

Negative effects of “work from home” culture during the coronavirus pandemic: a gender-based study

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the present research is to explore the negative effects of the “Work from Home” culture during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Information Technology (IT) sector, among males and females. Work from Home or working from home (WFH) indicates that an employee is working from their home or place of residence instead of their workplace/office. A two-group design has been followed. The study population consists of employees working in the Information Technology (IT) sector, belonging to the age group of 25-35 years. A purposive cum convenience sampling method was used to collect the data. The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Scores were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to find out the Cronbach Alpha of the overall questionnaire and separate dimensions, and a t-test was used to analyze the gender differences across dimensions and overall negative effects of work from home. Results suggest that no statistically significant differences exist among males and females on the construct of work-from-home with its dimensions (Work-Life Balance, Psychological Effects, Lifestyle Changes and Social Life) indicating that the “work from home” culture has similar negative effects on both the genders. This research also poses certain limitations and suggested future implications.

Keywords: *work from home, information technology (IT sector), Coronavirus (COVID-19), gender, negative effects*

Work from home or working from home (WFH) indicates that an employee is working from their home or place of residence instead of their workplace/office. Various companies and industries have opted for the work from home policy for their employees to ensure flexibility and efficient working at their convenience.

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Negative effects of “work from home” culture during the coronavirus pandemic: a gender-based study

Offices consist of diverse workforces with flexible working policies in place according to the organizations' requirements. Working from home has its benefits and drawbacks. While work from home may reduce costs for the organization and save commute time and money for the employees, it can result in hindrances in communication and collaboration. Remote working may improve employee productivity and work-life balance. Employees often use smartphones, tablets, desktop computers, laptops, etc. to work remotely and stay connected to each other and the organization through the services of teleconferencing available on the internet.

Due to the *Coronavirus* (COVID-19), pandemic caused by the transmission of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), industries such as the *Information Technology* (IT) sector have been left with no option other than to work remotely. Social distancing has been identified as one of the major ways to minimize the impact of the pandemic along with an increased awareness for maintaining good hygiene.

India has adopted strategies such as shutting down educational institutions and switching to online schooling, restricting access to public places, and appealing to the citizens to practice social distancing, home quarantine, and enforcing lockdowns during the COVID -19 pandemic.

The coronavirus was initially identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019. It was declared as a pandemic in March 2020 and has caused social and economic disturbance worldwide. The World Health Organization proposed the need for self-quarantine, isolation, and complete lockdowns of nations in the absence of a vaccine to limit the number of positive cases and slowing the spread of the virus. 3.9 billion people across the world were under some kind of lockdown by April 2020. Various countries including China, France, India, Italy, India, New Zealand, Poland, and the United Kingdom have created the world's largest and most stringent mass quarantines.

At present, India has the largest number of confirmed cases in Asia and the second-highest number worldwide after the United States. Mandatory lockdowns were implemented in COVID-19 hotspots and all major cities since the rise in the number of positive cases in the country. This was followed by a nationwide lockdown that has been slowly lifted with strict restrictions.

Soon after coronavirus was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization, companies across the world switched to working remotely as an essential step to ensure the provision of flexible working conditions to maintain the efficiency and the productivity of the employees towards their work with the aid of digital technologies. Several IT businesses, academic institutions, and other sectors have gone entirely online and workers are now expected to operate from home with a different set of rules and regulations that would be suitable for the organizations. According to Clutch. co, 44% of employees in the United States of America shifted to remote working during the pandemic compared to 17% before it.

Video conferencing systems and shared technologies make it easier for employees to connect and keep in touch. Nasscom has taken action, lobbying the Telecom Department to waive some conditions to allow IT employees to work from home. Data privacy and improved connectivity are being considered important now. The government took quick

Negative effects of “work from home” culture during the coronavirus pandemic: a gender-based study

decisions with thorough considerations with many ministries coordinating and delivering services remotely. In India, IT companies such as Cognizant, Amazon, Flipkart, Snapdeal, Uber, Ola, Swiggy, Paytm, Wipro, and Tech Mahindra were among the first companies to introduce work from home policies.

