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Perceived Nonwork Constraints and Withdrawal Intention among Expatriates during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Moderating Role of Resilience and Marital Status

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed a considerable threat to the wellbeing of expatriates, which can be seriously exacerbated by both work- and nonwork-related factors. Since restrictions were introduced worldwide, expatriates find it more challenging to integrate into their organizations and local societies. This study mainly aimed to examine if resilience and marital status could affect the perceptions of nonwork constraints and withdrawal intentions among expatriates during the pandemic. Data collected from a sample of 205 expatriates living and working in Malaysia was analyzed using partial least squares-structural equation modeling. The results showed the positive and direct effect of perceived nonwork constraints on withdrawal intention ($\beta = .29, p = .30$). Using the two-stage moderation analysis, the results indicated the significant moderating effect of marital status on the relationship between perceived nonwork constraints and withdrawal intention ($\beta = -.14, p = .04$). However, the results did not substantiate the moderating effect of resilience on the relationship between perceived nonwork constraints and withdrawal intention ($\beta = .16, p = .07$). This research contributes to behavioral science knowledge about global mobility by applying spillover theory and the conservation of resources theory in the context of a medical emergency like the COVID-19 crisis. Notwithstanding ongoing obstacles caused by the global pandemic, the research findings could provide implications for human resource practitioners to improve work behavior among expatriates by considering their nonwork aspects and marital status.

As unprecedented challenges can threaten organizational growth, many firms remain responsive to a wide range of complex issues like terrorist attacks, natural disasters, and medical emergencies when managing employees (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2022). Foremost among such issues, the current COVID-19 pandemic has seriously disrupted normal human lives and social activities worldwide (Channuwong & Ruksat, 2022). In particular, expatriates are more vulnerable in this situation because many of them were or are stranded overseas without the possibility of returning home (Koveshnikov et al., 2022). According to a recent survey conducted by InterNations (2021), expatriates have found their personal travel,

social life, and work/business to be the most affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even without the challenges raised by the pandemic, expatriates confront numerous difficulties associated with international assignments, ranging from cultural and family-related problems to individual and organizational performance issues (Tripathi & Singh, 2021). Despite extensive studies on global mobility within ‘hostile’ or ‘dangerous’ contexts (Koveshnikov et al., 2022), only a handful of them have empirically investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on expatriate success (e.g., Hoang, 2020; Koveshnikov et al., 2022; Sahoo et al., 2022).

Since lockdown rules and travel bans have impeded free movement, expatriates feel socially isolated abroad without being able to engage in any outdoor activities. In this noxious environment, nonwork factors can induce high levels of stress that are detrimental to expatriate effectiveness (Koveshnikov et al., 2022; Mello & Tomei, 2021). Selmer and Fenner (2009) asserted that expatriates tend to have shaky boundaries between life domains. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to accentuate spillover effects among expatriates, whose nonwork domain can influence their work domain, and vice versa (Koveshnikov et al., 2022). Spillover effects refer to the impact of variables in nonwork domain on other variables in work domain, or vice versa (Takeuchi et al., 2002). Nevertheless, spillover effects have been understudied in the expatriate literature, especially in the context of global pandemic (e.g., Koveshnikov et al., 2022). Similar expatriate research on the experience of spillover effects has only been explored in the context of terrorism so far (Bader et al., 2015; Bader et al., 2019). To address this existing research gap, the present study applies spillover theory (Staines, 1980) to explain how perceived nonwork constraints influence withdrawal intention among expatriates amid the pandemic.

If the relationship between perceived nonwork constraints and withdrawal intention is significant, the examination of moderating factors is imperative to alleviate the repercussions of perceived constraints in the nonwork domain. In this regard, the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) dictates that personal resources are expected to moderate the harmful effects of stressors in both work and nonwork domains. Since the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated resource loss (Shelef et al., 2022), resilience is a protective factor for employees to maintain well-being in this event (Shelef et al., 2022; Traunmüller et al., 2021; Tulucu et al., 2022). In the management field, research on resilience often draws from positive psychology, which is known to enhance employees’ organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and commitment to change (Aguiar-Quintana et al., 2021). Although studies on the COVID-19 pandemic have investigated the role of resilience among employees working in hospitals (Tulucu et al., 2022) and hotels (Aguiar-Quintana et al., 2021), little has been done to specifically examine how resilience can help expatriates cope with stressors during the pandemic, such as lockdowns and travel bans (Tripathi & Singh, 2021). Considering that these measures have affected the work-life interface of both single and married expatriates (Mello & Tomei, 2021), it is difficult to determine how married and unmarried expatriates deal with nonwork stressors, which subsequently impact their work behaviors in tough times. This is because single employees are highly vulnerable to feelings of loneliness and increased work expectations (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020), whereas married employees face additional difficulties in managing both their work and family life, especially if they have children (Mello & Tomei, 2021). In response to these issues, this study adopts the COR theory to incorporate both resilience and marital status as personal resources that moderate the relationship between perceived nonwork constraints and withdrawal intention among expatriates in a global crisis.

