

Investigating female employees' work-life balance practices under the Covid-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate female employees' perception of their work-life balance during remote working under the Covid-19 pandemic. It also explores the techniques that female employees implemented to keep a balance between their work and lives. The study employs a quantitative approach with a survey of 269 female respondents in Ho Chi Minh City. The study focuses on female employees who had experiences of work-from-home during Covid-19. Descriptive analysis is utilized to interpret the data. Prior to that, measurement scales have tested the reliability and validity. Findings show that Vietnamese working women perceived themselves as stressed and difficult to maintain their work-life balance. Cognitive crafting (i.e., prioritizing work) was reportedly the most common practice among women. The study suggests that future research should investigate work-life balance practices in different approaches, and organisations should consider how their employees' practices adjust their policies to attract and maintain employee retention.

1. Introduction

The world economy and people's health have been hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak. Governments of every country have enacted lockdown policies as well as social distancing regulations which means people have to keep their distance from each other to avoid physical contact with others until the situation is controlled. In the same situation, many firms in Vietnam have forced employees to work at home to ensure safety. That is noticeably one of the reasons why the proportion of employees working from home has increased due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, this issue has raised concerns about the quality of work-life (Grote & Guest, 2017). To achieve the quality of work-life, work-life balance becomes essential practice for employees working from home, particularly female workers. It has indeed challenges for women when they have to carry simultaneously out multitasks, which are referred to the family and the workplace. When getting married, women have more responsibilities to maintain the relationship of both their own family and husband's family sides. And even when being a mom, women have to take care of their children as well as their families associated with a greater burden to maintain their career path. As such, working women today have played many roles, work roles and non-work roles (Delina & Raya, 2013). Consequently, this has become a huge pressure for working women, and the balance between work and life turns out to be a/an crucial and urgent/interesting subject.

There are reports mentioned that female employees are mainly responsible for domestic chores, and family caring than males (Bainbridge, Palm, & Fong, 2020; Doble & Supriya, 2010). Findings from a study by Bainbridge et al. (2020) show that caregiving was found to have more

frequency on female employees compared with men, which leads to work-family conflict. In other words, female workers suffer from role conflicts more than males in terms of balanced work and life (Milliken, Kneeland, & Flynn, 2020). Work-life imbalance is also affected by cultures where the female voice is often ignored by their husband and male colleagues in the family and the workplace (Farivar, Cameron, & Yaghoubi, 2016). It is truth with the case of Vietnamese female employees as previous studies identify that they get gender stereotyped in the workplace, which negatively affects the female employees' work-life balance (Duong, Hussain, & Subramaniam, 2020). Researchers call for more study on the issue of enhancing work-life balance practices in order to improve employees' life quality at work (Doble & Supriya, 2010). Work-life specialists proposed that studies related to work and life are "culture-sensitive," and they encouraged more researchers to examine the effects of culture on work-life balance practices (Powell, Francesco, & Ling, 2009). Discovering a particular context may provide rich information and insight (Hammer, Kossek, Anger, Bodner, & Zimmerman, 2011). Therefore, the objective of this study is to understand the perception of female employees in Vietnam about their work-life balance especially during the Covid-19 pandemic and investigate the practices they implemented to balance their work and lives at home.

This study addresses two research questions:

- 1) What do female employees perceive as their work-life balance under the Covid-19 pandemic?
- 2) What techniques do they implement to keep their work-life balance under the Covid-19 pandemic?

The significance of this study is presented below. Firstly, this study addresses the gap of research on work-life practices in the crisis time of pandemic by focusing on female employees in the context of Vietnam. The study might extend the quality of work-life theory as this would offer novel insights into Vietnamese female employees' perception of their work-life balance and the techniques used to improve their life quality and work performance. Secondly, this study makes practical suggestions to individual female employees and organizations. Particularly, it will support organizations and policymakers to have an appropriate policy for their female employees in the workplace.