Many underlying factors influence and affect the work from home culture, the workers, and the organizations involved in various ways. Several factors have been considered in the present research to understand how the work from home culture during the COVID-19 pandemic has affected employees in the IT sector. These are:

- Work-Life Balance
- Psychological Effects
- Lifestyle Changes
- Social Life

LITERATURE REVIEW

Work-life balance

Work-life balance refers to the level of prioritization in the life of an employee between personal and work activities and the level at which things relevant to their career are present in the home.

Kirchmeyer (2000) described work-life balance as: “achieving satisfying experiences in all life domains and to do so requires personal resources such as energy, time, and commitment to be well distributed across domains.”

Sharma, N.; Nayak, P. (2016) researched the effect of Work-Life, Policy initiatives on work and family in IT companies in Noida. The research consists of the primary data of 100 male and female workers employed in five Information Technology (IT) firms in Noida collected through questionnaires. The findings suggest a higher level of job tension among female workers relative to male employees employed in organizations and female workers face more difficulties in keeping a work-life balance than male employees in the IT sector.

Work-life balance can also be affected through work from home due to the blurring of roles between work and home commitments, flexibility between the borders of home and work, fluctuating productivity levels, travel restrictions and remote working, difficulty in decision making, and planning, and reaching deadlines.

Dubey, A., Tripathi, S., (2020) conducted a study that aimed towards examining the sentiments of the people regarding the Work-from-Home concept by analyzing 100,000 tweets. Results indicate that the Work-from-Home concept was taken positively by the people. Most tweets indicated trust and anticipation which leads one to believe that people are in favor.

Clark (2000) suggests that consistency between the limits of work and the home realm can result in various results. With domestic space now still serving as an office, keeping a work-life balance has become extremely difficult. Both job and family relationships are influenced by the absence of physical boundaries between the two otherwise distinct worlds. This phenomenon has been described by experts as “role blurring” which is “the experience of confusion or difficulty in distinguishing one’s work from one’s family roles.”

Negative effects of “work from home” culture during the coronavirus pandemic: a gender-based study

Glavin, P., Schieman, S. (2012) studied employees in the US and found that higher levels of "role-blurring" were correlated with more work-life conflicts, particularly among those with high job pressures. Role blurring is associated with higher levels of work-to-family conflict, but the extent of this correlation depends on the worker's access to and sensitivity to certain job resources and job requirements. Specifically, the correlation is greater among employees reporting undue pressure and weaker among those with decision-making latitude and some schedule power.

Chung, H., van der Lippe, T (2020) in their report on Flexible Employment, Work-Life Balance, and Gender Equality show that at-home women workers are supposed to work more domestically than men.

Stanford's study of 16,000 workers over 9 months found that working at home increases productivity by 13%. This increase in productivity was attributed to more calls per minute leading to a smoother, more convenient working environment and more minutes per shift due to fewer breaks and sick days. In the same report, workers have reported a rise in work satisfaction and a reduction in attrition rates by 50%.

According to the article published by Time (2014), more than 30 minutes of daily one-way travel is associated with elevated levels of stress and anxiety, and evidence suggests that a 10-mile drive to work every day is related to health problems such as lower cholesterol levels, increased blood sugar and increased risk for depression.

There is also a financial advantage for workers operating at home in several ways. They will save money "by providing travel to the office" (Wienclaw 2019), such as "gas savings and vehicle wear" (Ford and Butts 1991), "parking or other transportation costs" (Wienclaw 2019:2). Employees will also save money by minimizing the expense of suitable workplace clothes and lunch (Ford and Butts 1991). Another financial gain is a drop in the rate of "baby-sitting/kindergarten/infirmary" (Lupu 2017) and "not having to pay for after-school programs" (Wienclaw 2019).

Working from home has benefits particularly for "new mothers or the physically handicapped who find travel burdensome or are unable to leave the home" It reduces the chances of getting sick, fatigue, and work-related stress. It makes it possible for people living in isolated areas to be employed.

Kazekami (2020) studied the systems impacting the productivity of remote workers. The stress of balancing work and domestic chores, life satisfaction, work satisfaction, and decreasing time spent commuting during rush hours are examined. The article highlights the disadvantages of working from home including concentration and child care. According to the study results, there is a positive correlation between telework hours and productivity.