The development of the research framework was based on the spillover theory (Staines, 1980) and COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) using a sample of expatriates in Malaysia (Figure 1). Malaysia is a developing Asian country which needs expatriates to facilitate knowledge and technology transfer (Ram, 2020) for economic progression (Sahoo et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the country has not been exempt from the COVID-19 outbreak; its impact on human lives has been dramatic, and daily routines are no longer the same as before. According to a local leading daily, the Malaysian government banned expatriates from leaving the country for holidays or business needs during the pandemic (Landau, 2020), which imposed

major restrictions on their work and nonwork lives. Additionally, as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to strike the world, Malaysia was among the countries that introduced punishments for noncompliance. For example, nine expatriates were arrested and fined for jogging in their residential areas following the enforcement of the nationwide movement control order in March 2020 (Lee, 2020).

By applying both spillover theory and the COR theory, the main objective of this research is to assess the relationship between perceived nonwork constraints and withdrawal intention among expatriates, and this relationship is expected to be moderated by resilience and marital status as possible resources. Arguably, the loss of these resources may stir up the negative emotions of expatriates, leading to assignment withdrawal amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

This section begins with the discussion of the two overarching theories applied in this paper, which are spillover theory and the COR theory. This is followed by the development of hypotheses to elucidate the moderating effects of resilience and marital status on the relationship between perceived nonwork constraints and withdrawal intention among expatriates.

The Spillover Theory

Spillover theory suggests that an individual's experience in one domain can influence his or her behaviors in another domain (Staines, 1980). This theory has proven to be useful in explaining the reciprocal relationship between work and nonwork domains. Particularly, spillover theory underlines the process by which people carry the attitudes, emotions, and behaviors they establish at work into their home, or vice versa (Crouter, 1984). The spillover process can be either positive or negative, such that positive spillover can enhance life satisfaction whereas negative spillover can provoke anxiety and unpleasant feelings.

In the international context, spillover theory has been largely applied to elucidate the nexus between an expatriate's work life and private life (Bader et al., 2015; Bader et al., 2019). Given that emotions can be unpredictable for expatriates, the effects of spillover from nonwork to work domains can favorably or unfavorably influence their success of international career. For instance, family adjustment has been found to strongly and positively flow into expatriate outcomes like work adjustment and job performance (Takeuchi et al., 2002).

Consistent with the above, spillover theory is a strong basis to understand expatriate withdrawal, which can be induced by excessive nonwork constraints during the COVID-19 pandemic. Scholars have identified that the pandemic-specific challenges faced by expatriates, such as limited travel and social activities, trigger spillover effects on their work attitudes (Mello & Tomei, 2021; Sahoo et al., 2022). This means that if expatriates cannot manage their nonwork constraints well during the pandemic, they are unlikely to perform and continue their assignments.

Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory

The COR theory is a motivational theory that describes how an individual strives to retain, foster, protect, and build resources in order to achieve personal or organizational goals (Hobfoll, 1989). This theory encompasses four main resources, namely objects (e.g., work tools), personal characteristics (e.g., resilience), conditions (e.g., employment), and energy (e.g., knowledge). Munyenyembe et al. (2021) signified that these resources can function beyond the workplace environment. Moreover, the COR theory emphasizes the salience of protecting resources that strengthen an individual's adaptation and coping skills (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Traunmüller et al., 2021).

Previous studies have applied this theory to explain expatriate outcomes, including job performance (Sahoo et al., 2022) and turnover intention (Andresen et al., 2018). Notably, the COR theory and research evidence both suggest that expatriates who experience resource loss would exhibit withdrawal behavior (Chan et al., 2021; Davies et al., 2019). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic's deleterious impact on humanity worldwide, the COR viewpoint rationalizes that highly sensitive expatriates are prone to a loss of resources (Sahoo et al., 2022) caused by the isolation from social distancing and work-from-home policies. Consequently, they may express withdrawal intention (Hoang, 2020) as an avoidance coping strategy to mitigate the influence of stressors (Andresen et al., 2018).

Moreover, the strict rules and entry barriers imposed on expatriates by host governments during the pandemic aggravate the former's uncertainties about their future (Sahoo et al., 2022; Shelef et al., 2022). This depletes the resources of expatriates, leading to difficulty concentrating at work. To deal with this, expatriates may utilize their existing resources, such as resilience and marital status, to minimize the effect of perceived nonwork constraints on withdrawal intention in the wake of the pandemic.

