



How felt obligation and organization engagement mediate the relationship between perceived organizational support and work life balance amid COVID-19 pandemic: empirical evidence from emerging countries

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Abstract

Drawing from Organizational support theory (OST), we develop and test a mediation model of felt obligation and Organizational Engagement (OE) between Perceived Organizational Support (POS) and Work Life Balance (WLB). Specifically, we examine the moderating effect of ethnic dissimilarity on the mediating effect of felt obligation between POS and WLB in the context of COVID-19 pandemic with aims to provide nuanced understanding of how the pandemic influences employees' POS, felt obligation, OE, and WLB to advance OST and extant POS literature. Based on a sample of 467 academics from China and Malaysia. Ethnic dissimilarity is found to be a salient moderator as our results reveal that felt obligation mediates the relationship between POS and WLB in the homogeneous sample but not in the heterogeneous sample through the lens of social exchange. In addition, under the self-enhancement mechanism, our result reveals that OE mediates the relationship between POS and WLB in the samples. Overall, it is envisaged that our findings are timely, and offer valuable theoretical and practical implications for organizations and employees in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords Work-life balance · Perceived organizational support · Felt obligation · Organizational engagement · COVID-19 pandemic · Ethnic dissimilarity

Introduction

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), an acute respiratory disease which is transmitted through physical contact (World Health Organization, 2020), has devastating effects on countries' economic, social, and political aspects. Workers worry about losing their jobs, face financial difficulties (Wilson et al., 2020), and concern about maintaining work and home life (Godderis, 2020). Overnight, many organizations are instructed by their government to implement "Work from Home" during lockdown periods. A sudden

shift in working condition has greatly impacted employees' work and family life.

In order to limit human contact, organizations are also serious about how and where employees carry out their work when they are asked to work remotely. Such dramatic alterations on working conditions have vital implications for employees' psychological well-being at the workplace. Furthermore, potential work-family conflict may be greater than ever, resulting from transitioning to remote working, employees are forced to manage the increased strain and find a balance between work and family life. Thus, it is critical to identify and examine relevant factors that affect the employees' work-life balance (WLB), especially during this difficult period of times. To date, there is no universally accepted definition of what constitutes WLB. The term usually refers to organizational support for dependent care, flexible work options, and family or personal leave (Estes & Michael, 2005). Practices of work-life balance include working from home, flexible working hours, job sharing, and family leave programs, among others. In general, WLB

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is concerned about employees' ability to balance their work and family demands.

Furthermore, perceived organizational support (POS) is particularly salient to maintaining and increase organizational and individual outcomes amid crisis times (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). POS is regarded as the extent to which the employees believe that their employing organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Additionally, recent studies reveal that POS is related to work engagement (Aldabbas et al., 2023), and it also moderates the relationship between employees' corporate social responsibility and job crafting (Hur et al., 2021). With POS, employees would feel less stressed in their work during uncertain times as they anticipate that help will be provided to them when needed, leading them to have a good balance of work and family life (Kurtessis et al., 2017). Despite the acknowledged importance of POS in advancing stressful situations benefiting both organizations and employees, empirical investigations on POS remained rare, particularly in times of dire trouble stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically on the extent and influence of the pandemic on the employee's WLB concerning to their perceived support from the organization.

A handful of research has been conducted in past by examining the moderation of national culture on POS and organizational citizenship (Chiaburu et al., 2015); affective and normative commitment (Wahab, 2010), but not on felt obligation, OE, and WLB specifically. Clearly, there is an urgency to examine the moderating effect of national culture on the relationships of these aforementioned variables to enhance the existing literature of POS. Moreover, researchers (e.g., Rockstuhl et al., 2020) also call for more studies to examine the potential influence of national culture on POS and other pertinent work outcomes. To date, it is rather surprisingly to have noticed that little empirical research has been conducted by examining the moderating effect of ethnic dissimilarity on the relationship between POS and organizational outcomes. However, there are some notable exceptions which have recently appeared in the POS literature. For example, Tan et al. (2019, 2022) revealed that ethnic dissimilarity moderates the mediating effect of POS between ethical leadership and organizational citizenship behavior as well as the mediating effect of self-efficacy between POS and organizational citizenship.

However, how exactly ethnic dissimilarity moderates the mediating effect of felt obligation between POS and WLB remains unknown which poses a significant challenge to the existing POS literature, particularly in terms of drawing conclusions and deriving practical implications. In this study, we answer the call to shed light on POS literature by examining the moderating effect of ethnic dissimilarity on

the mediating effects of felt obligation between POS and WLB during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, this study also contributes to uncovering the black box or mediating mechanism of OE between POS and WLB, specifically in the collectivist society with an aim to advance Organizational Support Theory (OST).