Psychological effects

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can contribute to his or her community”

The shift to remote work as a result of the social distancing procedure during the COVID-19 pandemic might cause deterioration of mental health. It can affect the levels of employees,

Negative effects of “work from home” culture during the coronavirus pandemic: a gender-based study

self-discipline, stress, initiate procrastination/frustration, have an effect on the resilience and coping abilities of employees during the pandemic, and job satisfaction.

Mann et al. (2000) claimed that teleworking had a major emotional effect on staff, as reports of negative emotions such as isolation, frustration, worry, and remorse were more organized than with office workers. Teleworkers in general have also been found to experience more mental illness than office workers.

Mann et al. (2003) looked at the psychological effect of teleworking relative to office-based jobs. The findings indicate that teleworking has a negative emotional effect, especially in terms of emotions such as isolation, irritability, worry, and guilt, and that teleworkers experience significantly more stressful mental health symptoms than office workers and marginally more physical health symptoms.

Ward and Hannah (2017) carried out a study to determine the effect that working from home has on the motivation and performance of employees working within a banking organization. The results of this study indicate that overall, a high degree of positivity was apparent.

A study conducted by LeanIn.org and Survey Monkey in April 2020 found that women were overwhelmingly affected by work-family stress during COVID-19 constraints. Women were more likely than men to experience symptoms of stress and burnout. Children reported doing 20 more hours of housework and care work per week for children and relatives on average than men. Research also found insufficient support from workplaces.

Hayes, S. et al (2020) conducted a study to explain the relationship between tension, job-related burnout, and remote work brought on by social distancing efforts and remaining at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results suggest that perceived stress did increase during the restrictions and that working from home may create more stress and result in more burnout.

Golden (2006) suggests that there is a positive relationship between home-based work and engagement and a negative relationship between home-based work and turnover intentions, such that a higher level of home-based work is correlated with a greater commitment to the company and weakened turnover intentions. He also found that workers who have continuous face-to-face contact with other employees are likely to become more exhausted. Der Feltz-Cornélis, V., et al (2020) explored how the outbreak of COVID-19 and arrangements such as remote work and furlough impact work or research stress levels and functioning in workers and students at the University of York, UK. The findings suggest that the university staff and students experienced high psychological distress, presenteeism, and absenteeism. 33.8% of employees and 71.7% of students were resilient. Amongst others, the female gender, having children and having to self-isolate contributed to vulnerability. Exercise contributed to resilience. Resilience occurred much more frequently in students than in workers, while psychological distress was much higher among students.

At home, when an employee has limited access to a comfortable chair, a designated workspace, heating, and air conditioning system will affect. Research shows that the physical workplace environment impacts both job efficiency and job satisfaction. (Vischer, 2007).

Negative effects of “work from home” culture during the coronavirus pandemic: a gender-based study

Bloom et al (2015) performed the first randomized home-based work experiment run by 16,000 employees of the NASDAQ-listed Chinese company, Ctrip. Findings indicate no negative spillovers to staff who stayed in the workplace. Home employees posted significantly higher job satisfaction and psychological scores, and their job attrition rates declined by more than 50 percent.

Lifestyle changes

The word 'Lifestyle Changes' was introduced in 1929 by Alfred Adler as “a person's basic character as established early in childhood”.

Modification of the lifestyle means modifying long-term behaviors, usually eating or physical activity, sleeping patterns, routine, time management, etc., and sustaining for months or years the new behavior.

A variety of psychological consequences and the challenges of adapting to the new lifestyle of the quarantine have been manifested by large numbers of people such as restrictive social relationships, opportunities, physical activity, etc.

Restrepo, B.J., Zeballos, E. (2020) discovered in a study that people are more likely to have meals at home when working from home than when working in other environments. (88.9 percent vs. 76.9%).

Restrepo, B.J., Zeballos, E.(2020) also found that people working remotely slept 37 minutes longer than those who work in other settings.

According to a study done by researchers at the University of Southern California, work from home has detrimental effects on employees' physical health with the employees likely to experience increased pain in the neck as the amount of time spent at the workstation increases.

Amabile & Kramer (2013) revealed that work from home helps manage office and regular work as work from home saves time to allow more time for personal life and improves productivity, which in turn helps to achieve goals on time.

