

# Will BYOD induce work-to-life conflict during COVID-19 pandemic period? – Exploring the importance of Work Connectivity Behavior After-hours (WCBA) enabled by BYOD

*Research-in-Progress*

**Cong Qi**

Department of Management and Marketing, Faculty of Business,  
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University  
Hong Kong  
cong.qi@polyu.edu.hk

## **Abstract**

*Mobile technologies blur work-life boundary, and pandemic upsets work-life balance. This paper explores the sustainability of Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) practice in COVID-19 pandemic. It investigates the relationship between BYOD and work-to-life conflict. Specifically, this study emphasizes the important mediating role of Work Connectivity Behavior After-hours (WCBA) enabled by BYOD. We discuss both positive (productivity and flexibility) and negative (overload and burnout) consequences of WCBA and investigate their influence on work-to-life conflict. Based on boundary theory and conservation of resource theory, a theoretical model is developed. The research hypotheses will be tested with employees who are currently working with their own wireless devices during COVID-19 pandemic period. This includes those who work at home (teleworking) and work at office. We hope the research is timely and helpful for the policy decision making of BYOD.*

**Keywords:** BYOD, Work Connectivity Behavior After-hours, Work-to-life conflict

## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic produced momentous disruptions in the functioning of many industries. Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) has been and is becoming a more important measure to ensure the continuity of work from home and anywhere. It is also useful when professional devices are no longer accessible in emergency situation (e.g., lockdown during pandemic period). BYOD is defined as allowing employees to bring their own mobile electronic communication devices to their workplaces and use such devices either in place or in addition to their work PCs, phones, tablets, and/or smartphones (Scarfò, 2012). The concept of BYOD renewed its significance during pandemic period as employees have to work in their flexible time and location. Though BYOD has brought many benefits to companies and employees, it also paves way for significant side effects. During COVID-19 pandemic, people are even more exposed to an always-on and connected BYOD working environment. Depending on the city's lockdown policy or company's preference, employees are now open to options from working from home or any convenient place (teleworking) to working from traditional office. In both occasions, organizations have to rely heavily on BYOD intentionally or unintentionally. Similar with pre-pandemic, BYOD users enjoy the convenience and efficiency of BYOD, and also suffer from a higher

level of work-to-life conflict: on one hand, official responsibilities demand more effort due to long-distance work, and on the other hand, the personal/family responsibilities need more time and energy.

BYOD has blurred the work-life boundary, however, during the pandemic, work and life boundary was even blurred in an unprecedented way. Employees' work days are filled with back-to-back Zoom meetings with their own devices either at home or at office. Employees are working more hours than before simply because working remotely is technologically possible (Thomason and Williams, 2020). Due to the pandemic uncertainty, people even began to explore "work-life integration", "stability of work and life that work together" and "mobile office" instead of continuing to pursue a "work-life balance" in the traditional sense (Shelley, 2020; Li and Yang, 2017). In such a context, studying BYOD and its influence on work-to-life conflict becomes needed and essential.

Many previous studies have explored the effects of mobile devices usage in general (e.g., Yun, et al., 2012), or mobile IT (Köffer, et al., 2014) on work-to-life conflict, but rarely studies have examined the exact effects of BYOD. There are even few studies that cover the impact of BYOD under the pandemic affected working scenario, where more flexibility was given and has to be given to the employees. The present study intends to cover the gaps in the literature. First, we believe there are both positive and negative effects of BYOD on work-to-life conflict. Second, the effect of BYOD is mainly mediated by workplace connectivity, which means it is the constant connectivity behavior after hours that leads to the positive and negative consequences of BYOD. Third, the literature of WCBA mainly focuses on antecedents and other related factors of WCBA (Büchler, et al. 2020), few studies discussed the consequences of WCBA. For those exploring the consequences, the job related factors include job control, job satisfaction, performance, and work-to-life issues (Wright et al., 2014). There is no systematic view or consensus among these findings. Motivated by conservation of resources theory, the current study summarizes the consequences of WCBA into two categories: the positive consequences (enhanced productivity and flexibility) and the negative ones (overload and burnout). Last, due to the co-existence of positive and negative effects, similar with Chen and Casterella (2019), we expect a curvilinear U-shaped relationship between WCBA and work-to-life conflict.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Prior research on BYOD***

Although BYOD is popular in practice, IS research has not yet reached full understanding of this phenomenon. The extant literature of BYOD largely focused on BYOD strategies (e.g., Barlette, et al., 2021), management issues (e.g., Chen, et al, 2020), security risks (e.g., Palanisamy, et al., 2020), and intention to adopt BYOD (e.g., Weeger, et al., 2020). Researchers like Niehaves, et al. (2013) and Köffer, et al (2014) studied the impact of IT consumerization on work performance and work-to-life conflict, but not specifically with a focus of BYOD. It is not until recently, researchers like Doargajudhur and Dell (2020) began to study the consequences of BYOD on work related outcomes. Through empirical work, they verified the relationship between BYOD and work performance and motivation. They further called for more theoretical development with regards to BYOD, and more empirical work on the personal and organizational consequences of BYOD. We respond to this call in the present study, and focus on work-to-life conflict – the negative consequence of BYOD.