Literature review and hypotheses development

Organizational support theory (OST)

POS is the central construct in OST (Eisenberger et al., 1986) that concerns the degree to which the organization values the employees' contributions and cares about their well-being (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). OST invokes social exchange theory and self-enhancement processes that explain employees' increased efforts in helping the organization to achieve its goals and objectives when they feel supported (Eisenberger et al., 2020). From the social exchange perspective (Blau, 1964) and the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), employees have the feeling of indebtedness to reciprocate support received from the organization because POS should induce employees' tendency to care for the best interest of the organization and aid the organization to attain its objectives (Eisenberger et al., 2001). On the other hand, self-enhancement processes involve POS' fulfilment of employees' socioemotional needs (i.e., approval, esteem, emotional support, and affiliation) which elicits the employees' identification with the organization, which in turn promotes greater employees' psychological well-being (Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2020; Kurtessis et al., 2017).

The moderating effect of ethnic dissimilarity on the mediation of felt obligation between POS and WLB

Scholars (e.g., Eisenberger et al., 2020; Rockstuhl et al., 2020) argue that the development of POS and OST has been quite advance thus far because myriad past studies have been conducted in the Western individualistic culture. They then suggest that research on POS should examine the influence of a national culture on employees' interpretation on support exerted by an organization, particularly in the Eastern cultural context because it is believed that employees in the collectivist society would have stronger work outcomes when POS emerged. Furthermore, employees in the collectivist society tend to have a strong in-group identity and work collectively with a shared common interest and try to achieve work outcomes or goals collectively (Cohen & Avrahami, 2006).

To the best of our knowledge, no previous research has explicitly tested the moderating effect of ethnic dissimilarity on the mediation of felt obligation between POS and WLB, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Little is known thus far about how employees in different nations with different ethnic compositions and cultural backgrounds influence their reciprocation of the support received from the organization that potentially affect their ability to balance work and family life.

With this realization, we heed the calls as one of the first studies to examine the moderating effect of ethnic dissimilarity on the mediation of felt obligation between POS and WLB with the aim to advance OST. Felt obligation is defined as “a prescriptive belief regarding whether one should care about the organization’s well being and should help the organization reach its goals.” (Eisenberger et al., 2001, p. 42). From the social categorization perspective, we conceptualize ethnic differences at the individual level as ethnic dissimilarity because it is natural and common for employees in a work group to differentiate themselves from the other co-workers which potentially affect their work outcomes (Guillaume et al., 2012). We also argue that employees’ feeling of indebtedness to reciprocate with WLB when support is received is contingent with the ethnic composition of the society being examined. Under the rule of social exchange, we postulate that employees from the same ethnic background would feel obliged to reciprocate with WLB when support is received from the organization. While employees from different ethnical backgrounds would directly demonstrate WLB when support is received. In other words, these employees do not think that having a feeling of indebtedness to reciprocate is particularly important for them to have WLB when an organization is supportive which manifests the self-enhancement mechanism in OST.

Furthermore, the role of ethnic dissimilarity in affecting employees’ interpretations of POS needs to be examined, especially in the collectivist societies such as China and Malaysia (Choy et al., 2021). Albeit, these two countries are regarded as collectivist societies, China is regarded as a homogenous society in which 95% of its population belongs to Han Chinese and the Chinese generally embrace the philosophical and religious values derived from Confucianism (Lam et al., 2010; Guha & Ray, 2000), which significantly influence their social interaction behaviors by concentrating the role of *guanxi* to maintain social harmony (Zhang et al., 2014). Additionally, the quality of *guanxi* is determined by the levels of self-disclosure, dynamic of reciprocity, and long-term equity principles between two parties who have engaged in numerous interactions (Chen & Chen, 2004).

On the contrary, Malaysia is considered as a less Confucian and more heterogeneous society (Huff & Kelly,

2003; Fontaine et al., 2002) because Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society with three dominant ethnic groups of Malay, Chinese, and Indian. Moreover, Malaysians are granted the freedom to embrace their own ethnic cultural and religious practices which ultimately shape their behavior to be more human oriented by placing the values of concerns for others, errors tolerance, generosity, friendliness, and sensitive toward others’ needs (Kennedy, 2002).

According to Triandis (1993), a collectivist society comprises homogeneous and heterogeneous societies. In a homogeneous society, individuals in this society share the same culture and values (Diener & Diener, 2009), and they generally have high reciprocity because of a high level of trust that exists among themselves (Aryal, 2018; Criado et al., 2015). Conversely, in a heterogeneous society, individuals are diverse in terms of ethnicity, country of origin, languages, and religion (Duffy & Matikainen, 2000). Scholars (e.g., Costa & Kahn, 2003; Delhey & Newton, 2005) have pointed out that due to the ethnicity and cultural differences in this society, people in a heterogeneous society generally have low trust in themselves which adversely affect their tendency to reciprocate favors received from other people.

Accordingly, we conjuncture that employees from the homogeneous society reciprocate with WLB when an organization exerts support toward them. Specifically, employees who have received good deeds from other individuals are expected to return the favors in the future (Newman et al., 2012). POS is possible to lead to employees’ felt obligation to care about and help the organization to achieve its goals (Eisenberger et al., 2001). When POS emerges, this indicates that employees believe that the organization values their increased efforts and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986) which elicits their sense of obligation to reciprocate (Eisenberger et al., 2020; Kurtessis et al., 2017). Therefore, under the social exchange rule, employees in the homogeneous society are expected to have a strong feeling of obligation to return the favors received from the organization by complying with their behaviors expected by the organization (Westwood et al., 2004).

