Investigating the Impact of Social Networks on Women Working from Home (WFH) in Alleviating Psychological Distress

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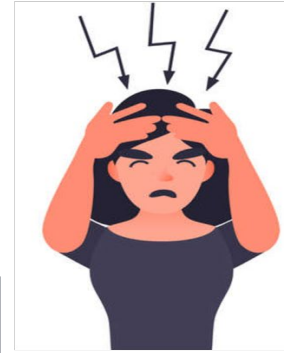
3. Awis Rumaisya Azizan

Research Symposium 2022:
"Towards an Inclusive Malaysia: Research Insights on the Implications of Digital Communications on Society"

Introduction

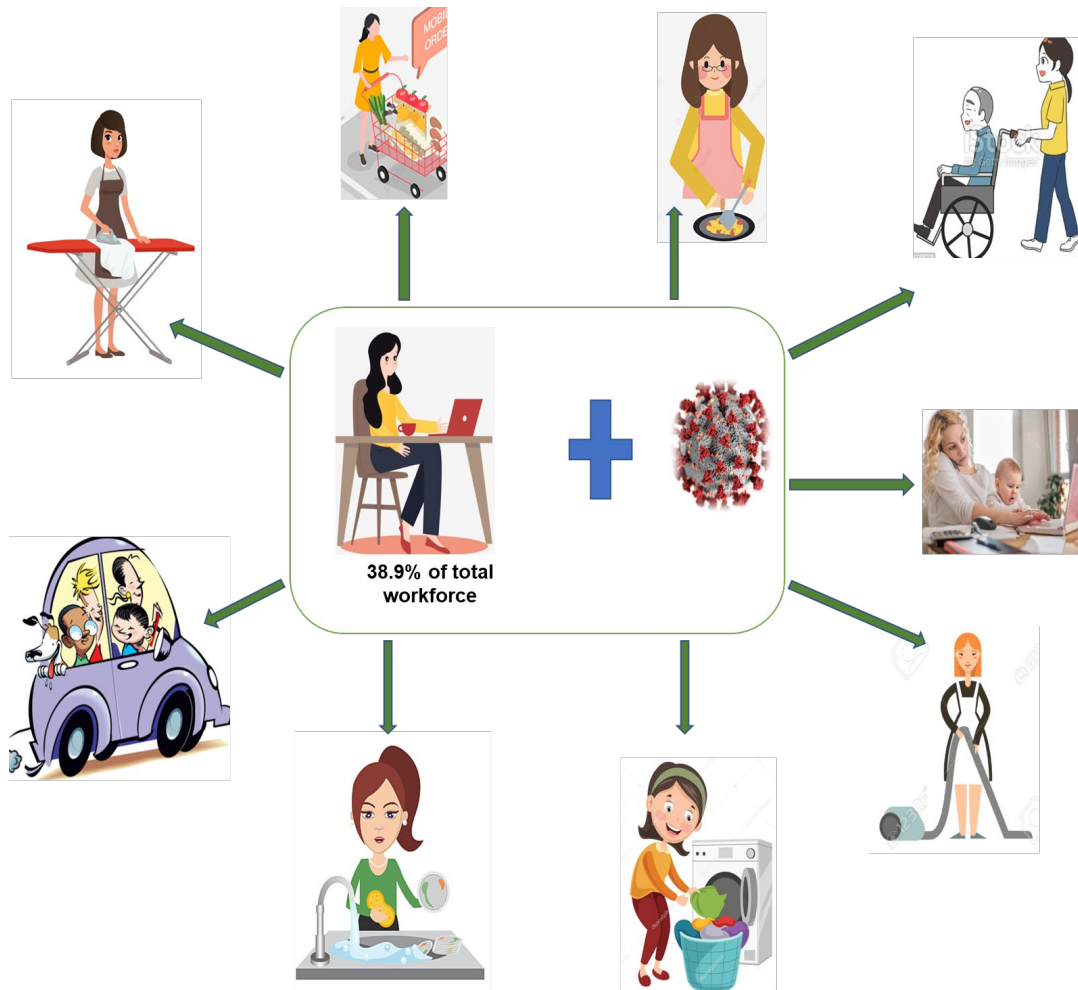## PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

