

COMPETITIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT, JOB PERFORMANCE, PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AND COPING STRATEGIES IN PAKISTANI WORKING WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

A competitive work environment significantly influences a person's attitude, behavior, mental health, and job performance. The current study aimed to explore psychological stress and job performance among women working in a competitive environment and to find out moderating role of coping strategies on this association. The cross-sectional study was conducted on 150 women aged 25-60, selected through non-probability purposive sampling, and working in different public and private sector institutes in Lahore, Pakistan. Demographic information sheet along with Competitive Work Environment Scales (Fletcher & Nusbaum, 2010), The Individual Work Performance Scale (Koopmans, 2015), Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) (Kessler 1996), and Brief COPE (Carver, 1997) were employed for the data collection. Descriptive statistics, pearson correlation analysis, moderation analysis, and regression analysis were employed to examine the relationship among study variables. Results revealed that competitive work environment has a significant positive correlation with job performance, coping strategies, and psychological distress. Additionally coping was found as having a significant negative correlation with psychological distress. A competitive work environment was found as a significant predictor of psychological distress. Moderation analysis showed that coping was a significant moderator for psychological distress and job performance. Moreover, findings revealed that competitive work environment was found a non-significant moderator for both psychological distress and job performance. The use of some effective stress management workshops and training can help minimize workplace stress and improve employee's professional performance to a significant level.

Keywords: Competitive work environment, psychological distress, job performance, coping.

INTRODUCTION

In organizational contexts, the work environment is regarded as a dominant and central feature of many people's lives. Employee health or well-being is greatly associated with the impact of the work environment (Murtin et.al, 2022). The work environment was found to be associated with organizational outcomes and job performance among university professors (Wilson, 2015; Rehman & Maqsood, 2008).

Workplace stress and burnout are problems that affect all institutions, including educational institutions. Missed days, lost production, and wasted class time are all examples of these consequences. Various internal and external factors are associated with reduced mental health and job performance in the employees of a competitive work environment (Quinn & Smith, 2018). Furthermore, the impact of the favorable work environment is

observed as being associated with improved emotional states as well as increased organizational productivity, reduced absenteeism, and better job performance in women (Sonnentag et. al., 2023; Leka & Houdmont, 2010). In addition, the high workload also influences dedication and promotion, limiting women's career advancement significantly (Rose-Smith, 2021; Gjerdingen et al., 2001).

Although work-related stress cannot be eliminated from daily life, the use of appropriate coping strategies can be practiced to reduce it. It not only improves the mental health of the individual but also helps them be more productive in their workplace (Iavicoli & Tecco, 2020). Workplace stress induces strain among both male and female employees, which pushes psychological and physiological variables beyond their limits. The study suggests that it may have a significant impact on an individual's health and job performance. It can considerably hinder females' performance because at the same time they are responsible for a variety of other tasks such as housekeeping and taking care of children (Gardazi et al., 2016). Various pieces of research suggest that individual performance is optimized if the person's requirements and abilities match the expectations of the workplace environment (Widarko & Anwarodin, 2022; Kim et.al., 2020; Strange & Banning, 2001).

Psychological distress is a state of emotional disturbance characterized by anxiety (e.g., feeling tense and restless), depression, or both (e.g., loss of interest and feeling hopeless) (Afanasyev et. al., 2019; Mirowsky & Ross, 2002). Other symptoms may be associated with these (e.g., headache, sleeplessness, and a lack of energy), and these may differ among cultures (Kleinman, 1991). The consequences of stress do not affect only one aspect of our lives. Stress at home can lead to stress at work, and stress at work can lead to pressure in our personal lives. In comparison to their male counterparts, female CEOs experience more internal stress at work and additional stress at home, with little assistance from their spouses in the management of household responsibilities (Nelson & Burke 2000). Work commitment, performance, and promotion are also influenced by a heavy workload and workplace stress, ultimately limiting women's career advancement (Fathima et al., 2020). Academic administrators are also said to be subjected to some extra pressures such as board relations, politics, workload, and time limits (Royal

& Grobe, 2008). Researchers have broadly investigated the gender differences in competitive work environment and satisfaction, indicating that females are better at performing multiple tasks at a time and also they are good in terms of coping with stress (Guthrie & Jones, 2012; Hwang & Ramadoss, 2017; Paoline et al., 2015).