We also argue that employees in the heterogeneous society will not reciprocate with WLB when support is received from the organization. Instead, through the self-enhancement mechanism, employees will immediately have WLB once they perceive that the organization is supportive by successfully fulfilling their socioemotional needs (i.e., approval, affiliation, recognition, and emotional support). As ascertained by Eisenberger et al. (2020); Kurtessis et al. (2017), once POS emerges, it indicates that the organization has successfully fulfilled the employees’ socioemotional needs which leads them to demonstrate greater efforts on the organization’s behalf, in this case, being able to balance work and family life during the pandemic.

Thus, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1a In the homogeneous group, the relationship between POS and WLB is mediated by Felt Obligation.

Hypothesis 1b In the heterogeneous group, the relationship between POS and WLB is not mediated by Felt Obligation.

POS and WLB: organizational engagement (OE) as mediators

OE refers to the employee's willingness to become a member of the organization with which he or she is currently working with. It reflects the employees' behaviors (i.e., physical, cognitive, and emotional) based on organizational values. According to Saks (2019), OE is about employees' role as a member of the organization with which they are working with. Their tendency to engage with the organization is contingent on the economic and socioemotional resources received from the organization. Moreover, employees become energetic and passionate about their work and immerse themselves to work excessively when they are engaged with the organization because they have a high-quality relationship with their employer (Saks, 2006). In addition, employees' emotional commitment towards the organization will increase their OE and therefore foster their ability to understand specific behaviors inside the organization (Borkowska & Czerw, 2017). Employees will have OE when they understand the organization's goals, values, and beliefs (Saks & Gruman, 2014).

Under the rule of social exchange, scholars maintain that when employees are engaged with the organization, it indicates that the organization is fair and has successfully fulfilled the employees' much needed resources (i.e., economic and socioemotional), which elicits the employees to reciprocate the kindness exerted from the organizations with high levels of engagement (Saks, 2006, 2022). Strikingly, however, little explanation is offered thus far pertaining to how OE mediates the relationship between POS and WLB through the mechanism of self-enhancement (Eisenberger et al., 2020; Kurtessis et al., 2017) to advance OST.

It is vitally important for organizations to demonstrate their concern and care for employees to elicit employees' OE (Saks, 2019). Hence, when employees perceive that the organization is supportive, it connotes that the employees' socioemotional needs (i.e., approval, esteem, affiliation, and emotional support) have been successfully fulfilled which leads the employees to have a strong sense of belonging to the organization which enables them to identify themselves as an important member of the organization (Kurtessis et al., 2017; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Additionally,

myriad hypotheses do not address whether OE mediates the relationship between POS and WLB during the COVID-19 pandemic knowing the fact that a given crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic has profound impacts on employees' POS as well as their engagement with the organization (Mihalache & Mihalache, 2022). We hence seek to provide a more nuanced understanding of how employees' engagement with the organization influences their WLB when support is received by examining the mediating effect of OE between POS and WLB.

In addition, despite calls for research (Eisenberger et al., 2020; Kurtessis et al., 2017), we were unable to find any study that examine OE as a mediator between POS and WLB particularly in the homogeneous and heterogeneous societies. Previous studies have shown that work engagement or employee engagement mediates the relationship between POS and various work outcomes (e.g., Aldabbas et al., 2023; Oubibi et al., 2022). Unfortunately, these studies offer no explanations pertaining to how the national culture manifests in the homogenous society that ultimately influence the employees' engagement and work outcomes. According to Baldassarri and Abascal (2020) and Triandis (1993), individuals from the homogeneous society would normally understand the norms, roles, rules, and values in which the society embraces through repeated interactions within groups and tight networks. As a result, individuals would produce behaviors such as reciprocity, cooperation, and peer sanctioning as expected behavioral outcomes in their society. Furthermore, individuals are discouraged to go against those decisions made by the authority.

Unlike individuals in the homogeneous society, individuals in the heterogeneous society embrace different kinds of norms, roles, rules, and values because they see themselves as independently different from others in the same society. In this society, disagreements on the decisions made are often tolerated and vote is normally adopted to reconcile diverse opinion (Triandis, 1993). However, despite such differences that emerged among individuals in the heterogeneous society, individuals would tend to neutralize in-group favoritism, and fosters interdependence which ultimately deepens social-cohesion (Baldassarri & Abascal, 2020).

Accordingly, we hence contend that employees in the homogenous society will not elicit OE when support is received from the organization which ultimately influences their WLB. Employees in the homogeneous society will not involve of their complete selves with their organization because they are given less chance to participate in the decision making process which hinders their understanding of the organizational goals, objectives, and beliefs. As a result, the employees may feel that their socioemotional needs (i.e., recognition, affiliation, self-esteem, and emotion) are

neglected by the organization which adversely affect their engagement to organization.