The structure of the study is presented below. First, this study provides the theoretical background of the study. Second, it describes the research design of this study. Before presenting the results. Finally, this study presents a discussion and conclusions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Remote working under the Covid-19 pandemic

Remote work consists of practices, for instance, working at home, teleworking, phone working, or work that requires the use of technology equipment and data (Sullivan, 2003). Remote working can be performed as a whole or as a part of employees' working time; however, there is evidence that more people are working from home and people are using their home as a place to work full-time (Brenan, 2020). Working from home can reduce traveling time and save expenses such as gasoline and parking cost (Weikle, 2018). Its benefits also include time savings, environment protection when people reduce commuting times, increased public concerns, and policy changes referring to work-life balance, and it also became an attraction to organizations for reducing fixed costs (e.g., rent payments, insurance). In fact, approximately 55 percent of employers in Canada arrange to keep their employees working from home until the situation of Covid-19 becomes lower risk (Conference Board of Canada Survey, 2020). The same with 60 percent of the workforce in the United States, who prefer remote working whenever possible (Brenan, 2020). Moreover, many organizations force their employees to work from home during the pandemic of Covid-19, and working from home is not an easy thing for those who did not

prefer it but now have to adapt to the current situation (Kramer & Kramer, 2020). This sudden change can be challenged in a business arrangement, working space negotiation, communication, and work-life balance (Waizenegger, McKenna, Cai, & Bendz, 2020). Less cooperation with people and more individual working can occur when working from home. Although work from home can have financial benefits, it is significant to recognize how this change may affect employees in terms of their work-life quality.

2.2. Understanding work-life balance

There are several definitions of work-life balance. Regarding employer perspectives, work-life balance is related to an organisation's policy and practices. For example, it refers to employers' arrangement of business strategy and non-work aspects of labour (Brough et al., 2014). It could be argued that work-life balance practice is considered as a wide range of activities, including "flexible scheduling and work arrangements, family leave, employee assistance programs, counseling services, childcare services, and the like" (Thomas & Ganster, 1995, p. 07). From employees' perspectives, Clark (2000) states that work-life balance is a combination of satisfaction and good performance at the workplace and at home with an insignificant role conflict. The concept of work-life balance is also described as a management of the relationship between work and non-work roles as employees need to control their tasks as well as other parts (e.g., family, children) of their life (Kossek, Noe, & DeMarr, 1999). As Haar (2013) states that work-life balance is the extent to which an individual is able to adequately manage the multiple roles in their life, including work, family, and other major responsibilities. Work-life balance is also described as a compromise between a person and their partner about expectations within family and work domains (Carlson, Grzywacz, & Zivnuska, 2009). In general, work-life balance can be understood as a harmony of an individual's work and non-work activities. The study emphasises employees' perspectives, especially female employees' work, family, and other duties.

Women today are responsible for many roles, both work, and family care. It can be seen that they are trying to balance their family and career at the same time. While the anxiety about family can impact women's work, the concern about work problems can also interfere with family. Rodgers (1992) conducted research with a sample of five hundred companies, and the result showed that 53 percent of female employees reported stress of work-family had negatively affected their concentration at work. The study by Pleck (1977) indicates that family-work spill-over is worse for working women. This research finds that most women have to deal with stress, overworked, and pressure of time. Plantenga and Hansen (1999) explored that women spent approximately four times on caring duties, more than men on average in Europe's countries. All family and work time resources are too big for women to play all roles comfortably and adequately (Duxbury, Higgins, & Lee, 1994). Therefore, the balance between work and life is a real concern that needs to be more recognised.

2.3. Female employees' experiences of work-life balance during the Covid-19 pandemic

Wuhan (China) is the first place that has been broken out because of the Covid-19, a dangerous virus. This virus has caused serious health damage, and up to 103 million people around the world have been infected by Covid-19 (World Health Organization, 2021). Many policies such as lockdown, and isolation have been conducted due to this pandemic. Most people have to endure worry, and depression and perceive themselves as at risk (Yıldırım & Güler, 2020). This also means that many children are staying at home and participating in online classes, while female employees have to face the issue of keeping their families stay healthy, and safe on a daily basis and continue to work under risky circumstances. According to Collins, Landivar, Ruppner, and Scarborough (2021), women are trying to reduce their working hours or leave work early to take care of their children. In other words, the Covid-19 pandemic has affected women's career development and increased stress (Milliken et al., 2020). Meanwhile, female workers have to do

domestic chores and childcare, so they may face difficulties in balancing their work and life aspects.