Coping is acknowledged as an important factor to minimize or tolerate stress (Carnicer & Calderon, 2013). Coping is the common behavior and attitude that people usually employ to deal with stressful life events (Folkman, 2010). The Transactional Model of Stress states that the appropriate use of coping can significantly reduce stress as it is an essential element in the stress process (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping strategies are not restricted to occupational, physical, or mental stress only. The stressors faced at home can cause stress at the workplace, and vice versa, that is the reason people usually tend to employ a variety of techniques to mitigate the negative consequences of stress (Bhui et al., 2016). Nelson and Burke (2000) concluded in a study based on a sample of female executives, that women usually employ both positive and negative coping techniques. Women who tended to eat healthier have better attitudes, but they were also observed to be more likely to use emotion-focused coping, such as avoiding and expressing their feelings, as a negative coping technique with stress.

This study aimed to assess the correlation between the competitive work environment, job performance, psychological distress, and coping strategies in Pakistani working women. The predictive role of a competitive work environment for psychological distress was also explored. The study also examined if coping strategies moderate the relationship between a competitive work environment and job performance and psychological distress in Pakistani working women.

METHODOLOGY

this cross-sectional research was conducted in different educational institutes in lahore, pakistan. the study sample was comprised of 150 female participants (n=150), collected through the non-probability purposive sampling technique. data was collected from the sample through the online google forms. only female employees working in public and private sector colleges and universities, with an age range of 25-60 years were included in the study sample.

A brief demographic form along with the Competitive work environment scale, The Individual Work Performance Scale, Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), and the brief COPE were used for data collection. The competitive Work Environment Scale (Fletcher & Nusbaum, 2010), is 20 item scale that was used to measure the participants' preference for working in competitive workplaces. A five-point Likert type scale with a response format of 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The scale indicated good reliability scores $\alpha=.96$.

To measure the three main aspects of job performance including task performance, contextual performance, and counterproductive work behavior, the 18-item Individual Work Performance Scale (Koopmans, 2015) developed in the Netherlands was used. All items have a three-month recall span on a five-point Likert scale (1 = seldom to 5 = always). The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) (Kessler 1996) was used to assess the level of psychological distress. K-10 is a brief, straightforward, and reliable scale for assessing the general public's mental health. The scale consists of ten items on non-specific psychological discomfort, and it asks about depressive symptoms and anxiety feelings in the last four weeks. For each of the ten items, the response categories range from (1) all of the time to (2) none of the time. The scale is highly reliable, with a range of 0.89 to 0.91.

The brief COPE was used to measure the coping strategies used by working women. It is 28 items self-report scale designed to assess the various coping strategies employed by humans in response to stress (Carver, 1997). Scale is rated on a 4-point scale 1 = I haven't been doing this at all to 4 = I have been doing this a lot. The scale is divided into three major coping strategies: problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant coping techniques. The scale was found to be reliable with the coefficient value ($\alpha = 0.77$).

Procedure

Department of Applied Psychology Lahore College for Women University granted permission for this study. Permission was granted from the authors through email for using the Competitive Work Environment Scales, The Individual Work Performance Scale, Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), and the Brief COPE has open access, as the permission was granted for all non-commercial use. The data collection was undertaken through

online Google forms. With the terms of confidentiality and use of data, the research project was briefly explained to the participants. The participants were requested to fill out the demographic sheet and then the questionnaires.

Plan of Analysis

SPSS 23 version was employed for the data analysis. Analysis of basic variables was done by using descriptive statistics. Correlation analysis was employed to assess the correlation among scores of competitive work environment, job performance, psychological distress, and coping strategies. Regression analysis was used to find out if a competitive work environment positively predicts psychological distress. Moderation analysis was used to identify if coping strategies moderated the relationship among competitive work environment, job performance, and psychological distress.