When the employees feel that their socioemotional needs are deserted by the organization, they will not invest their physical, cognitive and emotional resources to the organization. Instead, the employees merely reciprocate the rewards (e.g., salary and bonus) received with work efforts with continuous cooperation with other employees in the organization. This manifestation reduces the employees' emotional commitment towards the organization which leads them to be unwillingly to conform to the organization values and exhibit less effort for the overall goodness of the organization. Thus, we argue that POS is positively related to employees' WLB in the homogeneous society during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As for employees in the heterogeneous society, we conjecture that employees in this society would perceive themselves as important member of the organization when support is received, which lead them to be able to balance their work and family life during the COVID-19 pandemic. Employees in this society are given equal chances to participate in the decision making process which leads them to be able to understand the organization's values, goals, and beliefs, which ultimately make them to feel that they are an important member of the organization. On the other hand, the employees would also perceive that the organization is concern about their voices by giving them the chances to vote for decisions. Such efforts demonstrated by the organization are interpreted by the employees as organization's attempts to fulfill their socioemotional needs (i.e., affiliation, recognition, self-esteem, and emotion), which eventually leads the employees to invest their emotional commitment towards the organization.

Thus, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 2a In the homogeneous group, the relationship between POS and WLB is not mediated by OE.

Hypothesis 2b In the heterogeneous group, the relationship between POS and WLB is mediated by OE.

Research framework

The research framework is proposed and shown in Fig. 1.

Research methodology

Participants and procedures

In this study, a quantitative research design with a cross-sectional study was used. The sample of this study is full-time university's academics from Malaysia and China. We categorize our samples into two different ethnic groups with the terms homogeneous and heterogeneous to examine how an ethnic's culture influences their tendency to reciprocate when support is received. We group China's samples as a homogeneous group as these respondents share the same facets of culture (e.g., language, national origin, and customs). On the other hand, Malaysia's respondents are categorized as a heterogeneous group because these respondents are uniquely distinct in the aspects of cultural practices as different ethnicities in Malaysia are allowed to practice their own cultures which includes religion, customs, and languages.

We use a self-administered questionnaire method to collect responses from academics. Prior to data collection, the developed questionnaire is approved by the human research ethics committee of the institution. A total of 467 academics is selected with the use of a convenience sampling

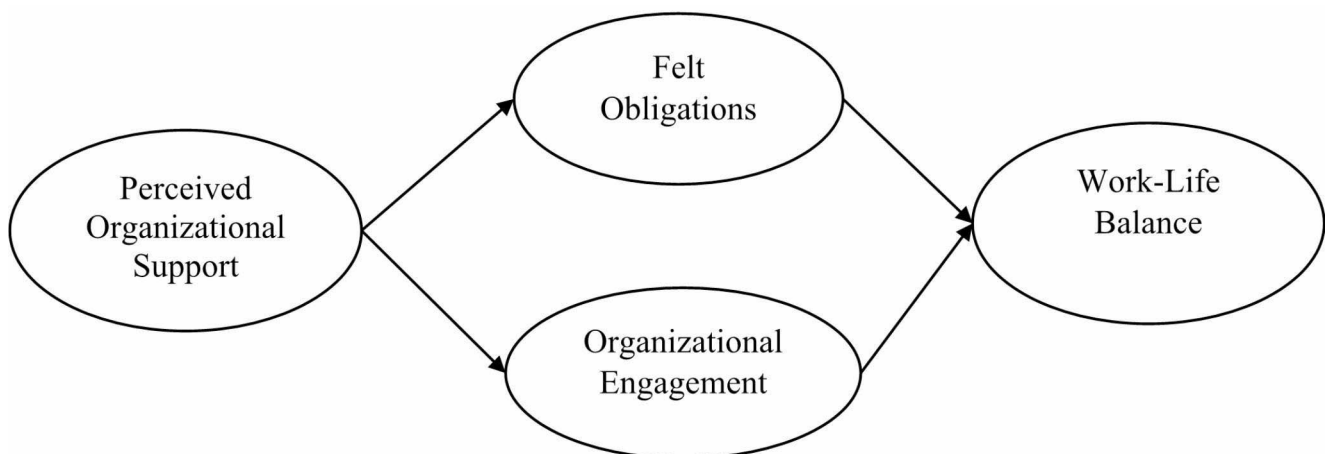


Fig. 1 Conceptual Framework

technique. Based on the suggestion from Faul et al. (2009), the sample size of 467 satisfied the minimum requirement of 77 samples at the level of 80% power level with an effect size of 0.15. Thus, this affirmed that the sample size of this study has adequate power to detect the required effect size and statistical significance.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents who participated in this study. The sample consisted of 284 Malaysian academics and 183 Chinese academics.