2.4. Work-life balance practices

Sturges (2012) suggests that individuals can approach work-life balance based on some techniques such as physical, relational, and cognitive crafting. Physical crafting describes the time employees spend on work (temporal crafting), working place (locational crafting), what position they do (choosing a job) and how much time they spend on moving from home to work (reducing traveling time). While relational crafting illustrates employees manage and utilize their working relationships between managers and co-workers as well as their relationships with family and friends to achieve work-life balance. Cognitive crafting includes the definition of work-life balance, which defines work-life balance in a technique that is possible to accomplish; prioritizing work over home or leisure activities; and making negotiations to trade-off for future benefits.

According to Shinn, Wong, Simko, and Ortiz-Torres (1989), there are three activities that employees try to approach to reduce stress and enhance their well-being. They include individual coping, social support, and flexitime. Coping includes problem-focused coping (planning) and emotion-focused coping (avoidance), which relates to the activity that a person can do by themselves. Social support can come from different sources such as managers, spouses, friends, or colleagues. Finally, flexitime defines an individual managing their working time and avoiding nonstandard plans for family activities (Staines & Pleck, 1986).

Related to the study of Hobfoll (1989) suggests that people achieve their work-life balance through three aspects of society, psychology, and organisation such as managing to achieve work goals; reducing work demands and related costs (physiological and psychological); motivating personal development (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). This study also suggests that people utilise their resources at the workplace in order to increase their fulfillment.

Greenhaus, Collins, and Shaw (2003) indicate that staff should balance their work and family through three dimensions: equal time, involvement, and satisfaction. This approach concentrates on family only (e.g., married, parents) rather than including employees without their partner or single. Equal time relates to an equal amount of time that employees spent on their work and non-work roles. Involvement refers to an equal level of psychological involvement in work and family roles. Satisfaction is described as an “equal level of satisfaction with work and family roles” (Greenhaus et al., 2003, p. 513). Nevertheless, this approach has limitations; for example, employees may perceive they have a balanced life while enjoying spending time work than doing non-work activities. It means that they still perceive their life to be balanced despite unequal time for each role.

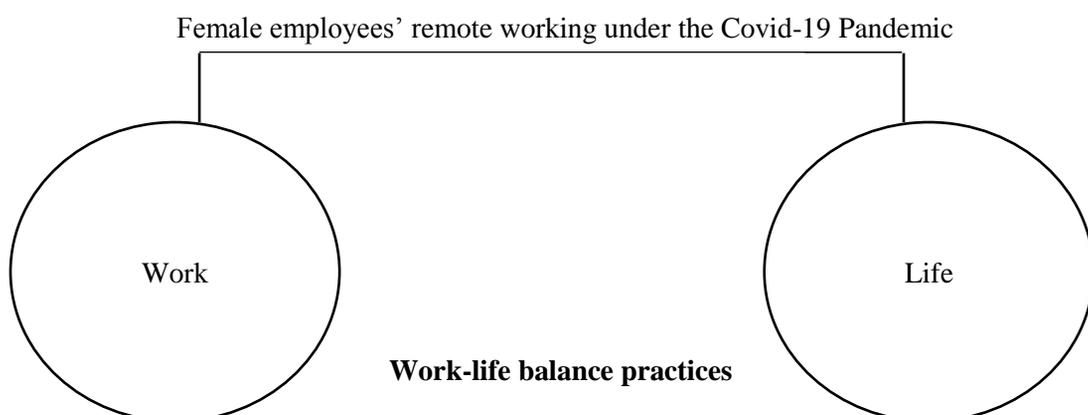


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of work-life balance practice

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research paradigm

Collis and Hussey (2013) define the research paradigm as a framework that illustrates how research should be performed and “based on people’s philosophies and their assumptions about the world and the nature of knowledge” (p. 46). There are several paradigm approaches, such as idealism, realism, positivism, and interpretivism (Alang, 2021). The current study uses the positivism approach due to some reasons. First, the positivist approach tends to use large samples (Collis & Hussey, 2013), which will be easier and timesaving to collect data through surveys. Due to the Covid-19 context, the government also restricts direct interactions between people, and this leads to a limitation in conducting interviews, which relates to qualitative methods. Therefore, the study will use the positivism approach to examine large samples and quantitative research methods for the data collection and analysis.

3.2. Research design

The study used quantitative research methods and collected primary data through surveys using closed-ended questions. Due to the limit of time, expense, and the risk of Covid-19 infection, the quantitative approach was conducted in order to ensure safety and avoid direct interaction between people. Using survey methods is more flexible in collecting a large sample and does not take a long period for the data collection (Rahman, 2017). Survey methods are also easier to ensure anonymity for those filling out the survey (Muijs, 2010).