Perceived Nonwork Constraints and Withdrawal Intention

The global mobility literature reveals that studies on the nonwork domain have largely focused on general adjustment and family adjustment (Bader et al., 2015; Selmer & Fenner, 2009). However, COVID-19 has imposed more constraints on expatriates than domestic employees in different nonwork aspects (Chan et al., 2022). By halting global travel and personal freedom, the pandemic has constricted the social support of expatriates in a foreign country, which inevitably increases their stress (Thomas, 2020). Stranded abroad with little to no social welfare benefits, most of them choose to end their assignments. For example, when Singapore closed its borders for over a year to contain the spread of virus, many expatriates left the country for good as travel re-opening and vaccinations were delayed by the local government (Jamrisko & Curran, 2021).

Considering the curfews declared in different locations, expatriates are unlikely to enjoy the same lifestyles they had before the pandemic (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Although these measures are to protect expatriates outside work, they are forced to limit their personal leisure time and freedom significantly (see Bader et al., 2019). As a result, expatriates who are unadjusted to these life changes would experience greater fear, which triggers their intention to withdraw. Withdrawal intention is defined as an expatriate's thoughts of returning home earlier than expected before his or her contract ends (Koveshnikov et al., 2022). For instance, as strict lockdown measures continue in Shanghai to realize China's zero-COVID strategy, many expatriates have left the city upon feeling that their mental health is not taken care of by the local authorities (The Straits Times, 2022).

This study applies spillover theory (Staines, 1980) to examine the influence of perceived nonwork constraints on withdrawal intention among expatriates during the COVID-19 pandemic. As highlighted above, the pandemic creates multiple stressors in the nonwork setting, such as reduced global travel and social gatherings. Bader et al. (2019) and Chan et al. (2022) contended that perceived constraints in the nonwork domain are associated with negative perceptions of the host environment; consequently, expatriates express their desire to leave the assignment destination. In other words, the greater the importance of perceived nonwork constraints, the higher the intention to withdraw from one's assignment. Therefore, the following hypothesis is developed:

H1: There is a positive relationship between perceived nonwork constraints and withdrawal intention of expatriates.

Resilience

Resilience refers to an individual's ability to quickly bounce back from adversity, trauma, or tragedy (Connor & Davidson, 2003). It is a self-rated coping resource and personal quality that enables people to

thrive amid ongoing stressful events (Kimura et al., 2018). The concept of resilience is well known in the organizational psychology field and the COR perspective (Arshad et al., 2021). In fact, the COR theory postulates that resilient employees are able to adjust and protect their coping resources in the face of work-related stressors (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Employees may respond to these stressors differently depending on the quality and quantity of the resources (i.e., resilience) they have gained over time. In the concept of psychological capital, resilience is the strongest personal characteristic employees can showcase to overcome obstacles in challenging circumstances compared to hope, self-efficacy, and optimism (Aguilar-Quintana et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic caused global disruptions through measures like curfews and economic shutdowns. These are the main stressors that have created personal restrictions for individuals, thereby weakening their coping ability (Shelef et al., 2022; Traunmüller et al., 2021). Congruent with the COR theory, expatriates who live in such a hostile environment endure the loss of personal resources (i.e., resilience), which can cause physical and mental exhaustion (Caligiuri et al., 2020; Chan et al., 2022; Tulucu et al., 2022). Hence, expatriates should boost their resilience as a coping mechanism to recover from adversity. Without resilience, they may exhibit negative work attitudes due to their inability to effectively cope with traumatic experiences during the pandemic (Sahoo et al., 2022).

According to Kimura et al. (2018), resilience has the capacity to act as a moderator that reduces the effects of stressors rather than a mediator that explains such effects. Tripathi and Singh (2021) proposed that in times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, resilient expatriates tend to look at the positive side of the lockdown by spending more time with their family or improving their professional skills. A recent research undertaken by Traunmüller et al. (2021) further confirmed the moderating effect of resilience on the relationship between the psychological impact of COVID-19 and anxiety symptoms. The results suggest that resilient individuals are better able to overcome the harmful psychological impacts of the virus on anxiety symptoms than those with lower levels of resilience. In line with these arguments, expatriates with stronger resilience are expected to respond positively to nonwork constraints caused by the pandemic, such that they would not end their assignments during the stressful period. Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Resilience moderates the positive relationship between perceived nonwork constraints and withdrawal intention of expatriates.

Marital Status

Although the relationship between perceived constraints in the nonwork domain and withdrawal intention has been established in the global mobility literature (Bader et al., 2019), it is unclear if married and single expatriates have faced the same level of nonwork constraints and withdrawal intention in the recent outbreak. This is because marital status can affect the ability to manage work and nonwork roles of expatriates (Vijayakumar & Cunningham, 2019). For example, Selmer and Luring (2011) found that married expatriates have better work effectiveness and performance than their single counterparts. As per the COR theory, being married can be considered a valuable resource (Charoensukmongkol & Puyod, 2022), as married employees acquire extra resources (i.e., marital support) from spouses to buffer the effects of psychological strain and occupational stress. On the contrary, single employees are more prone to resource depletion as they do not receive spousal support to alleviate emotional exhaustion at work (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Charoensukmongkol & Puyod, 2022).