Measures

Given that the adapted measurement items had been developed in English, it is necessary to translate them for use in China. We translate the questionnaire into Chinese by

following the Brislin's (1970) back-translation method. The English version of the questionnaire is for the Malaysian (Heterogenous) sample, whereas the Chinese version of the questionnaire is for the Chinese (Homogenous) sample. Items are measured with a seven-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7).

Perceived organizational support. We use Eisenberger et al.'s (1986) 16-item scale to measure POS. The sample item is "the university values my contributions to its well-being". The Cronbach's alpha value of 0.96 for the heterogenous sample and 0.93 for the homogenous sample.

Felt obligations. We measure felt obligations with a 7-item scale developed by Eisenberger et al. (2001). The sample item includes "I feel a personal obligation to do whatever I can to help the university achieve its goals". The

Table 1 Demographic Profile of Participants

Characteristics	Malaysia (n=284)		China (n=183)	
	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender				
Male	112	39	82	45
Female	172	61	101	55
Age Group				
30 or below	18	6	17	9
31 to 40	133	47	95	52
41 to 50	83	29	43	24
51 to 60	40	14	28	15
More than 60	10	4	0	0
Education Level				
Bachelor's Degree	21	7	14	8
Master's Degree	181	64	77	42
Doctorate's Degree	82	29	92	50
Organisational Tenure				
Below 2 years	19	7	26	14
2 to less than 4 years	33	12	13	7
4 to less than 6 years	49	17	19	10
6 to less than 8 years	47	17	16	9
8 to less than 10 years	58	20	14	8
10 years and above	78	27	95	52
Academic Position				
Lecturer	165	58	66	36
Senior Lecturer	46	16	6	3
Assistant Professor	47	17	76	42
Associate Professor	21	7	25	14
Professor	5	2	10	5
Marital Status				
Single	106	37	21	11
Married	178	63	162	89
Frequency of Communication				
1 time per month	12	4	78	43
2 times per month	25	9	30	16
3 times per month	49	17	9	5
4 times per month	52	18	66	36
More than 4 times per month	146	52	0	0

Cronbach's alpha is 0.92 for the heterogenous sample and 0.95 for the homogenous sample.

Organizational engagement. We assess academics' OE using the 6-item scale developed by Saks (2006). The sample item includes "Being a member of this university is very captivating". The Cronbach's alpha is 0.93 for the heterogenous sample and 0.93 for the homogenous sample.

Work-Life balance. We adopt four items from Brough et al. (2014) to measure academics' WLB. The sample item includes "I have difficulty balancing my work and non-work activities". The Cronbach's alpha is 0.90 for the heterogenous sample and 0.85 for the homogenous sample.

Results

Common method bias

Due to the cross-sectional single-source data used in this study, there is a possibility that a single factor accounts for the majority of covariance among the adopted measures (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Thus, we conduct Harman single factor test to address common method bias by using exploratory factor analysis. The un-rotated factor analysis result reveals that the first factor accounted for not more than 50% of the variance. Therefore, we affirm that common method bias is not a major problem in this study.

Descriptive analysis

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations and the inter-correlations among the variables. The mean for all the latent variables is greater than the mid-point of 4.00 on a seven-point Likert scale. All the latent variables are statistically inter-correlated with each other.

Confirmatory factor analysis

We utilize SmartPLS version 3 software to conduct partial least square structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM). A two-stage analytical approach is used to assess the measurement model and structural model. At first, the measurement model is tested by examining factor loadings, average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability. All composite reliabilities are above the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2019). The majority of item factor loadings exceed the minimum threshold value of 0.708 as stipulated by Hair et al. (2019), except for one item from POS, and one item from felt obligation. By eliminating these items from the measurement model, it results that the AVEs for POS and felt obligation are well above the minimum cut-off value of 0.5 (Hair et al., 2019). For the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlation, there is no correlation value greater than the benchmark value of 0.900 (Hair et al., 2019). Based on the results reported above, we conclude that the convergent validity and discriminant validity of the measurement model are considered well-ascertained.

Hypotheses testing

In this study, we assess the significance of the path relationships through bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples (Hair et al., 2019). Prior to mediating path analysis, we adopt an independent sample t-test to examine the differences in mean for each latent construct between the heterogenous sample and the homogenous sample. Based on the statistical result (see Table 3), its show that there is significant difference in mean between both samples for POS ($M_M = 5.08$, $M_C = 4.23$, $t = 8.593$, $p < 0.001$), OE ($M_M = 5.29$, $M_C = 4.94$, $t = 3.414$, $p < 0.05$) and WLB ($M_M = 4.99$, $M_C = 4.63$, $t = 3.00$, $p < 0.05$). The statistical result reveals