3.3. Sampling

The research focuses on the remote working of female employees in Vietnam and how they balance their work and life. The sample size focused on female employees from different organisations. The research was undertaken in Vietnam to determine what practices female employees use to achieve their best work-life balance. The total items of the survey were 50. As Comrey and Lee (2013) suggest that to test the validity of the scale, the sample size has to satisfy the minimum criteria. The number of questions multiplies by five. By applying this rule, a total of 250 respondents has to be collected.

3.4. Data collection

The survey target is female employees in Vietnam has been working from home during Covid-19. Because of the Covid-19 and social distance policy, the survey was created by google form and sent online through the mail or social media to ensure health safety and social distance policy. Each respondent received PowerPoint templates after finishing the survey. A total of three weeks was taken to complete data collection. The first part of the questionnaire consists of basic information about the respondent such as gender, education, age, job position, marital status, children, work from home, and living in Vietnam. All male respondents will be excluded from the survey. For the next part, the questions measured the perception of balance between work and family during Covid-19 of the respondent by adapting a four-item work-life balance measure developed by Brough et al. (2014). To adopt the context of this study, every question was emphasized “Covid-19” at the end of it. This study used five-point Likert scales, which range from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). The next questions measured work-life balance practices by using emotion-focused coping, including 10 items, physical crafting (10 items), cognitive crafting (9 items), and relational crafting (7 items). Emotion-focused coping items were

selected from Shinn et al. (1989). The items, assessed on 5-point Likert-style frequency scales from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree), factored into emotion-focused efforts.

The physical crafting, cognitive crafting, and relational crafting items were developed based on a previous qualitative study by Sturges (2012), discovering initiatives that female employees practised achieving their work-life balance. Based on the Covid-19 context in Viet Nam, most employees have to work from home and rarely come to the office. So, our study excludes the elements of locational crafting and reduces traveling time in physical crafting practice. Physical crafting includes questions such as: “I am trying to manage time on the working day”, “If I know there is something I need to do, I will try to do it as soon as possible”, “If I want to reduce working hours, I will talk to my boss”. The questions for cognitive crafting include “Priority spending time at work rather than non-work activities”, “I find that my life balance when I have weekends free”. Relational crafting includes questions such as: “My manager can trust me when giving tasks”, “If my colleagues knew I got sick, they would understand why I take a day off or leave work early”.

3.5. Data analysis

Descriptive analysis was used to analyse the data through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). The IBM SPSS 26 was utilised for this statistical analysis as this program is one of the friendliest users of software for data management in social science (Muijs, 2010). Validity is defined as the extent to which topic the researcher wants to measure. Reliability refers to the accuracy of measurement (Collis & Hussey, 2013). The research tested validity through convergent validity and discriminant validity and tested reliability by examining the Cronbach’s alpha in the data analysis section.

4. Results

4.1. Respondents’ demographic profiles

The sample size was 269 respondents who live in Vietnam, of which 100 percent were women. The age of those female respondents ranged from 20 to 46 years old. By job status, the structure of the survey was as follows 56 percent of staff, 39.8 percent of team leaders/supervisors, and 4 percent of managers. By material status, 59.9 percent were single, 35.7 percent were married, and 4.5 percent were divorced. From the data, most respondents (75 percent) had completed university/college, 12.6 percent of the respondents had completed master’s or relevant certificates, and 12 percent had completed doctor/associate professor/professor doctor. Of the 35.7 percent of married respondents, 72 percent said they had children, and 27.6 percent said they had no child. On average, 42 percent of female employees worked more than 40 hours/week, 51.7 percent of working women worked less than 40 hours/week, and 6.3 percent of respondents worked 40 hours/week. The sample has 76 percent of respondents working from home 03 days/week, 18 percent working from home 01 day/week, working from home full-time was 4 percent, and others were 1.5 percent. Overall, the percentage of female respondents is high because the study focuses on female employees working from home in Vietnam, and the sample is qualified and representative of all the components.