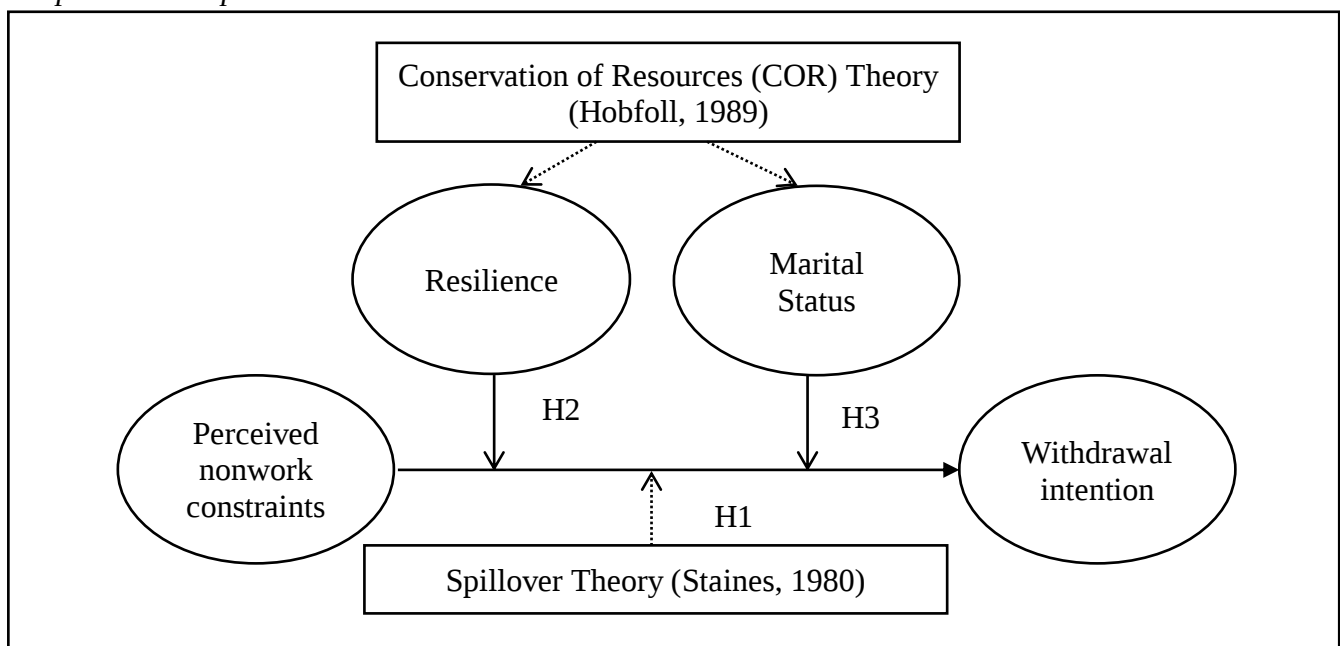
Despite the severity of the pandemic in human societies, married employees are more motivated to work and less likely to leave their jobs compared to their single and younger colleagues (Bajrami et al., 2021). This is due to the fact that married employees have more familial responsibilities and cannot just sacrifice their jobs in tough times. Following this logic, marital status has been incorporated as a moderator in past studies (Charoensukmongkol & Puyod, 2022; Vijayakumar & Cunningham, 2019). For instance,

Vijayakumar and Cunningham (2019) indicated that marital status moderates the relationship between work hours and work-nonwork conflict (WNWC) among expatriates with high work salience. Their findings further suggested that married expatriates experience less WNWC than their unmarried colleagues when managing long work hours. A possible reason is that married expatriates are more family-oriented and concerned about achieving work-life balance. Based on the preceding empirical evidence and the COR perspective, the effect of perceived nonwork constraints on withdrawal intention is likely to be more relevant to single expatriates than married ones. Thus, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H3: Marital status moderates the positive relationship between perceived nonwork constraints and withdrawal intention of expatriates.

Figure 1 displays the proposed conceptual framework with the three hypotheses.