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics, Reliability, and Correlations among Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Gender											
2. Age	-0.08										
3. Tenure	0.06	0.46**									
4. Position	-0.09	0.36**	0.22**								
5. Education Level	-0.14**	0.14**	0.07	0.43**							
6. Marital Status	-0.04	0.26**	0.30**	0.23**	0.18**						
7. Communication	0.05	-0.01	-0.04	-0.13**	-0.06	-0.12*					
8. Perceived Organizational Support	0.01	0.16**	-0.14**	0.09	-0.04	-0.11*	0.21**				
9. Felt Obligation	-0.02	0.26**	0.03	0.14**	0.02	-0.02	0.02	0.55**			
10. Organizational Engagement	-0.07	0.17**	-0.07	0.15**	0.03	-0.09*	0.11*	0.77**	0.71**		
11. Work-Life Balance	-0.10*	0.27**	-0.00	0.16**	-0.03	-0.04	-0.01	0.58**	0.45**	0.58**	
Mean	1.58	2.55	4.26	2.06	2.30	1.73	3.56	4.75	5.45	5.15	4.85
Standard Deviation	0.49	0.90	1.73	1.20	0.60	0.45	1.34	1.18	0.97	1.10	1.32

Note. *Significant level at 0.05;

**Significant level at 0.001;

Table 3 Mean Difference

Variable	Heterogenous Sample (n=284) Mean Score	Homogenous Sample (n= 183) Mean Score	Mean Difference	Sig. Value	Result
Perceived Organizational Support	5.08	4.23	0.85	0.000	Significant Different
Organizational Engagement	5.29	4.94	0.35	0.001	Significant Different
Felt Obligation	5.47	5.40	0.03	0.457	No Significant Different
Work-Life Balance	4.99	4.63	0.36	0.003	Significant Different

Table 4 Hypothesis Results

Hypothesis	Sample	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect	Indirect Effect / Total Effect
Hypothesis 1a & 1b: Perceived Organizational Support -> Felt Obligation -> Work-Life Balance	1a- Homogenous sample	0.26	0.16	0.43	0.37
	1b- Heterogenous sample	0.62	0.05	0.67	0.08
Hypothesis 2: Perceived Organizational Support -> Organizational Engagement -> Work-Life Balance	2a- Homogenous sample	0.16	0.26	0.43	0.60
	2b- Heterogenous sample	0.42	0.25	0.67	0.37

that the heterogenous sample has a greater mean score than the homogenous sample. Interestingly, there is no significant difference in mean for felt obligation ($M_M = 5.47$, $M_C = 5.40$, $t=0.457$, $p>0.05$). Thus, we can conclude that both homogenous society and heterogenous society show similar levels of felt obligation. Generally, academics from both societies demonstrate a strong sense of personal duty, responsibility, and commitment toward their jobs.

The mediating path analysis reveals that the relationship between POS and WLB is significantly mediated by felt obligation for the homogenous sample ($\beta=0.164$, $t=3.830$, $p<0.001$), but not for heterogeneous sample ($\beta=0.045$, $t=0.885$, $p>0.05$) (see Table 4). The p value for hypothesis 1a is statistically significant at 0.001, but does not support hypothesis 1b. Thus, hypothesis 1a is supported, whereas hypothesis 1b is not supported by the data. The variance account for (VAF) for a significant mediating hypothesis is 0.08 for the heterogenous sample and 0.37 for the homogenous sample (indirect effect/total effect). Therefore, we conclude this mediating path for the homogenous sample as partial mediation in which VAF value falls between 20% and 80% (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). However, there is no mediation effect for the heterogenous sample as the VAF value is less than 20%.

Our study's finding further demonstrates that the relationship between POS and WLB is significantly mediated by OE for both homogeneous sample ($\beta=0.263$, $t=3.048$, $p<0.05$) and heterogenous sample ($\beta=0.248$, $t=2.749$, $p<0.05$), thereby confirming hypotheses 2a and 2b (see Table 4). The p value for hypothesis 2a and 2b are statistically significant at 0.05. The VAF for a significant mediating hypothesis is 0.37 for the heterogenous sample and 0.60 for the homogenous sample (indirect effect/total effect). Thus, both mediating paths can be considered as partial mediation

in which VAF value falls between 20% and 80% (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

Discussion

The primary goal of this study is to investigate the moderating effect of ethnic dissimilarity on the mediations of felt obligation and OE between POS and WLB during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study is envisaged as a timely and pivotal attempt which examines employees' WLB amid the turmoil set off by the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically on how employees' WLB is influenced by the variables of POS, felt obligation, and OE. Further, we conduct studies with samples from Malaysia and China to test our model as current research remains limited in its ability to provide insight into the mediation mechanisms of felt obligation between POS and WLB in the wave of the COVID-19 crisis, especially in the Eastern collectivist cultural context. Moreover, we also examine the mediating effect of OE between POS and WLB to shed light on the scant POS literature. Our findings have several theoretical and practical implications, which contribute to the extant literature on POS significantly.

Interestingly, our result reveals that felt obligation serves as an integral mediation between POS and WLB in the homogeneous group. This finding provides further evidence to indicate that the Chinese academics elicit their sense of obligation to reciprocate the university's support with the ability to balance work and family life during COVID-19 time, which is consistent with Aryal's (2018) and Criado et al.'s (2015) assertions that individuals in the homogeneous society are likely to reciprocate among themselves because of high social trust. In addition, our finding also

lends credence to the notion of social exchange process wherein employees' decision to reciprocate is a direct result of POS exerted by the organization which in turn influences their desire to help the organization to achieve its goals and objectives (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Eisenberger et al., 2001) – in our case, to work from home with less stress in work and family life during uncertain times.