### ***Prior research on the relationship between BYOD and work-to-life conflict***

Literature is not consistent in discussing the implications of BYOD on work-to-life conflict. The flexibility enabled by BYOD increases the employees' control over the spatio-temporal context of work. Employees carrying their own mobile devices are likely to have a greater productivity and suffer less from work-life clashes due to the greater plasticity of work commitments and the opportunity to work in a familiar and comfortable setting (Hill, et al., 2003). On the other hand, BYOD also engenders work-to-life conflicts due to the increased technocratic control of managers, extensification of work, as well

as an overlapping between private life and work commitment (Palumbo, 2020). This is especially true during pandemic period when people rely more on personal devices simply because of “no choice”. Prior research in this stream focuses on either mobile technologies usage in general (e.g., Yun, et al., 2012), mobile IT (Köffer, et al, 2014), or the impact on work-life balance (e.g., Chen and Casterella, 2019). Little is known about the direct and indirect effects of BYOD on work-to-life conflict. Qi et al. (2017) is among the few conceptual studies that explored the antecedents of work-to-life conflict under the BYOD context. The present study extends their study by explicitly measuring BYOD usage, proposing WCBA as a significant mediator, adding burnout as a second negative effect, and considering several control variables. By doing this, our study is more targeted to the BYOD context, especially during pandemic period when people tend to feel more physical and psychological stress in work.

### ***Prior research on workplace connectivity behavior after hours (WCBA)***

The present research emphasizes on the importance of connectivity as an important mediator between BYOD and its consequences. Work Connectivity Behavior After Hours (WCBA) refers to an organization member’s use of portable wireless devices to perform their work or communicate with their colleagues outside their working hours (e.g., mornings before going to work, evenings after finishing work, weekends, or vacations) (Richardson and Thompson, 2012). Studying WCBA is relevant because such a behavior is associated with work-to-life conflict, that is, the constant availability of an employee has the potential to interrupt or distract him/her ubiquitously (Boswell and Olson-Buchanan, 2007). For the exact nature of mobile technologies, Dery and MacCormick (2012) explained that “it is not so much the mobile capabilities of technology that are changing the way we work, but the capacity for ubiquitous and constant connectivity” (p. 160). We therefore believe WCBA plays a very important role in BYOD practice. In other words, it is the constant connectivity that makes individuals feel as if they are always “on call”, and cannot keep work and personal life separate instead of the BYOD itself. Following this line of research, Richardson and Thompson (2012) investigated the direct and indirect relationship between WCBA (duration and frequency) and work-to-life conflict. Wright et al. (2014) also called for further research into the work-to-life conflict stemming from increased connectivity. The study of WCBA is, however, rare in the BYOD literature, especially during the pandemic period, where people tend to connect more by using their personal devices.

Contributions include: it is among the first to understand the BYOD practice under post-pandemic context; it is also the pioneer study to investigate WCBA induced by BYOD instead of the general mobile devices usage alone. We proposed a theoretical model to understand the consequences of BYOD and their impact on work-to-life conflict, especially, we emphasized the important role of WCBA as a mediator toward this end. The following research questions inspired the development of this study.

1. Does WCBA mediate the relationship between BYOD and the positive and negative consequences of BYOD?
2. What are the direct and indirect relationships between WCBA and work-to-life conflict?

### **Theoretical Foundation**

To study work-to-life conflict, we borrowed boundary theory and conservation of resources theory that have been used in studying mobile technology interruption and work-life balance.

**Boundary theory** is a theoretical framework to understand how individual creates and manages the boundary between work and life as an effort to simplify and classify the world around them (Allen et al., 2014). Two key principles of boundary theory are: 1. keeping work and family separate makes it easier to manage work-family borders; and 2. integrating work and family facilitates transitions between these domains. In the present study, BYOD facilitates the integration of work-life boundary, therefore, we focuses more on the integration part of boundary theory. Integration is believed to occur through two mechanisms: flexibility and permeability. Flexibility refers to the malleability of the boundary

between two or more roles/domains, and permeability involves the extent to which a boundary allows psychological or behavioural aspects of one role or domain to enter another (Ashforth, et al., 2000). Mobile technologies can change the traditional spatial and temporal boundaries between work and life, thereby resulting in highly permeable boundaries wherein employees complete their work during their personal time and fulfil their life responsibilities online during their working hours (Dery and MacCormick, 2012). From a positive perspective, the nature of work-life integration facilitates role transitions between work and family, which provides work flexibility and enhanced productivity. From a negative perspective, the mobile technology enabled integration blurs the work-life boundary, which increases the workload and psychological burden of the employees, leading to work-to-life conflict.