Figure 1
Proposed Conceptual Framework



Method

Sample and Data Collection

The sample of this study comprised expatriates working across multiple industries in Malaysia. Data collection was administered using online Google Forms from August 2020 to December 2020. The convenience sampling technique was adopted due to issues accessing potential respondents during the country's lockdown period. Before data collection, the questionnaire was customized to suit the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and pre-tested by six professionals, including academics, expatriates, and human resource managers. The purpose of the pre-test was to enhance the questionnaire's clarity and refine its items before actual distribution to respondents. There were minor revisions made to the vocabulary of the survey items for better readability. The survey also contained a cover letter stating the purpose of the study and an assurance of anonymity. Referring to prior studies (Bader et al., 2019; Davies et al., 2019; Koveshnikov et al., 2022), expatriate respondents for this research were identified through social networking sites such as InterNations, LinkedIn, and Facebook. A total of 1,000 expatriates were approached for participation; only 210 questionnaires were completed. Of those, five were removed from the analysis due to invalid data, yielding a final response rate of 20.50%.

Out of the 205 respondents, 61.95% were male and 38.05% were female. The majority were self-initiated expatriates (80.50%) and were less than 40 years old (67.80%). In terms of marital status, 52.20% of the expatriates were married. The sample comprised top managers (13.17%), middle managers (45.37%), and non-managers (41.46%). More than half (57.07%) did not have prior international experience. In addition, a significant majority (91.22%) of the expatriates had been working in the host country for more than a year. Many of the respondents were from Asian countries (59.51%), with 32.68% from South Asia followed by 16.10% from Southeast Asia. European expatriates made up 28.79% of the respondents, while the rest of the expatriates were from African (4.39%), American (3.90%), and Oceanic (3.41%) countries. Over a quarter of the respondents worked in the education industry (26.83%) and the information technology industry (25.37%).

Measurements

All measurements were adopted from prior studies to confirm their reliability and validity. Firstly, *perceived nonwork constraints* were measured with a four-item scale by Bader et al. (2019), wherein expatriates rated how often they perceived constraints in their nonwork lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. The items were assessed on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The sample items were 'How often your private life is constrained in the host country in terms of leisure time for outdoor activities' and 'How often your private life is constrained in the host country in terms of mobility and travel'. Secondly, *withdrawal intention* was evaluated using a three-item scale adapted from Bader et al. (2019). A five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was employed. The sample items were 'I often think about leaving the assignment location' and 'I plan to leave the present assignment location.' Thirdly, *resilience* was measured using a six-item scale constructed by Smith et al. (2008). Expatriates responded to the statements on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The sample items were 'I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times' and 'I have a hard time making through stressful events.' Finally, demographic factors such as gender, previous international experience, and duration in the host country were measured to serve as control variables in this study.

Ethical Considerations

This research project was approved by the Medical Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Malaysia Sabah on 12 August 2022 (Approval Code: JKEtika UMS 2/22 (6)).

Results

Common Method Bias

Common method bias was one of the main concerns in this cross-sectional research, especially when survey questionnaire data were collected from a single source (i.e., expatriates only). As this potential issue demands significant attention, Harman's single factor approach was adopted to address it (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The result revealed that 20.81% (< 50%) of the variance was explained by the first factor; thus, common method bias was not a serious issue in this study.

Analytical Method

For the present study, partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was performed using SmartPLS software. PLS-SEM is a variance-based SEM approach, which is suitable for testing a model with limited theoretical support (Hair et al., 2011). Moreover, PLS-SEM is appropriate when analyzing a complex model with multiple moderators (Hair, Matthews et al., 2017). Given that this study's hypotheses involved moderators in a new phenomenon (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic), PLS-SEM was deemed an appropriate method for data analysis.

Measurement Model

The measurement model is assessed to determine the reliability and validity of the constructs. Hair et al. (2011) recommended that construct reliability be evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite

reliability (CR), which should both be above .70. The results shown in Table 1 confirm that all the constructs met this requirement. Next, the quality of convergent validity is concluded based on the factor loadings of each item, which should exceed .708 (Hair, Risher et al., 2017). Apart from factor loadings, the average variance extracted (AVE) of each construct should also meet the threshold value of .50 (Hair, Risher et al., 2017). As exhibited in Table 1, several items (P01, R01, R03, and R05) were removed due to low loadings (< .708). Nonetheless, the AVE values of all constructs were higher than .50.

Table 1
Internal Reliability and Convergent Validity Results

Construct	Item	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Perceived nonwork constraints	P02	0.79	0.72	0.84	0.64
	P03	0.82			
	P04	0.79			
Resilience	R02	0.84	0.73	0.84	0.65
	R04	0.77			
	R06	0.80			
Withdrawal intention	W01	0.94	0.93	0.95	0.87
	W02	0.92			
	W03	0.94			

Note. Factor loadings $\geq .71$; Cronbach's alpha and CR $\geq .70$; AVE $> .50$; P01, R01, R03, and R05 were removed due to low loadings.

The final step of measuring the model is to identify discriminant validity by comparing the correlations among constructs via the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) method. Given that HTMT values should be lower than .90 (Henseler et al., 2015), the corresponding values for all the constructs indicated satisfactory discriminant validity (refer to Table 2).