According to Beal et. al., (2005), the environment at home can be the source of distractions such as chores, noise, and easier access to social networking sites which make it difficult to focus on the task at hand contributing to reduced productivity and suboptimal performance.

According to Birkinshaw, J., Cohen, J., and Stach, P. (2020), the lockdown due to the pandemic helped people take responsibility for their schedules. 50% of activities of personal choice are engaged in by people as they view them as important and other activities when asked by others to do so. People use their energy in more efficient ways than when engaged in less important tasks.

Social life

People's social life has taken a hit as they can no longer go out without restrictions or communicate face to face with colleagues, friends, or even family for those who don't live at home. Social isolation has been marked as the greatest downside of working from home as revealed in a survey done in 1983 in the United Kingdom by Huws (1984).

Negative effects of “work from home” culture during the coronavirus pandemic: a gender-based study

Susan, Madsen. (2003) examined the disparities between full-time worksite workers and employees who worked at least 2 days a week from home in the work-family dispute. The results showed that working from home employees' had lower levels of work-family conflict under the same in different dimensions.

As workers are accessed by their peers and managers, "lack of face-to-face communication and the benefits of face-to-face communication" poses a disadvantage for employees (Greer et al. 2014). Effective communication is highly necessary for working from home operations since team members are interdependent and it is a struggle for managers to organize their activities. (Greer et al. 2014).

Gallacher, J. (2020) revealed in an article that, relative to their lives before the coronavirus pandemic, workers working for the organization 'Glint' feel less connected to leaders, colleagues, and friends. The employees' reported being more connected to family members. According to Ford and Butts (1991), employees working from home lack opportunities for informal interactions with others in the organization leading to social isolation and straying away from the company's ideals and objectives.

The purpose of this research is to explore the negative effects of work from culture during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Information Technology (IT) Sector. Companies across the world are trying to adapt to the changing times by going for work-from-home. The literature suggests that work from home has both positive and negative effects on employees across various dimensions of life, thus we attempt to explore the negative effects by understanding how work from home culture impacts males and females' work-life balance, lifestyle, social life, and psychological effects. As work from home becomes more relevant and prevalent, this trend is likely bound to continue even after the pandemic. Organizations are investing in providing the employees with the necessary tools for efficient working from home. This area of research hailing from the current circumstances asks for further examination in various spheres of life during remote working conditions such as self-regulation, discipline, how employees' social relationships have been challenging to cope with, etc. There is a necessity to understand how these constructs interact with each other in the Indian context as it will be another profound topic for all stakeholders engaged in an organization.

METHODOLOGY

Objective

The objective of the present research is to explore the negative effects of the “Work from Home” culture during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Information Technology (IT) Sector among males and females.

Design

A two-group design, i.e., consisting of males and females was used in the present study. The diagrammatic representation of the design is given below:

Table 1 Diagrammatic Representation of the Design of the present study

Total Number of Participants	170
Number of Males	86
Number of Females	84

**Negative effects of “work from home” culture during the coronavirus pandemic:
a gender-based study**

Sample

The study population consisted of employees working in the Information Technology (IT) sector, belonging to the age group of 25-35 years. For the quantitative research, there was a sample of 86 male employees and 84 female employees making the total sample to be 170 participants. A purposive cum convenience sampling method was used to collect the data.

Table 2 Demographic Characteristics of the Participants (N=170)

Males	No. of Males	Percentage	Females	No. of Females	Percentage
	86	50.6%		84	49.4%
Age			Age		
25	25	29.06%	25	22	26.19%
26	13	15.11%	26	15	17.85%
27	9	10.46%	27	10	11.90%
28	7	8.13%	28	3	3.57%
29	6	6.97%	29	8	9.52%
30	11	12.79%	30	3	3.57%
31	0	0%	31	4	4.76%
32	2	2.32%	32	2	2.38%
33	3	3.48%	33	3	3.57%
34	7	8.13%	34	3	3.57%
35	3	3.48%	35	11	13.09

Tools

Survey Questionnaire

A survey questionnaire is a type of data gathering method that is utilized to collect, analyze and interpret the different views of a group of people from a particular population. For the questionnaire development, a discussion was done on the topic of working from home especially during pandemics, post which four dimensions were decided. These dimensions were work-life balance, psychological effects, lifestyle changes, social life. The topics covered in each theme were discussed and questions under every theme were written. All negative, double-barreled questions were removed and the final questionnaire consisted of 24 questions, i.e., 6 questions from each theme decided. The questions were put in a proper sequence with a 1-5 response choice (1= strongly disagree and 5= strongly agree). After this, a pilot study was conducted and some minor changes were made to the questionnaire. Alpha reliability was measured using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient which was $\alpha = .886$ which indicates high internal consistency of the questionnaire.