**Conservation of resources theory (COR)** is based on the central tenet that people strive to obtain, build and protect resources they value, and psychological stress occurs when resources are lost, threatened with loss or if individuals fail to replenish resources after significant investment (Hobfoll and Freedy, 1993). COR theory provides a theoretical framework for examining potential outcomes of WCBA. On one hand, employees may be motivated to remain virtually connected to the workplace because it helps them to build or conserve important resources related to their jobs, such as the ability to stay on top of job demands and obligations. WCBA gives them a sense of safety and control, which leads to better productivity and flexibility. On the other hand, WCBA enables a constant connection to work, which leads to psychological stress and burnout. The inability to psychologically detach from work can cause emotional exhaustion if exposed over long periods of time (Hobfoll and Freedy, 1993).

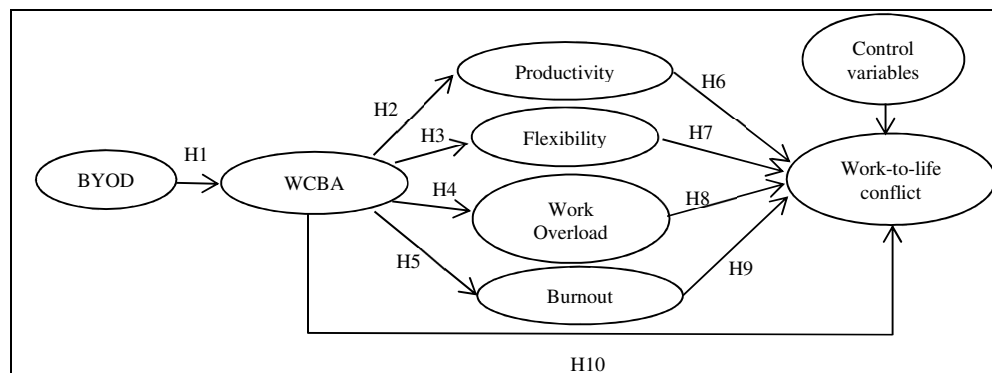
The positive aspect of work-life integration from boundary theory and resource gain from COR were used to support the positive effects of WCBA; and the negative aspect of work-life integration from boundary theory and resource losses from COR were used to support the negative effects of WCBA. The relationships between theories and constructs were summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Relationships between theories and constructs**

Relationships between constructs	Theories
WCBA->Productivity->work-to-life conflict	Boundary theory (Positive aspect of work-life integration)
WCBA->Flexibility->work-to-life conflict	COR (Resource gains)
WCBA->Overload->work-to-life conflict	Boundary theory (Negative aspect of work-life integration)
WCBA->Burnout->work-to-life conflict	COR (Resource losses)

## Theoretical model and hypotheses

We developed a new research framework (see Figure 1.) to understand the effects of BYOD on work-to-life conflict. There are 7 constructs and 10 hypotheses. Control variables include demographic information, family status, and segmentation norm/preference etc. (Chen and Casterella, 2019).



**Figure 1. Research Model**

Notes: BYOD=Bring Your Own Device; WCBA=Work Connectivity Behavior After-hours

BYOD becomes a necessary practice because it enables employees to continue communicating and working despite social distancing and new working conditions in pandemic. Employees are more comfortable with the functions of their own devices than with the devices provided by corporate IT (Steelman et al. 2016), and do not treat it as additional workload. Due to this, employees will naturally use their personal devices to keep connected with work and people during non-working time.

H1: BYOD is positively related to WCBA

WCBA refers to individuals' use of portable mobile devices to perform work or to communicate with colleagues outside of working hours. From boundary theory, WCBA facilitates work-life integration, which provides work flexibility and enhanced productivity. From the perspective of COR, being connected to the workplace gives employees a sense of control and safety (Richardson and Thompson, 2012), which allow them to freely arrange working schedules and increase productivity (Rege, 2011).

H2: WCBA due to BYOD is positively related to productivity

Yun et al. (2012) divided flexibility into flextime and flexplace, where flextime refers to "the ability to rearrange one's working hours within certain guidelines offered by the organization" and flexplace refers to "giving employees varying degree of control over where their work is done". The continuous connectivity behavior after hours creates such a flexible time/place and working environment, where employees could enjoy a maximum level of flexibility by using their personal devices. Flexibility is also a benefit of work-life integration in boundary theory, and a resource gain in COR.