4.2. Measurement scales’ reliability and validity tests

The Cronbach’s Alpha was applied to test reliability. The Cronbach’s Alpha is a coefficient to evaluate the strength of items’ reliability (George & Mallery, 2003). The acceptable Cronbach’s

Alpha should be $0.8 > \alpha \geq 0.7$, or $0.9 > \alpha \geq 0.8$ is good (George & Mallery, 2003). Furthermore, the total correlation should be > 0.3 so as to make sure the item is valuable. If the total correlation is smaller than 0.3, the item should be eliminated. The rules require that if the value of Cronbach's Alpha when an item is removed is greater than the initial value of Cronbach's Alpha, that item should be excluded and take the new value of Cronbach's Alpha.

The emotion-focused coping factor already excluded 04 items that have a total correlation under 0.3. The next factor is physical crafting (choosing a job), which removed 01 item number to enhance the consistency of the scale. The relational crafting (managing work relationships) factor also deleted one item because the total correlation was smaller than 0.3. After deleting, the number of Cronbach's Alpha increases. Other factors have not excluded any items because all the items meet the requirement.

The results of the reliability analysis of this study had the fluctuation of all Cronbach's Alpha ranges from 0.754 to 0.866, which are considered as the acceptable, good value when testing reliability. In detail, the variable achieving the highest value of Cronbach's Alpha is relational crafting (managing work relationship), which is 0.866. Whereas the factor having the lowest value of Cronbach's Alpha is cognitive crafting (making compromises), which is 0.754. The Cronbach's Alpha of remaining variables which are emotion-focused coping, physical crafting (temporal crafting), physical crafting (choosing a job), cognitive crafting (defining work-life balance), cognitive crafting (prioritizing work), relational crafting (managing non-work relationships), and work-life balance perception during Covid-19 are 0.86, 0.811, 0.817, 0.815, 0.807, 0.861, and 0.764 respectively.

After checking the reliability of the variable, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was carried out to test the validity of the scale based on the rule of Kaiser (1974). Results showed that the KMO from this study is 0.782 ($P\text{-value} > 0.01$), which means the value is acceptable since the standard of KMO for the data to be fit in EFA is $0.5 < \text{KMO} < 1$ (Kaiser, 1974). The Total Variance Explained from this study is 57.81 percent, which is greater than 50 percent and indicates the EFA is qualified. Also, the eigenvalues are at $1.290 > 1$, which defines variables are valid; and all the factors loading higher than 0.5.

4.3. Descriptive analysis

Based on the rule of normal distribution, it was evaluated by the mean, median, and skewness values (Armitage, Berry, & Matthews, 2008). The mean and median are almost equal, and skewness fluctuates from -1 to 1 can be considered a normal distribution. As shown in Table 1, all items' average mean value ranges from 3.52 to 4.04, which means that respondents tend to agree with all practices. The highest average mean value (4.04) belongs to cognitive crafting (prioritizing work), which presents those participants intend to spend more time for work than other activities. The items of physical crafting (temporal crafting) reach the lowest average mean value (3.52), which explains that participants have an agreement with the practices of managing the time of the working day. The other items are emotion-focused coping, physical crafting (choosing a job), cognitive crafting (defining work-life balance), cognitive crafting (making compromises), relational crafting (managing non-work relationships), relational crafting (managing work relationships), work-life balance perception during the Covid-19, having average mean value equalling 3.59, 3.86, 3.99, 3.88, 3.78, 3.53, 3.94, respectively.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of work-life balance practices

Factors	N	Factor loadings	Average Mean	Std. Deviation
Emotion-focused coping	269	0.763	3.59	0.87
Physical crafting (temporal crafting)	269	0.787	3.52	0.79
Physical crafting (choosing a job)	269	0.843	3.86	0.91
Cognitive crafting (defining work-life balance)	269	0.692	3.99	0.89
Cognitive crafting (prioritizing work)	269	0.762	4.04	0.83
Cognitive crafting (making compromises)	269	0.818	3.88	0.77
Relational crafting (managing non-work relationships)	269	0.871	3.78	0.79
Relational crafting (managing work relationships)	269	0.846	3.53	0.77
Work-life balance perception during Covid-19	269	0.911	3.94	0.92

Source: Authors' data analysis

5. Discussion and conclusions

5.1. Discussion

The study is about examining female employees' work-life balance practices in the Covid-19. Two main objectives of the research are as the following: Firstly, the study supports finding out what techniques Vietnamese working women use to balance their work and life. Secondly, based on the data gathered, this study explores the perception of female employees in Vietnam about their work-life balance during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The final results showed that Vietnamese women have to deal with work and family matters, which cause them stress and anxiety, similar to the study of U.S women during Covid-19 (Preis, Mahaffey, Heiselman, & Lobel, 2020). About 65 percent of female employees had a hard time maintaining work-life balance during Covid-19 in Vietnam, and 35 percent left was able to maintain work-life balance despite the difficulties. Specifically, 35% of Vietnamese female employees used several techniques to balance their work and lives during the Covid-19, such as cognitive crafting (defining work-life balance) and relational crafting (managing work and non-work relationships).

