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THE ROLE OF WORK WELL-BEING ON PRODUCTIVITY GUILT AND WORK-LIFE BALANCE AMONG EMPLOYEES: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Work well-being has emerged as a critical factor influencing employee productivity, emotional health, and overall organizational outcomes. In modern workplaces marked by high expectations and continuous connectivity, employees frequently experience productive guilt, a persistent feeling of not doing enough despite active engagement. This study employs a thematic analysis of existing literature to explore how work well-being shapes productive guilt and work-life balance. The findings suggest that supportive work environments reduce maladaptive guilt and promote healthier balance, while high-pressure contexts intensify emotional strain and imbalance. The study contributes by identifying key psychological themes linking workplace experience with employee well-being outcomes.

IndexTerms **-** Work Well-Being; Productive Guilt; Work-Life Balance; Thematic Analysis; Employee Mental Health

Introduction

Work occupies a central role in shaping an individual's identity, financial security, and overall psychological functioning. In contemporary society, employment is not merely a means of livelihood but also a source of self-worth, social recognition, and personal fulfillment. However, the nature of work has undergone significant transformation due to rapid technological advancements, globalization, and evolving organizational expectations. Increased connectivity through digital platforms has extended work beyond traditional boundaries, often blurring the distinction between professional and personal life. As a result, employees are experiencing heightened demands, continuous availability expectations, and reduced opportunities for psychological detachment from work.

Within this context, maintaining work well-being—defined as the psychological, emotional, and social quality of an individual's work life—has become increasingly critical. Work well-being encompasses factors such as job satisfaction, perceived support, autonomy, and a sense of purpose at work. High levels of work well-being contribute not only to improved job performance and organizational commitment but also to better mental health outcomes. Conversely, poor work well-being is associated with stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout, which can impair both individual functioning and organizational effectiveness.

A growing concern in modern work culture is the phenomenon of **productive guilt**. Productive guilt refers to the persistent feeling that one is not doing enough, even when actively engaged in work-related tasks. This psychological state is often reinforced by high-performance cultures, constant comparison, and internalized expectations of productivity. Employees experiencing productive guilt may find it difficult to disengage from work, feel uneasy during periods of rest, and perceive leisure time as unproductive or undeserved. Over time, this can lead to chronic stress, reduced recovery, and diminished overall well-being.

Productive guilt also plays a significant role in shaping an individual's work-life balance. Work-life balance is conceptualized as the ability to effectively manage and harmonize professional responsibilities with personal life, relationships, and leisure activities. It is not merely the equal distribution of time but the subjective sense of satisfaction and control over one's roles. When productive guilt is high, individuals may prioritize work excessively, encroaching upon personal time and undermining their ability to rest and recharge. This imbalance can lead to strained relationships, decreased life satisfaction, and increased vulnerability to burnout.

On the other hand, positive work environments that promote autonomy, realistic expectations, and psychological safety can mitigate productive guilt and support healthier work-life integration. Organizations that encourage boundaries, recognize effort rather than constant output, and support employee well-being contribute to a more sustainable work culture. In such environments, employees are more likely to experience a balanced integration of work and personal life, leading to enhanced well-being and productivity.

Although prior research has extensively examined occupational stress, burnout, and work-life balance, relatively limited attention has been given to the underlying psychological mechanisms—such as productive guilt—that connect work well-being and work-life balance. Understanding these interconnections is essential for developing a more nuanced perspective on employee experiences in modern work settings.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the relationship between work well-being, uncover the psychological processes that link these constructs and to provide deeper insight into how employees navigate the complexities of contemporary work life.