H3: WCBA due to BYOD is positively related to flexibility

WCBA is associated with beneficial effects on work performance; it is also found to be coupled with detrimental effects on work-to-life conflict (Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2007), such as increase workload and burnout. Ayyagari et al. (2011) argued that the constant connectivity offered by mobile technologies increases the workload of employees by increasing both the work flow speed and expectations of productivity. Accordingly, employees must work under time pressure and strict deadlines, which are also considered sources of work overload (Cooper et al., 2001).

H4: WCBA due to BYOD is negatively related to work overload.

The constant connectivity is perpetuated as an "electronic leash" that limits employees' ability to psychologically disengage from work (Derks, et al., 2014). This is especially true during pandemic period. Though many organizations have strengthened the IT support of BYOD, employees still feel stress and burnout due to the task itself, the technical problems of remote working with BYOD, and the inefficient virtual assistance from the IT specialist. This detrimental effect may result from a full day's work at office/mobile office/home office, followed by continued engagement with the organization during non-work hours (Rosenbloom and Eldror, 2017). Both negative outcomes of WCBA (overload and burnout) can be explained by the negative effect of work-life integration and resource loss in COR.

H5: WCBA due to BYOD is negatively related to burnout.

Individual productivity is a combination of efficiency and effectiveness (Payne, 2000). Employees can use mobile devices to handle their daily work tasks efficiently within their working hours, thereby reducing inter-role conflict and work-to-life conflict (Thomas and Ganster, 1995). Moreover, by using the devices that they are most familiar with, employees can finish a higher number of tasks with a higher quality and standard (Rege, 2011), thus reduce the work-to-life conflict.

H6: Productivity is negatively related to work-to-life conflict.

Anderson et al. (2002) revealed that having a flexible time and workplace gives employees a greater control over their work and family matters, thereby helping them manage the often-conflicting demands from their work and family. The perceived autonomy can help employees better balance their work and family demands and make them feel less taunted by stress, boredom, fatigue, or work-to-life conflict.

H7: Flexibility is negatively related to work-to-life conflict.

Work overload is used to describe one's quantity of work and has been identified as one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of work-to-life conflict (Geurts and Demerouti, 2003). Perceived work overload is associated with a high level of work-to-life conflict, especially for persons occupying the boundary role (Ahuja et al., 2007). COR also argued that when an individual consumes time and energy in performing one role (work), s/he will run out of resources for fulfilling other role (family).

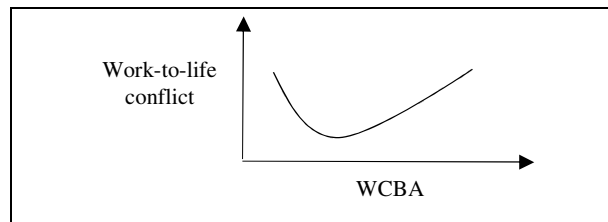
H8: Work overload is positively related to work-to-life conflict.

Burnout is a psychological syndrome that occurs in response to interpersonal stressors in the work environment and is a negative emotional experience (Maslach, et al., 2001). Work-life integration will lead to burnout, and burnout is also one of the resource loss under COR. Once employees feel burnout, they will pay extra effort to keep the psychological boundary, and spend extra time to regain the lost resource. By doing this, they increase the chances of role conflict and work-life conflict.

H9: Burnout is positively related to work-to-life conflict.

Inspired by Chen and Casterella (2019), we also propose a competing hypothesis – a curvilinear U-shaped relationship between WCBA and work-to-life conflict (see Figure 2.). Various theories discussed above induce both positive and negative relationships between WCBA and work-to-life conflict. We expected that work-to-life conflict is likely to be lowest at a moderate level of WCBA. At a relatively low level of WCBA, employees may not experience the productivity and flexibility BYOD could bring to them, thus, may perceive high level of work-to-life conflict. At a very high level of WCBA, employees may devote excessive resources to work, which leads to work overload and burnout. Again at this moment, they will perceive high level of work-to-life conflict.

H10: WCBA due to BYOD has a U-shaped relationship with work-to-life conflict.



**Figure 2. U-shaped relationship**

## Research methodology

We borrowed measures in the existing BYOD and WCBA literature to measure the 7 constructs in the research model. The measures will be tailor made to post-pandemic context. The conceptual model will be empirically tested via a cross-sectional survey. The target sample will be knowledge workers who are currently using their personal mobile devices to work during pandemic period. They could be the employees who work from home, office or other places convenient for them (mobile office).

## Conclusion

The concept of Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) has emerged as organizations attempt to bridge the work/home divide in hopes of increasing employee productivity and reducing corporate technology costs. Meanwhile, work-to-life conflict is also found to be among the strongest indicators of work-related health issues (Goh, et al., 2015). This paper investigated the direct and indirect relationship between BYOD practice and work-to-life conflict, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic period. Borrowing boundary theory and COR, we highlighted the importance of WCBA under the BYOD context. We believe this study has great potential in directing BYOD practice in pandemic.

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