This finding provides support to highlight the similarity with studies of Sturges (2012); Golden and Geisler (2007), but not in the Covid-19 period when young workers used various techniques to manage their work and life activities. The finding shows that the majority of Vietnamese women use a variety of approaches to maintain the balance between work and life, with some of the strategies used seven or eight. This finding also seems to be consistent with the research on single parents of Lindholm (2021), who has investigated that parents take advantage of their working schedules and other practices to balance work and life domains. Our exploration shows that the respondents engaged in physical, cognitive, relational, and emotion-focused coping of work-life balance crafting. Many of the practices that research participants used to achieve work-life balance such as managing time on working day, choosing the job that is convenient for them to arrange their schedule such as companies offering work-life balance policies or reducing their working hours; similar to the study of Casper and Buffardi (2004) has explained that work-life balance policies attracted people even though they have no need.

An interesting finding is that most participants in Vietnam believed that cognitive crafting (prioritizing work) supports them to have the ability to control work-life balance and they also try to define work-life balance in a way that makes it easier to achieve. According to GSO (2018), Vietnam has a low percentage of female employees in the workforce, approximately 47.8 percent, compared with males (52.2 percent). Simultaneously, Vietnamese women are trying to carry out their responsibility as mother and wife in the family as traditional roles. It means that Vietnamese tradition assigns females in charge of household chores and childcare, while males are responsible for making money to support their family income. It can possibly be explained why a working woman is now choosing to prioritize the job since they take care of their families has taken most of the gender roles. When a woman starts working more to share the burden of the family's economy, they are also more aware of their roles and spend more time with their jobs than spending most of the time taking care of the family as they were before.

However, even though emotion-focused coping was used as a technique to balance the work and life of female employees, this practice has significant negative outcomes. According to McLeod (2009) emotion-focused coping is associated with stress and is not an absolute solution. Consequently, the finding suggests that this practice is not for positive long-term outcomes.

The study may have some limitations, such as the research design using a quantitative method. Other research methods (qualitative method) might have a deep insight into work-life balance practices and discover more about female employees' perceptions. The participants are only female employees in Vietnam, which narrowed down the sample size and location of the research. The study might take approximately three and a half months to finish and revise. The study was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic so the finding might have been biased. It is possible that female employees could have other practices in different periods. Therefore, the study suggests future research should extend research scope to different approaches to have a holistic picture of work-life balance practices.

5.2. Managerial implications

HRM practices are crucial to organisational outcomes (Dang, Thai, Vu, & Tran, 2018). Many authors have recognised that human resources management in private companies in Vietnam is still undeveloped (T. C. Le & Truong, 2005), and work-life balance policies (e.g., flexible working hours) are mostly unpopular in organisations, especially among senior Vietnamese employees (Doan & Ngo, 2020). Since female employees now are keen on more about their careers, organisations should consider policies to increase workers' and organisations' performance (Lazar, Osoian, & Ratiu, 2010). Work-life balance policies enhance job satisfaction, turnover intention and increase employees' wellbeing (Hughes & Bozionelos, 2007). Thus, the study suggests that organisations in Vietnam should consider applying work-life balance policies to attract and enhance employees' satisfaction.

5.3. Conclusions

In this research, female employees have standard practices of balancing their work and life aspects, even applying seven to eight strategies. The most popular practice that Vietnamese working women prefer is cognitive crafting (prioritizing work), and most Vietnamese women perceive themselves as stressed and difficult to maintain work-life balance. It can be explained that in the past, affected by Vietnamese women's tradition; female employees considered taking care of their children and family members as their most prioritizing role. For now, however, female employees are more perceived as responsible with work roles and spend more time at work than taking care of their families. Additionally, this study gives a message that organizations in Vietnam should carefully consider adopting work-life balance policies to enhance individual performance, especially for working women in the Covid-19 period.

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