Review of Literature

1. **De Oliveira et al., 2023** – Found that employees' mental health and well-being are strongly linked to workplace productivity; poor psychological health reduces performance, while positive well-being enhances efficiency and engagement.
2. **Fang, Veenhoven & Burger, 2025** – Supported the "happy productive worker" hypothesis, showing that employees with higher levels of happiness and well-being demonstrate significantly higher productivity levels.
3. **Jarden et al., 2023** – Highlighted that workplace well-being is multidimensional (psychological, emotional, social) and plays a crucial role in employee functioning, emphasizing the need for structured measurement of well-being in organizations.
4. **Leitão, Pereira & Gonçalves, 2021** – Found that quality of work life positively influences employees' perceived productivity, while burnout weakens this relationship, indicating the importance of well-being in sustaining performance.
5. **Wei et al., 2025** – Reported that increased job stress (e.g., through multitasking demands) negatively affects workplace well-being, while job autonomy can buffer stress, suggesting that work conditions shape psychological experiences like pressure and guilt.
6. **Gupta, 2021** – Demonstrated that work-life balance policies significantly improve employee well-being and productivity by enabling better time management, motivation, and reduced stress levels.
7. **Chack, Bhatnagar & Khatik, 2025** – Identified work-life balance as a mediating factor between work stress and productivity, showing that imbalance leads to stress and reduced efficiency among employees.
8. **Aruldoss et al., 2021** – Found that work-life balance significantly impacts quality of work life, with occupational stress partially mediating this relationship, indicating that imbalance contributes to psychological strain.
9. **Kasperczuk et al., 2025** – Reported that flexible work arrangements improve work-life balance, which in turn enhances employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational productivity.
10. **Gangwisch, 2014** – Emphasized that poor work-life balance is associated with stress, fatigue, and reduced well-being, while balanced work conditions support better health and functioning.

Methodology

Research Design : This study adopts a qualitative thematic analysis approach to systematically examine patterns and themes in existing literature related to work well-being, productive guilt, and work-life balance.

Aim

To explore how work well-being influences productive guilt and work-life balance through thematic patterns in existing research.

Objectives

• To identify recurring themes linking work well-being and productive guilt

• To analyse how productive guilt influences work-life balance

• To synthesize findings into a thematic framework

Inclusion Criteria

- Research papers focusing on work well-being, productive guilt, or work-life balance
- Studies using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method approaches relevant to employee psychology
- Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2014 - 2025
- Papers providing conceptual or empirical insights into workplace emotional experiences
- I got my ideas and review of literatures from this site PubMed Central, ScienceDirect and Google scholar.

Exclusion Criteria

• Studies unrelated to employee psychological or workplace experiences

• Papers focusing solely on physical health without psychological context

• Non-peer-reviewed articles, blogs, or opinion pieces

• Studies lacking relevance to the core variables (work well-being, guilt, or work-life balance)

Procedure

The present study utilized thematic analysis to systematically identify, analyze, and report patterns within the selected literature. The analysis was conducted following the six-phase framework proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006).

Initially, the researcher engaged in **data familiarization** by reading and re-reading the selected studies to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. Preliminary observations and notes were documented to capture recurring ideas related to work well-being, productive guilt, and work-life balance.

In the second phase, **initial codes were generated** by systematically identifying meaningful segments of data across the studies. Codes were assigned to key concepts such as stress, burnout, job satisfaction, inability to disengage from work, and boundary management. This process involved both semantic (explicit) and latent (interpretive) coding.

Subsequently, the codes were organized into **potential themes** by grouping related codes together. Patterns across studies were identified, and broader thematic categories were developed to reflect significant aspects of the data.

The fourth phase involved **reviewing and refining themes** to ensure coherence and consistency. Themes were evaluated in relation to the coded data and the entire dataset, leading to the merging, modification, or removal of themes where necessary.

In the fifth phase, **themes were defined and named**. Each theme was clearly articulated to capture its core meaning and relevance to the research objectives. This step ensured that the themes accurately represented the relationship between work well-being, productive guilt, and work-life balance.

Finally, the analysis proceeded to **interpretation and reporting**, where the themes were systematically presented and discussed. The findings were interpreted in alignment with the study's objectives, highlighting the interconnections between the key variables and providing a comprehensive understanding of the underlying psychological patterns.

Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the role of work well-being in shaping **productivity guilt** and work-life balance among employees using a thematic analysis approach. By applying the six-phase framework proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006), the study systematically identified recurring patterns across the selected literature, allowing for a deeper understanding of the psychological processes underlying employee experiences.

The thematic analysis generated several key themes that explain the relationships among the variables. The first theme, **psychological impact of work well-being**, highlighted that employees with higher levels of well-being experienced greater emotional stability, job satisfaction, and resilience in managing work demands. In contrast, lower work well-being was associated with stress, fatigue, and emotional exhaustion. This theme underscores the foundational role of work well-being in shaping employees' overall psychological functioning.

A second major theme identified was **the experience of productivity guilt**. Across the reviewed studies, employees consistently expressed a persistent sense of inadequacy and pressure to remain constantly productive. Thematic coding revealed patterns such as discomfort during rest, fear of falling behind, and self-imposed expectations of continuous output. This theme illustrates that productivity guilt is not merely a reaction to workload but a deeper cognitive-emotional response influenced by both internal standards and external workplace demands.

The third theme, **work-life imbalance and boundary blurring**, emerged as a direct consequence of productivity guilt. Employees experiencing high productivity guilt reported difficulty disengaging from work, leading to the intrusion of professional responsibilities into personal life. The inability to establish clear boundaries resulted in reduced participation in leisure activities, strained relationships, and overall dissatisfaction with life. This finding highlights how productivity guilt acts as a barrier to achieving a healthy work-life balance.

Importantly, the thematic analysis revealed an **interconnected relationship between the themes**, suggesting a process-based understanding of employee experiences. Work well-being influences the intensity of productivity guilt, which in turn affects work-life balance. Employees in supportive and positive work environments reported lower levels of productivity guilt and better balance, whereas those in high-pressure environments experienced heightened guilt and greater imbalance. This indicates that productivity guilt functions as a mediating psychological mechanism linking work well-being and work-life balance.

Additionally, a cross-cutting theme of **organizational culture and expectations** was identified. The analysis showed that workplace norms emphasizing constant availability, high performance, and multitasking contribute significantly to the development of productivity guilt. Conversely, organizations that promote flexibility, autonomy, and well-being create conditions that reduce guilt and support healthier work-life integration.

Overall, the use of thematic analysis enabled the identification of nuanced psychological patterns that are often overlooked in quantitative research. The findings extend existing literature by positioning productivity guilt as a central construct in understanding how work well-being translates into work-life balance outcomes. This thematic perspective provides a more comprehensive understanding of employee experiences in contemporary work settings and highlights the importance of addressing both structural and psychological factors in promoting well-being.

Conclusion

The present thematic analysis demonstrates that work well-being plays a significant role in shaping **productivity guilt** and work-life balance among employees. The findings indicate that positive work environments—characterized by support, autonomy, and realistic expectations—help reduce maladaptive productivity guilt and facilitate healthier integration between professional and personal life. In contrast, poor work conditions contribute to heightened emotional distress, increased productivity guilt, and a disruption of work-life balance.

By identifying and organizing recurring patterns through thematic analysis, the study highlights the psychological mechanisms that connect work well-being to broader life outcomes. In particular, productivity guilt emerges as a critical mediating factor influencing employees' ability to disengage from work and maintain balance.

Understanding these themes is essential for developing effective organizational interventions aimed at enhancing employee well-being and promoting sustainable productivity. Addressing both environmental and psychological factors can help create healthier work cultures that support long-term individual and organizational success.

Implications

• Encourages organizations to prioritize employee well-being initiatives

• Supports development of policies promoting work-life balance

• Highlights the need for interventions addressing productivity-related guilt

• Contributes to research in occupational health and organizational psychology

Limitations

• Based on secondary data without primary empirical validation

• Potential bias in selection and interpretation of literature

• Cultural and industry-specific differences not deeply explored

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