Negative effects of “work from home” culture during the coronavirus pandemic: a gender-based study

Procedure

The objective of the present research is to explore the negative effects of the “Work from Home” culture during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Information Technology (IT) sector, among males and females. The study population consisted of employees working in the Information Technology (IT) sector, belonging to the age group of 25-35 years. For the quantitative research, there was a sample of 86 male employees and 84 female employees making the total sample to be 170 participants. A purposive cum convenience sampling method was used to collect the data. A self-developed questionnaire was used as a tool to conduct the study measuring the effects of work from home culture on an individual’s life based on four dimensions: work-life balance, psychological effects, lifestyle changes, social life. The questions had a 1-5 response choice (1= strongly disagree and 5= strongly agree). After this, a pilot study was conducted and some minor changes were made to the questionnaire. Alpha reliability was measured using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient which was $\alpha = .886$ which indicates high internal consistency of the questionnaire.

The google form was developed and each individual was asked to fill the questionnaire. The ethical considerations were also mentioned in the form. Participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the study and informed consent was obtained from interested participants stating that the questions answered would be kept anonymous and the identity of the participants would be kept confidential. Participation was completely voluntary and could be terminated at any time. They were assured that their responses would be recorded honestly and confidentially. Finally, the selected participants fulfilling the inclusion/exclusion criteria were given relevant instructions for completing the questionnaires.

All the responses that were recorded, were then scored according to the Likert scale and positive items were reverse-scored. Scores were then analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to find out the Cronbach alpha of the overall questionnaire and separate dimensions, t-test was used to analyze the gender differences across dimensions and overall effect.

RESULTS

Table 3 Alpha Reliabilities

S.No.	Dimensions	Cronbach Alpha
1.	Work-Life Balance	.605
2.	Psychological Effects	.746
3.	Lifestyle Changes	.672
4	Social Life	.634
Overall Alpha Reliability of the questionnaire		.886

Table 3 shows Cronbach's Alpha Reliability for all the dimensions in this research. Psychological Effects has the highest Cronbach's Alpha Reliability and work-life balance has the lowest Cronbach's Alpha Reliability. Overall Cronbach’s Alpha Reliability of the questionnaire is .886.

**Negative effects of “work from home” culture during the coronavirus pandemic:
a gender-based study**

Table 4 Mean, Standard Deviation, t-value, and p-value on the dimensions of Work-Life Balance, Psychological Effects, Lifestyle Changes and Social Life (df=168)

Measures	Males (n=86) Mean± SD	Females (n=84) Mean± SD	t-value	p-value
Work-Life Balance	15.99 ± 4.74	16.75 ± 4.39	-1.08	.280
Psychological Effects	15.55 ± 5.58	15.65 ± 5.39	-.128	.898
Lifestyle Changes	16.56 ± 4.84	17.29 ± 5.45	-.920	.359
Social Life	17.15 ± 4.91	17.62 ± 4.66	-.636	.525
Total	65.24 ± 17.43	67.30 ± 16.80	-.786	.433

It can be seen from the above table the males have a lower total mean as compared to females whereas females have a higher mean on work-life balance, psychological effects, lifestyle changes, social life, and total effect. It is observed from Table 4 that the t value is not statistically significant for any of the dimensions. It is therefore inferred that there is no significant difference between the two groups.

DISCUSSION

Table 3 depicts the overall and dimension-wise Alpha Reliabilities of the questionnaire used. The overall Cronbach’s Alpha Reliability of the questionnaire is .886 which shows good internal consistency between the items. Psychological Effects has the highest Cronbach's Alpha Reliability (.746) and Work-Life Balance has the lowest Cronbach's Alpha Reliability (.605).