Table 2
Discriminant Validity Results (HTMT Criterion)

Constructs	1	2
1. Perceived nonwork constraints		
2. Resilience	.08	
3. Withdrawal intention	.18	.23

Structural Model

In the structural model assessment, the causal relationships between variables were analyzed using the bootstrapping re-sampling technique (1,000 resamples). Before looking at the moderating effects, the first step of the assessment was to confirm the direct relationship between perceived nonwork constraints and withdrawal intention. The results displayed in Table 3 demonstrate that perceived nonwork constraints had a positive and significant relationship with withdrawal intention, which supported Hypothesis 1 ($\beta = .29$, $p = .03$, BCI LL = .08, and BCI UL = .55), as predicted. The second step was to create the interaction term for the moderating effects of resilience and marital status using the two-stage analysis (Hair et al., 2019). However, the results demonstrated that the relationship between perceived nonwork constraints and withdrawal intention was moderated only by marital status, which supported Hypothesis 3 ($\beta = -.14$, $p = .04$, BCI LL = -.35, and BCI UL = -.07), wherein the relationship was stronger in the case of single expatriates. Resilience was not found to moderate the relationship between perceived nonwork constraints and withdrawal intention, thus rejecting Hypothesis 2 ($\beta = .16$, $p = .07$, BCI LL = -.33, and BCI UL = .18). Among the control variables, only duration in the host country ($\beta = .11$, $p = .04$) exhibited a negative relationship with withdrawal intention. Overall, the exogenous variables explained 17.90% of the variance

in withdrawal intention ($R^2 = .18$). The effect size (f^2) results also indicated that perceived nonwork constraints had a small effect on withdrawal intention (.04).

Table 3

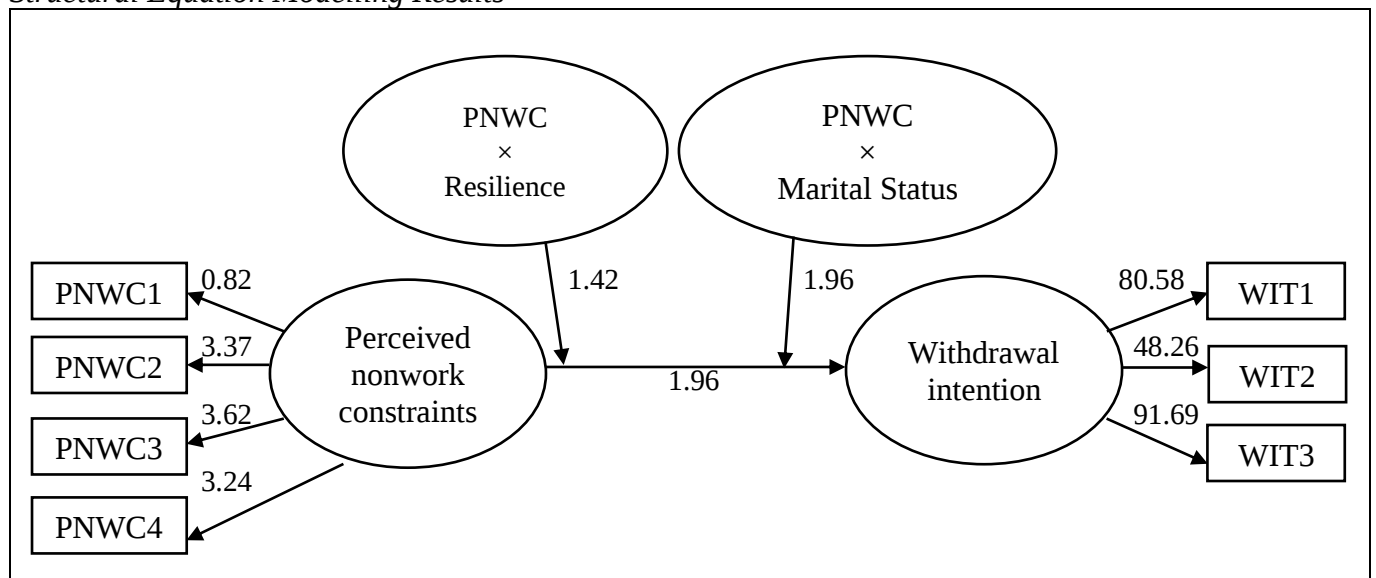
Structural Model Assessment Results

Path	Direct Effect	Standard Beta	Standard Error	t-value	p-value	BCI LL	BCI UL
H1: Perceived nonwork constraints → Withdrawal intention	.30	.29	.16	1.91	.03	.08	.55
H2: Perceived nonwork constraints × Resilience → Withdrawal intention	.16	.19	.10	1.51	.07	-.33	.18
H3: Perceived nonwork constraints × Marital status → Withdrawal intention	-.14	-.13	.08	1.80	.04	-.35	-.07

The last step of the structural model assessment was to generate the Q^2 value as a measure of predictive relevance through the blindfolding procedure (omission distance = 7). As suggested by Hair, Risher et al. (2017), a Q^2 value should be greater than zero to signify the predictive relevance of exogenous variables for endogenous variables. In this study, the Q^2 for withdrawal intention was .09, indicating good predictive relevance of the model. Figure 2 depicts the results derived from PLS-SEM.