38.9% of total workforce

- 37%(664) emotional distress
- 33%(592) depression
- 24%(430) stress
(Balakrishnan, 2020)

SOCIAL NETWORKS for support

Main Purposes:
1. To **understand the impact of social networks** in assisting women (WFH) to cope with psychological distress
2. To identify **how social networks can be leveraged** to develop the **women's resilience** in facing **future health threats**

Research Objectives

1 To identify the **level of psychological distress** faced by women (WFH)

2 To investigate the **extent** to which social networks help women (WFH) to cope with psychological distress.

3 To investigate the women's (WFH) **perceptions** on the effectiveness of social networks to provide support to them in coping with psychological distress

4 To provide **suggestions** on how the internet (including social networks) can be further leveraged to provide support to women (WFH) in coping with psychological distress and make them more resilient.

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Methodology

Research Objective

To identify the level of psychological distress faced by women (WFH)

To investigate the extent to which social networks help women (WFH) to cope with psychological distress.

To investigate the women's (WFH) perception on the effectiveness of social networks to provide support to them in coping with psychological distress.

Research Question

What is the level of psychological distress faced by women (WFH)?

How does social networks help women (WFH) in coping with psychological distress?

What is the perception of women (WFH) on the effectiveness of social networks in providing support to them to cope with psychological distress?

Data collection/Analysis

Self-report questionnaire (DASS 21)

1. Online survey questionnaire

2. Online semi-structured interview

Participants

Quantitative
Convenient sampling
No of respondents: 443

Qualitative
1. Online survey – convenient sampling – no of 443 respondents
2. Virtual online semi-structured interview – convenient sampling – no of respondents (20)

Key Findings – No.1

Women WFH faced many challenges:
- ➢ juggling between different responsibilities, i.e. as mothers, wives, employees, caretakers, etc.
- ➢ handling heavy workloads and long working hours.

Key Findings – No.2

Depression (mild to extremely severe)	Anxiety (mild to extremely severe)	Stress (mild to extremely severe)
• Rural (31.81%) • Urban (27.12%)	• Rural (50%) • Urban (39.47%)	• Rural (27.28%) • Urban (20.1%)

➢ Reasons for the high indication of depression, anxiety and stress:
  a. lack of communication due to the MCO where social interactions were done mainly via Whatsapp
  b. adjustments to new work life i.e. working from home

➢ These findings are indicative in nature as DASS 21 is just a screening tool. Clinical assessment needs to be performed in order to reach a more conclusive outcome.

Key Findings – No.3

Depression (mild to extremely severe)	Anxiety (mild to extremely severe)	Stress (mild to extremely severe)
• Rural (31.81%) • Urban (27.12%)	• Rural (50%) ✓ • Urban (39.47%)	• Rural (27.28%) • Urban (20.1%)