It can be inferred from Table 4 that the p-value observed is not significant for Work-Life Balance, Psychological Effects, Lifestyle Changes, Social Life and the total negative effect of work from home on males and females, as the values found were greater than 0.05. The t-test revealed no statistically significant differences among males and females on the construct of work-from-home with its dimensions (Work-Life Balance, Psychological Effects, Lifestyle Changes and Social Life). This result exhibits that the negative impact of working from home is similar on both males and females. This finding is consistent with the work of Kurowska (2018) who studied the gender effects of home-based work on parents’ capability to balance work with non-work. It was found that there is a negative impact of home-based work on the capability to balance work with non-work that affects both genders. According to Harter, J., & Rath, T. (2020), frequent experiences with colleagues are very closely related to engagement and job satisfaction at the workplace. When employees mostly work from home, this crucial aspect is omitted from the calculation, which adds to feelings of isolation and anxiety. Regardless of gender identity, humans are social beings, so working remotely may make workers feel disconnected from their roles and lead to the general deterioration in the quality of their employment. Lack of communication with colleagues can also stifle creativity and minimize team cohesion. This may be the reason why there are similar negative effects of work from home among males and females.

Bibby (1999) suggests that male teleworkers suffer more from mental health problems and subjective physical stress effects than male office workers. Telework increases the

Negative effects of “work from home” culture during the coronavirus pandemic: a gender-based study

opportunity to blur the lines between professional life and family life and increases the distribution of child care and household obligations to work (Hill et al., 1996). Traditionally, men have not been interested in these day-to-day duties and usually have a propensity to carry out their positions consecutively (Hall, 1972). Male teleworkers may take on the dual duties of work and home life, typically the realm of women. Research suggests that Female teleworkers typically maintain responsibility for the bulk of household tasks, which may contribute to feelings of frustration, insufficiency, and distress. (Christensen, 1987/1988; Costello, 1988, Ellison, 1999)

Cerrato and Cifre (2018) examined "Gender Inequality in House Chores and Work-Family Conflict." The findings of this study revealed that greater participation of women in household chores doesn't have a different effect on the degree of Work-Family Conflict (WFC) in both men and women. High engagement in household tasks has detrimental implications for women in the family sphere and men in the workplace.

Research by Shockley et al (2017) also indicates that both men and women tend to be more equivalent than different in their work-family conflict experiences; gender variations in work-family conflict usually appear to be negligible, regardless of which particular subgroups are studied, and where there is substantial variance in the extent of gender differences in work-family conflict, the main factors that decide this variation are currently not well known.

In research by Restrepo, B.J., Zeballos, E. (2020), people who worked from home spent substantially more time participating in leisure (94 minutes). Individuals who worked from home with a spouse or partner present spent slightly more time on food production and eating and drinking at home (25 and 48 minutes, respectively). Individuals who worked from home without a spouse or partner present spent slightly more time at home eating and drinking (33 minutes) than those who worked away from home.

Limitations

Some limitations to this study consist of a small sample size and the probability of self-report measures being biased. The data was collected using non-probability sampling methods. Thus, it does not give a basis for generalization. Since the questionnaire was filled through the internet, those with unstable network connections could not be made a part of the present research.

Directions for future research

A bigger sample size could be considered in future research. Different research designs can be employed in future studies to understand the relationships between the dimensions used in our study. Sample can be made more representative of the wider population and inferential analysis on the characteristics of the sample population could be performed. Researchers could make use of probability sampling methods in the future.

CONCLUSION

The objective of the present research is to explore the negative effects of the “Work from Home” culture during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Information Technology (IT) Sector among males and females. Statistically significant differences do not exist among males and females on the construct of work-from-home with its dimensions (Work-Life Balance,

Negative effects of “work from home” culture during the coronavirus pandemic: a gender-based study

Psychological Effects, Lifestyle Changes and Social Life) indicating that the “work from home” culture has similar negative effects on both the genders.

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**Negative effects of “work from home” culture during the coronavirus pandemic:
a gender-based study**

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**Negative effects of “work from home” culture during the coronavirus pandemic:
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