Results

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the demographics. A total sample of this study was comprised of 150 female participants working in different public and private institutes in Lahore. The mean age of the participants was 29.83 (SD = 8.47), 99(65.1%) were single while 51(33.6%) were married and a majority of the participants 112(74%) were living in a nuclear family system, 98(65%) belonged to the middle-class family. Education statistics revealed that the percentage of BA/BSc/BS was 52(34.2%), Mphil/MS 82(53.9%), and 16(10.5%) Ph.D. degree holders. The public and private sector employees were 115(75.7%) and 35(23.0%) respectively. Among the participants, 20(30.3%) were working as non-teaching faculty and 104(68.4%) belonged to the teaching profession. The mean duty hours of the participants were 6.63 (SD = 1.76).

correlation analysis was applied to test the link between competitive work environment, job performance, psychological distress, and coping strategies in pakistani working women. the results explained that a competitive work environment has a significant positive correlation with job performance ($r = .21, p<.05$), coping strategies ($r = .26, p<.01$), and psychological distress ($r = .24, p<.05$). the coping was found as having a significant negative correlation with the psychological distress ($r = -.32, p<.05$). see table 1.

Table 1 Pearson Product-Moment Correlation, Between Competitive Work Environment, Job Performance, Psychological Distress, and Coping. (N=150).

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. CWE	-			
2. JP	.21*	-		
3. PD	.24*	.22*	-	
4. COPE	.26**	.27*	-.32*	-

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, CWE= competitive work environment, JP= job performance, PD= psychological distress, COPE= briefCOPE

the predictive role of a competitive work environment for psychological distress was explored. for this purpose regression analysis was employed. findings revealed that a competitive work environment was found as a significant predictor of

psychological distress in the study sample ($p > .01$) see table 2.

Table 2 Summary of Linear Regression Analysis for Competitive Work Environment Predicting Psychological Distress (N=150).

Predictors	Psychological Distress		
	B	β	S.E
Constant	6.10**		1.45
Competitive Work Environment	.74**	.48	.06
R ²	.23		

Note: ** $p < 0.01$, B= Unstandardized coefficient, β = Standardized coefficient

A regression model was applied to explore the moderating role of a competitive work environment and coping in relation to psychological distress and job performance. The regression model was carried out with a competitive work environment and coping, and it revealed a non-significant moderation

effect between a competitive work environment and both psychological distress and job performance. While coping was found as a significant moderator for psychological distress and job performance (see table 3 & 4).

Table 3 Regression Analysis Examining the Interaction Effect of Competitive Work Environment and Coping on Job Performance (N=150).

Variables	Job Performance		
	B	SE	95 % CI
Constant	68.25*	.943	[61.365,65.131]
CWE	.070	.063	[-.055,.195]
COPE	.156*	.074	[.008,.304]
CWE x COPE	.005	.004	[-.003,.012]
R ²	.11		
F	2.76		

* $p < .05$

Table 4 Regression Analysis Examining the Interaction Effect of Competitive Work Environment and Coping on Psychological Distress (N=150).

Variables	Psychological Distress		
	B	SE	95 % CI
Constant	25.62***	.930	[23.745,27.460]
CWE	.011	.062	[-.112,.135]
COPE	.405***	.073	[.259,.551]
CWE x COPE	.004	.004	[-.003,.012]
R ²	.34		
F	11.23		

***p<.001

DISCUSSION

Employee job satisfaction is positively influenced by a favorable working environment. Stressful working conditions make it difficult for employees to benefit their abilities, better cope with the distress, and reach their full potential, so it is critical to recognize the value of a favorable working environment.

The current study investigated the effect of a competitive work environment and coping strategies on psychological distress and job performance through the lens of female university employees. It was found that a competitive work environment has a significant positive correlation with job performance, coping strategies, and psychological distress. Coping was found to be negatively associated with psychological distress. The findings are in line with the previous literature suggesting that coping is found to be linked with improved job performance and reduced psychological distress among women experiencing poor mental health due to long working hours and stressful workplace environments (Fontinha et al., 2019; Motahari & Esfahani, 2015). Another study conducted on female college employees suggests that occupational stress, coping techniques, and job satisfaction are associated with each other and the use of better coping strategies predicts improved job performance (Louly, & Kanniammal, 2022). Lian and Tam (2014) reported that coping could help deal with the stressful work environment thus helping the employees boost their job performance to a considerable level. Clipa and Clipa (2019) argued that the working environment is one of the major causes behind the employee's motivation and job performance. Teachers who are under a lot of stress frequently complain about their physical health, and psychological problems, as well as poor work performance. In addition, occupational stress is

considerably linked with poor physical and mental health and compromised job performance, especially in higher education institutes (Guthrie et al., 2018; Sumathi & Velmurugan, 2018; Bouarroudj, 2021). Taken together, these findings confirm the results published in the previous literature on this subject.