Figure 2

Structural Equation Modelling Results



Note. PNWC = Perceived nonwork constraints; WIT = Withdrawal intention

To illustrate the significant moderating effect of marital status (Hypothesis 3), an interaction plot is presented in Figure 3. The solid line representing single expatriates has a slightly steeper slope than the dotted line representing married expatriates. This implies that the effect of perceived nonwork constraints on withdrawal intention is stronger among single expatriates.

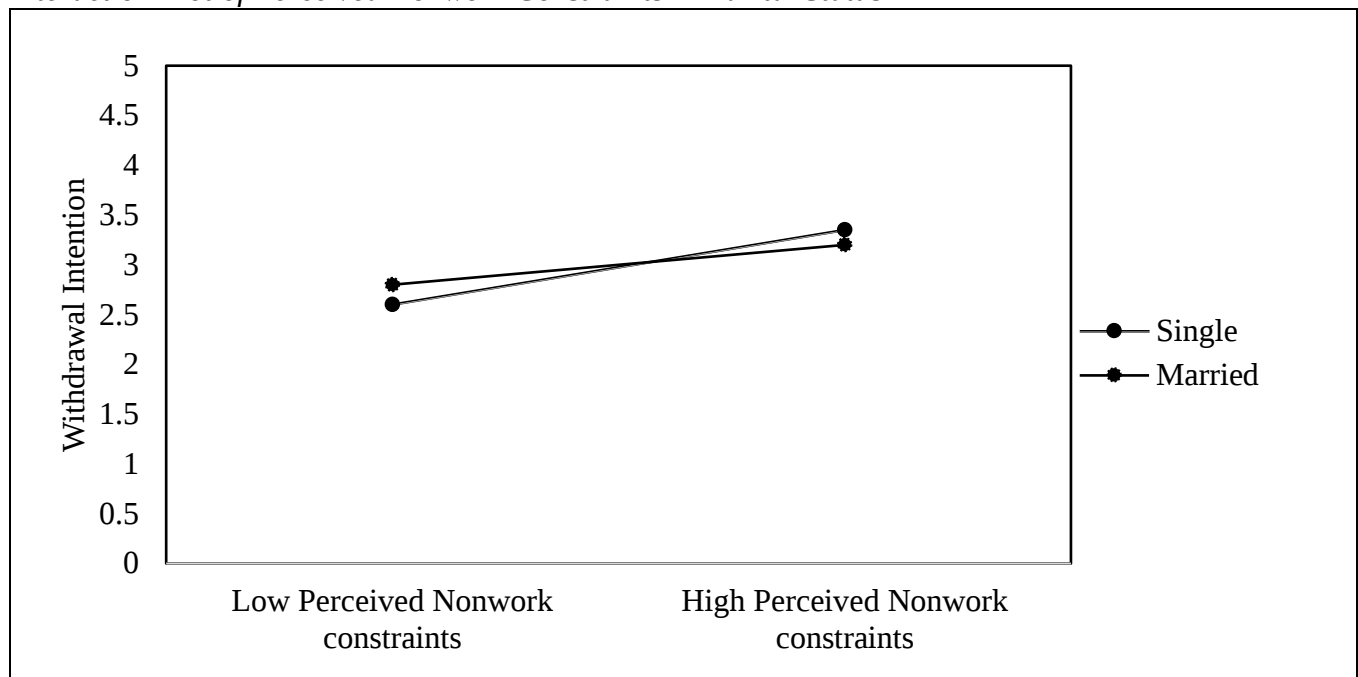
Discussion

In the present study, a theory-based research framework was developed to explain how perceptions of nonwork constraints might influence withdrawal intention among expatriates during the COVID-19 pandemic. In alignment with spillover theory (Staines, 1980) and the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), the findings posit that expatriates may behave according to their personal resources and experience in the

pandemic. For the first hypothesis, the results of this study reveal that perceived nonwork constraints have a direct and significant effect on withdrawal intention. With the implementation of nonwork-related restrictions like local curfews, lockdowns, and travel bans, expatriates are more likely to form a negative impression of their host country and subsequently, reduce their work effectiveness by exhibiting withdrawal behaviors. Consistent with spillover theory (Crouter, 1984), a negative spillover is observable in expatriates whose stress in their nonwork domain (personal life constraints) percolates into their work domain (withdrawal) during the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding echoes with that of Bader et al. (2019), who discovered that the perceptions of nonwork constraints can trigger country withdrawal intention among expatriates working in terrorist-endangered environments.