❑ Anxiety symptoms due to their apprehension about the future:
➢ Uncertain, unpredictable, and uncontrollable situations of COVID-19
➢ Economic uncertainty
➢ Loneliness
➢ Fear of visiting health facilities due to the risk of infection
➢ Loss of one's usual coping mechanisms such as socialising, group sports and travelling
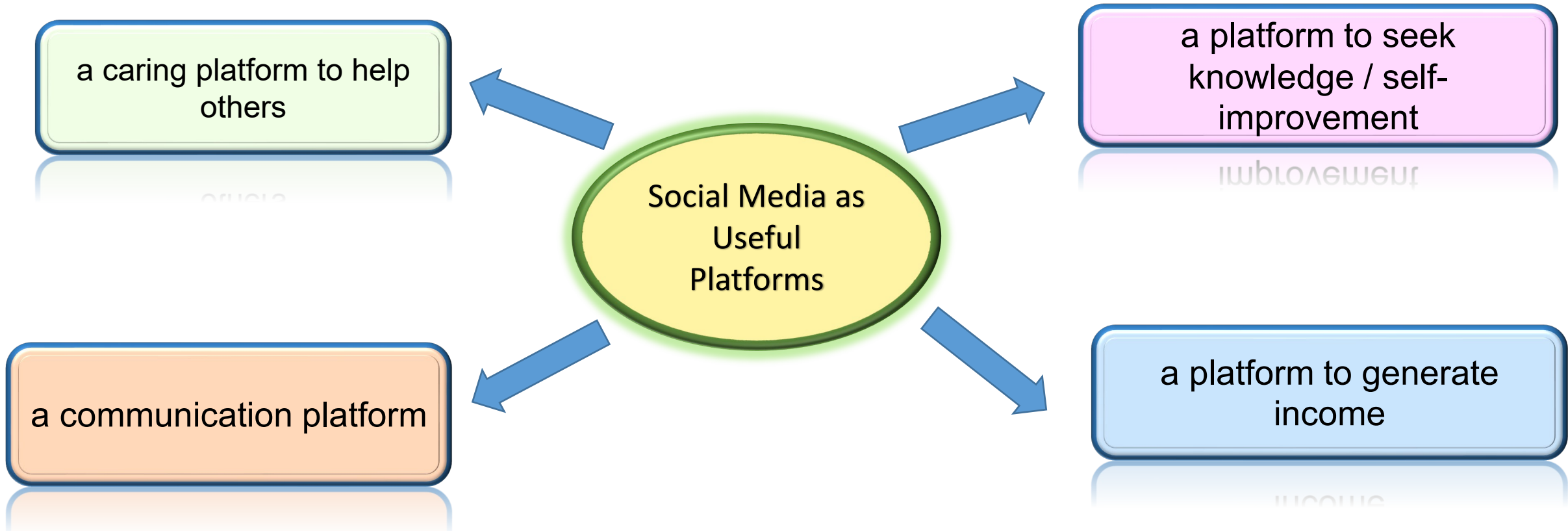
Recommendations

1. **Establishment of a National Mental Health support platform in accordance with the National Strategic Plan for Mental Health 2020-2025**

a. One single platform which is **holistic, integrating and synergising** the **involvement** of various **stakeholders** such as relevant Ministries, agencies, NGOs, employers

➢ The role of employers either in the **Public or Private sector** must be heightened to ensure the success of this collaborative initiative. Employers need to have their **internal policy** on staff mental health to safeguard the wellbeing of the employees.

➢ The collaborative effort also needs to **integrate components of religiosity/ spirituality** by bringing in religious leaders of various faiths. Integrating religious coping techniques with evidence-based mental health interventions should be emphasised.

Recommendations

b. The platform should be a **combination of online and face-to-face or hybrid** mode since "virtual bonding is difficult to form".

➤ Incorporating a systematic approach, where the diagnosis could be made online followed by in-depth assessment and treatment via face-to-face and online; and

➤ Incorporating a **personalised approach**, where it is not generalised or be one-size-fits-all.

c. The platform should be **accessible to women in urban and rural areas**.

d. **Awareness** of the platform needs to be created at the national level since many women reported having very limited knowledge of existing social support for mental health issues.

e. **Features of the platform** that could be embedded are a caring platform to help others, a platform to seek knowledge/self-improvement and a communication platform.

Recommendations

2. Implementing amendments in work policy to ensure work-life balance among employees, especially women during this post-pandemic era.

a. Most women welcomed the idea of **flexible or hybrid working conditions**. This corresponds with the amendments that shall be made to the Employment Act on flexible schedules and shorter workweeks for working women (The Star, 29 November 2021).

b. It is also suggested that the policy considers **employers' responsibility in respecting the boundaries of working hours** to avoid the issues of 'heavy workload' and 'long working hours'.

c. Employers must make **mental health a company-wide priority**. Company leaders are expected to drive awareness and action on mental health. A culture in which employees feel supported by co-workers and management makes them more likely to share their feelings or challenges.