Conversely, we also find felt obligation does not mediate the relationship between POS and WLB in the heterogeneous group. Our finding suggests that Malaysian academics are able to exhibit WLB once they perceive that the university is supportive of them. In other words, Malaysian academics do not elicit any sense of obligation to reciprocate the university's support in order to balance their work and family life during the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding is consistent with the assertions from Costa and Kahn (2003); Delhey and Newton (2005) in which individuals in a heterogeneous society are unlikely to reciprocate other people's favors because of low social trust. Furthermore, this result ascertains the self-enhancement mechanism instead of the social exchange process wherein the emergence of POS reduces employees' stress during precarious times because the organization is able to take care of the employees' socioemotional needs (i.e., affiliation, recognition, approval, and emotional support), leading employees to trust the organization that it will not take advantage of their vulnerabilities that ultimately encourage them to participate in the organization's coping strategies (e.g., to break the chain of transmission of the virus) in order to deal with the uncertainty posed by the pandemic with effective balance in their work and family life (Eisenberger et al., 1990; Kurtessis et al., 2017). Scholars (e.g., Eisenberger et al., 2020; Rockstuhl et al., 2020) have highlighted the importance of examining the influence of a national culture on POS and its outcomes, particularly in the Eastern collectivist society. Our study provides empirical evidence by revealing that ethnic dissimilarity has a moderating effect on employees' felt obligation to exhibit WLB when support is received. Moreover, this investigation extends extant research on the moderating effect of ethnic dissimilarity on the mediating effect of felt obligation between POS and WLB. Furthermore, Caesens and Stinglhamber (2020) suggest that it is salient to examine whether the existence of a high level of POS influences employees' felt obligation to reciprocate with subjective well-being (e.g., WLB), particularly in different cultural settings to advance OST. Indeed, our result indicates that the level of POS in the heterogeneous sample is significantly higher than the homogeneous sample. We conjecture that the absence of mediating effect of felt obligation between POS and WLB in the Malaysian sample indicates that the emergence of a high level of POS has no influential effect on

academics' felt obligation towards the university's support, which in turn affects their WLB during upheaval time.

Finally, scholars (e.g., Eisenberger et al., 2020) have stressed the importance of examining the mediating effect of OE between POS and attitudinal outcomes via the self-enhancement process. To our surprise, we find OE mediates the relationship between POS and WLB not only in the heterogeneous but also in the homogeneous society. One plausible explanation to this stark finding could be that academics in the Malaysian and Chinese universities were given the opportunity to participate in the decision making process pertaining to what the university should do to mitigate the uncertainties posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This effort demonstrated by the university have led the academics to immediately feel that the university is supportive and care about their well-being during upheaval time. Furthermore, the academics also feel appreciative towards the university for giving them the chances to participate in the decision making process pertaining to their work arrangements. Such favors demonstrated by the university are interpreted as the university's efforts to fulfill the academics' socioemotional needs (i.e., affiliation, recognition, self-esteem, and emotion). As such, once these socioemotional needs are successfully fulfilled, the Malaysian and Chinese academics then decide to invest their emotional commitment to the university by considering themselves as an important member of the university, which ultimately enables them to balance their work and family life. Additionally, this finding also ascertains the self-enhancement process in the OE's mediation between POS and WLB, wherein success fulfilment of employee's socioemotional needs (i.e., approval, affiliation, esteem, and emotional support) through POS, leads the employees to regard themselves as an important member of the organization, which ultimately enables them to have WLB (Eisenberger et al., 2020; Kurtessis et al., 2017).

Importantly, this is the first study that we know of that examines the mediating effect of OE between POS and WLB in the heterogeneous and homogeneous societies during undependable time. Empirical evidence is found revealing OE is a salient mediator linking POS and WLB. This finding is consistent with prior research examining the mediating effect of OE between POS with organizational commitment, intention to quit, volunteer satisfaction and commitment (e.g., Malinen & Harju, 2017; Saks, 2006). In the collectivist society, in particular, we show that the Chinese and Malaysian academics generally agree that the university is supportive of them. Through the self-enhancement mechanism, the demonstration of support from the university to the academics is envisaged to be precious and highly appreciated by the academics during COVID-19 time as the university's genuine intention to fulfil the academics' socioemotional needs (i.e., affiliation, esteem, approval,

and emotional support) which significantly influence their identification as university's important member via in-group membership and approval (Eisenberger et al., 2020; Kurtessis et al., 2017), that enables their balance of work and family life.