Figure 3

Interaction Plot of Perceived Nonwork Constraints × Marital Status



For the second hypothesis, contrary to expectations, the moderating effect of resilience on the relationship between perceived nonwork constraints and withdrawal intention did not obtain sufficient empirical support. This meant that resilience cannot fully resolve the problem of withdrawal stemming from expatriates who are exposed to extensive nonwork constraints during the COVID-19 pandemic. The finding contradicts empirical evidence from previous research, which suggests that resilience is a strong personal resource that protects individuals from being hurt by the negative effects of stressful events (Arshad et al., 2021). Presumably, while resilience may function as a useful resource in preventing withdrawal, its effect is insufficient for expatriates to deal with resource depletion caused by nonwork constraints. When resilient expatriates perceive less nonwork constraints, they are less likely to think about leaving their host country. However, their withdrawal intention associated with growing negative perceptions of nonwork constraints cannot be reduced by resilience. A plausible explanation for this insignificant finding could be that the COVID-19 pandemic's nature as a non-intentional global crisis (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2022) has burdened individuals with constant personal restrictions to the point that they can no longer boost their resilience in such challenging times (see Traunmüller et al., 2021).

From the analysis of the third hypothesis, marital status was found to moderate the relationship between perceived nonwork constraints and withdrawal intention. It is interesting to report that married expatriates endure fewer impacts of nonwork constraints than single expatriates. As per the COR theory

(Hobfoll, 1989), in a crisis, married couples can provide resources for their spouse in the form of moral support (Charoensukmongkol & Puyod, 2022). Despite the fact that married expatriates experience greater challenges in both personal and work domains during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mello & Tomei, 2021), the results show that they tend to have lower withdrawal intention compared to their single counterparts when facing nonwork constraints. This further concurs with the view of Bajrami et al. (2021) that married employees are unlikely to develop turnover intention as they have to shoulder the responsibility for their family and cannot simply take the risky decision to resign. In contrast, single expatriates do not have familial or marital commitments, and therefore can allow nonwork constraints to spill over into their professional lives by leaving their assignments.

Implications for Behavioral Science

Based on the above results, several practical implications can be made to assist human resource practitioners in designing mechanisms that can potentially enhance the well-being of expatriates in challenging environments (e.g., terrorism, natural disaster) in the future. First, given that perceived nonwork constraints are likely to fuel assignment withdrawal, it is imperative for companies to provide expatriates with emergency protection and special benefits outside work, such as insurance coverage or well-being webinars (Caligiuri et al., 2020). This shows that even when expatriates are not physically present at work, they would feel appreciated by their employers and continue to give their full commitment without showing withdrawal behavior. For example, a crisis team for COVID-19 could be set up by companies to assist expatriates in all pandemic-related matters, such as COVID-19 testing and vaccination programmes (Tripathi & Singh, 2021). Such crisis planning will be beneficial in maintaining the well-being of expatriates throughout and even after the pandemic.

Second, since the finding that marital status influences the relationship between perceived nonwork constraints and withdrawal intention, it is recommended that companies pay more attention to single expatriates, who are particularly vulnerable to feelings of loneliness outside work compared to their married colleagues. Although both single and married expatriates are equally important in the global workforce (Mello & Tomei, 2021), the former are more inclined to withdraw from their assignments due to the pandemic. Single expatriates are unaccompanied by their family members, so they are in dire need of their employers' assistance in nonwork aspects after being ordered to limit their social activities. Hence, companies should encourage single expatriates to interact with their superiors and local co-workers regularly in order to eliminate negative well-being, which is likely to cause withdrawal.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the above implications, this study has some limitations. First, the sample was only limited to expatriates based in Malaysia, meaning that the findings cannot be generalized to affected expatriates working in other regions during the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to this constraint, future research should target a wider range of host countries to explore the differences in expatriate outcomes. Second, the findings of this research were derived from cross-sectional data, which was collected over a specific period of time during lockdowns in Malaysia (Sahoo et al., 2022). Future scholars should thus consider a longitudinal study to identify possible changes in expatriate behaviors after the pandemic.

Conclusion

This research has confirmed the application of spillover theory (Staines, 1980) by proving the relationship between perceived nonwork constraints and withdrawal intention among expatriates in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak. In agreement with the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), this research has also confirmed the moderating effect of marital status, as a potential resource, on the relationship between perceived nonwork constraints and withdrawal intention. These findings can be used by human resource practitioners as references to manage the expatriate workforce effectively in times of crisis.

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