This study replicates and extends the previous literature exploring the predictive role of a competitive work environment for psychological distress among female university employees. Study findings align with the prior literature suggesting that a competitive work environment significantly predicts psychological distress. Various studies show that women employees experience burnout and psychological distress due to the stressful and competitive work environment (Mearns & Cain, 2003; Fontinha et al., 2019; Motahari & Esfahani, 2015). It was also observed that the effect of work overload on poor mental health was mediated by the long working hours (Sandmeier et al., 2022; Fontinha et al., 2019). Individuals' personal qualities play a significant role in explaining psychological distress. In addition, the impact of a stressful workplace environment on female employees is linked to their physical and mental health condition, the burden of the household, and other responsibilities, hence resulting in elevated risks of developing psychological distress among them (Magnavita et al., 2008; Miech et al., 2007). Women facing a separation or divorce, issues in their relationship with their children or family, for example, are already under stress. Their resources have already been engaged to deal with these day-to-day issues. As a result, these women have fewer resources to deal with workplace stressors.

The moderating effect of a competitive work environment and coping with psychological distress

and job performance were explored. Results showed that there was a non-significant moderation effect between a competitive work environment and both psychological distress and job performance. While coping was found as a significant positive predictor of psychological distress and job performance. By contrast, the literature suggests that better job performance and increased productivity are expected as a result of a supportive work environment (Sumathi & Velmurugan, 2018). A healthier physical atmosphere in the office is expected to motivate employees to reduce their stress and as a result, increase their productivity (Larner et al., 2015). People who have been working in hazardous conditions may end up with poor performance and frequently face health issues (Guthrie et al., 2018; Bouarroudj, 2021). In-depth, studies may be needed to better explore the phenomenon, as the mental health condition and job performance are mainly two long-term consequences of work-related stress and they both vary with the level of distress and its reaction (Navidian et al., 2015). On the other hand, finding related to moderating effect of coping with psychological distress and job performance are strongly supported by the literature. Multiple studies suggested that coping is greatly associated with better mental health and it helps an individual deal with stressful situations at the workplace without letting them harm their performance at work (Louly, & Kanniammal, 2022; Fontinha et al., 2019; Clipa & Clipa, 2019; Clipa & Honcius, 2020; Motahari & Esfahani, 2015). Consequently, successful coping with stress resulting due to a competitive work environment can buffer against its harmful impacts and improve the well-being and job performance of working women. Although the link between working female stress and general well-being has been well established, not all female employees, mother or not, experience bad health results. As a result, it is critical to determine what other factors may explain why, or under what conditions, these individuals are affected by work stress.

Conclusion

Workplace stress and its negative consequences on human health have dramatically increased in recent years. This study investigated the different dimensions of the competitive work environment in terms of psychological distress and job performance in Pakistani working women, mediating role of coping was also explored in this context. Results

showed that there is a significant correlation between a competitive work environment, psychological distress, job performance, and coping. Individuals who adopt appropriate coping skills are better at dealing with work-related stress and effectively performing in their jobs. A competitive work environment was also found as a significant predictor of psychological distress and coping was proved as a mediator for psychological distress and job performance. Thus, the study found that women experiencing a mild level of stress show better work performance, concluding that effective coping connects positively with high performance.

There are a few notable limitations in the study that needs to be considered. mainly, the sample of the study was comprised of participants from a few institutes in Lahore only, it was mainly due to the scarcity of resources. This study should be conducted on large scale with participants from diverse backgrounds and considering multiple psychological constructs involved in the phenomenon to improve the generalizability of the findings.

The findings of this study would help to develop a better understanding of psychosocial complexities and their impact on job performance among Pakistani working women. It would benefit society by raising awareness about the need for a decent working environment and coping skills for the employees to perform better at their job. The study also highlights the need for institutions to take the working environment more seriously and to adopt the appropriate precautions to avoid undue burden to increase employee engagement and dedication.

Authors Contribution:

IA: Conceptualized the idea and wrote the manuscript.

YN: Helped in data collection and data analysis and reviewed the manuscript.

AK: Supervised research, did review and final approval of the manuscript.

URK: Supervised research, did review and final approval of the manuscript.

IA: She is responsible and accountable for the accuracy or integrity of the work.

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