Theoretical contribution

Our findings provide several salient theoretical contributions to POS, felt obligation, OE, and WLB. Our study has several theoretical implications which involve consideration of how a nation's culture influences POS that elicit the employees' felt obligation to ultimately balance their work and family life during the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our finding reveals that a nation's culture has a significant impact on the employees' decisions to reciprocate distinctly in terms of their WLB when support is received. Based on OST, we find that felt obligation does not mediate the relationship between POS and WLB in the heterogeneous group. As such, our finding advances OST by revealing that POS is a crucial force for employees to be better able to balance work and family life. The organization is stressed due to uncertainties amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Employees are instructed to work from home. With a demonstration of support from the organization, employees find themselves coping with the new normalcy effectively (i.e., working from home) by having a good balance in work and family life because they are confident that the organization will not take advantage of their vulnerabilities during this difficult times (Kurtessis et al., 2017). Additionally, finding from this study also helps to enhance OST by revealing that high level of POS does not necessarily elicit employees' felt obligation to reciprocate towards organizational welfare in different cultural context. Albeit, OST maintains that POS elicits a felt obligation to care about the organization's welfare and help the organization achieve its objectives (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). The finding from this study reveals otherwise by demonstrating the asymmetrical relationship between POS and felt obligation which contribute to OST and the extant literature on POS as the emergence of a high level of POS may be interpreted by employees as incompetence, lack of autonomy, and power related to their works, affecting their feelings of indebtedness to care about the organization's welfare, which adversely influences their well-being (Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2020).

In addition, our study also finds that employees in the collectivist society are inclined to identify themselves as an important member of the organization when they feel supported which influences WLB. This compelling finding is aligned with the call from Eisenberger et al. (2020) to examine the employees' identification with the organization to advance OST, particularly in Eastern collectivist societies.

The present study also extends POS literature by demonstrating that ethnic dissimilarity has a moderating effect on the mediation of OE between POS and WLB. Most of the prior studies examined the mediating effect of work engagement of POS and WLB (e.g., Caesens et al., 2016; Peterson, 2015) while omitting the underlying mediating mechanism of OE pertinent to POS and WLB to advance OST. Finding from this study identifies the salient mediating effect of OE between the relationship of POS and WLB, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic. The mediating effect of OE between POS and WLB offers insight as to support received by the employees significantly affects their socioemotional needs, which fosters their identifications as an important member of the organization that leads to their abilities to balance work and family life.

Practical implications

With respect to practical implications, this study corroborates the importance of heightening POS to elicit employees' felt obligation, OE, and WLB, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, our result indicates that felt obligation is a salient mediator that links POS and WLB in a homogeneous society. Because the fact that China is still imposing a zero COVID-19 policy across the country until now. We hence recommend that the Chinese university's management to continuously exert support towards the academics because the Chinese academics would regard the support received as the university's intention to demonstrate care and concern on them, in turn for them to reciprocate with good balance in work and family life.

Second, to motivate academics to engage themselves in the university in order to balance their work and family life during COVID-19 pandemic, POS does matter in the collectivist society. Specifically, our result suggests that POS influences academics to regard themselves as an important member of the university that enables them to balance work and family life. Thus, we propose that the university's management in the collectivist society exerts support focusing on the academics' socioemotional needs (emotional support, affiliation, recognition, and approval) to enable them to regard themselves as the university's important member, that enabling them to have balance in work and family life. As Kurtessis et al. (2017) maintain that when an organization can take care of the employees' emotional support during a stressful time, it will make the employees feel comfortable and eventually lead them to identify themselves with the organization when POS emerges.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

As with any study, ours has limitations. Our study is conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Acknowledging the fact that this crisis has profound impacts on the livelihood of many people in this world, we are uncertain whether the same empirical results found in this study would be of the same magnitude in non-pandemic contexts or other industries. Nevertheless, our findings are salient to university academics who are expected to continue to devote themselves educating the students during uncertain and challenging times. We believe it is certain that extant POS literature would benefit if future research could examine relevant concepts of POS when the world has become more certain and stable. Second, it is not possible to test causal relationships with a cross-sectional survey. We believe it would be beneficial to future researchers to replicate our study with a longitudinal approach to enhance understanding of the complex relationships between HR practices and POS. Third, we focus on the mediating effects of felt obligation and OE between POS and WLB to examine employees' feeling of indebtedness and investment in the organization, but other important mediators such as intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy (Eisenberger et al., 2020; Kurtessis et al., 2017) also warrant attention. Finally, it's important to recognize that even within the homogeneous group, academic staff from China may exhibit diverse ethnic and cultural practices and beliefs (Chan et al., 2022). Likewise, within the heterogeneous group, individuals may share common religious beliefs and cultural practices.

Conclusion

This study presents two distinct mediation models that open a new vista concerning our understanding of how employees envision their support received from the organization during the COVID-19 pandemic. We demonstrate that the onset of daily COVID-19 disruptions have a significant impact on employees' perceived support and work life balance, especially for academics in Malaysian and China universities. This investigation highlights the essentiality of continuous support academics during these tiring times.

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Data Availability The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available due the data is required to be kept confidentially which requested by third party but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval The questionnaire and methodology for this study were approved by the Human Research Ethics committee.

Competing interests The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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