

Remote Work and Ageism in Organizations

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Bachelor of Science

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Purpose/Motivation:

With the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the already ongoing trend of remote work has been further reinforced. In addition to that, due to demographic changes the workforce is ageing, and more people will eventually be confronted with age discrimination. This conceptual paper aims to explore the relationship between remote work and ageism in organizations by using an abductive reasoning approach which combines pre-existing theory and empiricism to propose original theory.

Theories/Hypotheses:

Aiming to answer the research question if the implementation of remote work increases ageism in organizations there are mainly two seemingly contradictory theories that should be considered. On the one hand, the terror management theory by Martens, Goldenberg, and Greenberg suggests that contact with older employees can trigger three types of threat, namely the threat of death, the threat of animality and the threat of insignificance and therefore lead to ageist behaviour (Martens et al., 2005, pp. 227-228). On the other hand, the intergroup contact theory, originally introduced by Allport in 1954, implies that contact reduces age stereotyping through the process of “learning about the outgroup, changing behaviour, generating affective ties, and ingroup reappraisal” (Pettigrew, 1998, p. 70).

Approach/Methodology:

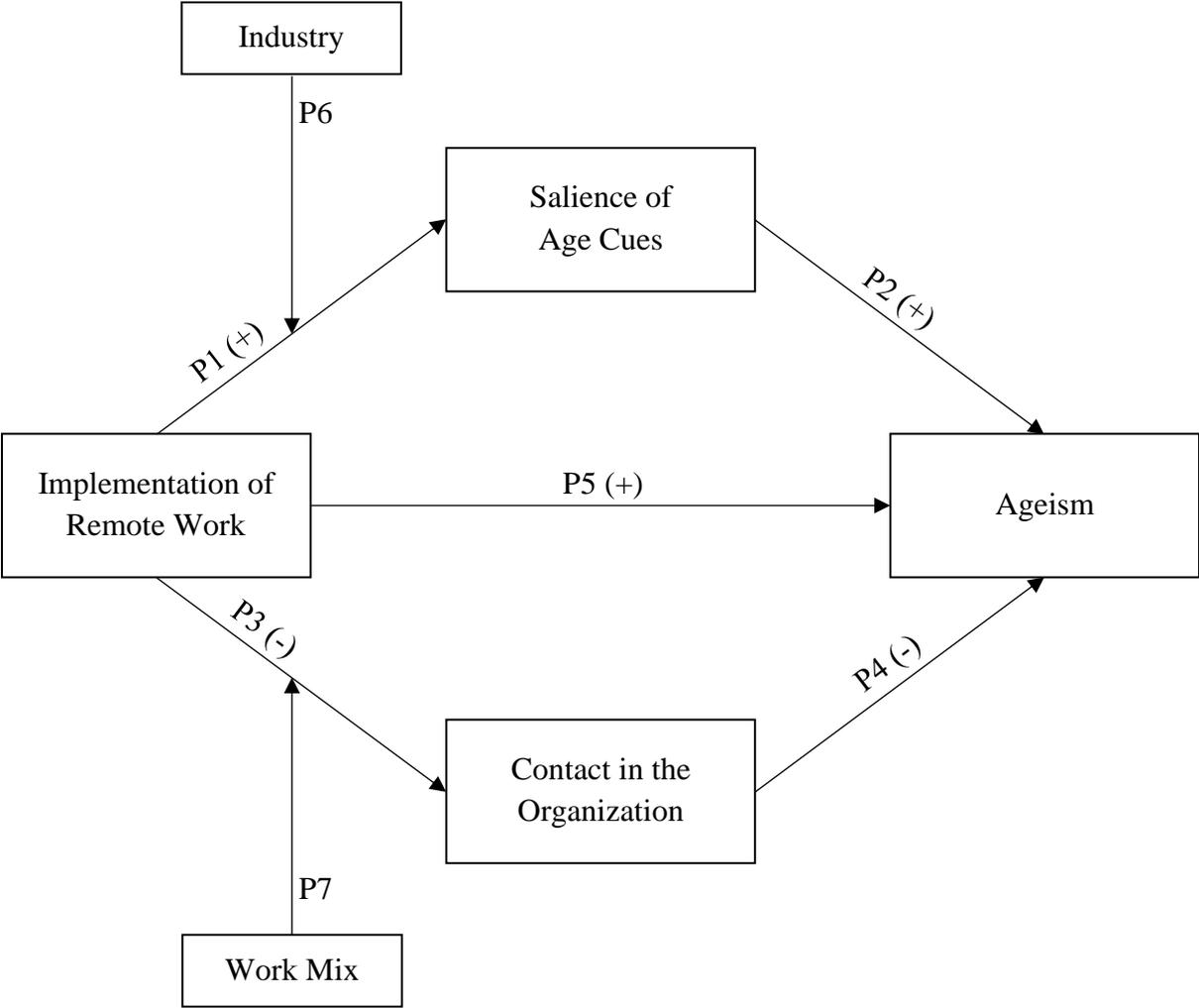
According to Janiszewski and van Osselaer, having two conflicting theories is a use case for abductive theory construction (Janiszewski & van Osselaer, 2021, p. 180). Following that approach the paper provides an empirical component besides the above-mentioned theoretical foundation. Collecting the data necessary to build propositions, 13 semi-structured qualitative interviews with people, who have had the option to work at least partially remote in their organization within the past 12 months, were conducted. The questionnaire didn't only include questions from five different cores to map potential inequalities, the contact, the age climate, and the digital literacy in the organization, but also a short free association test.

Findings:

The findings of this thesis are illustrated in a proposed moderated mediation model suggesting a positive relationship between the implementation of remote work and ageism in organizations (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Proposed Moderated Mediation Model



Research Limitations:

It is important to acknowledge the fact that the research that was conducted to write this thesis also has its limitations. The abductive research method that was utilized to formulate the propositions can be assessed to be subjective and sensitive to the sample by some researchers (Janiszewski & van Osselaer, 2021, p. 189). However, other than a deductive approach, it allows for the exploration of the most relevant potential construct relationships beyond existing theories,

based on the collected data (Janiszewski & van Osselaer, 2021, p. 190). Besides, the sample of the 13 interviewees included only three females. Therefore, no statements about gender-specific differences or the influence of gender when it comes to the evaluation of remote work and its impact on ageism can be made. In addition to that, no employee above the age of 60 was interviewed, the three oldest interviewees were aged 58 (Interviewee O3 & O4) and 57 (Interviewee O5). No data from employees above the age of 60 was collected and the ratio of IT-related jobs within the sample was relatively high, which might have led to a positively biased evaluation of the implementation of remote work in organizations.

Research Implications:

As many companies are facing skilled labour shortages due to the demographic change now, a viable positioning on the labour market is essential to attract skilled workers. Especially for younger employees having flexible work arrangements is a crucial factor when deciding to work for a company (Interviewee Y3, Y4 & O4). Some managers, who are predominantly of a higher age, however, still hesitate with the implementation of WFH arrangements. It would be interesting to research to what extent the meta perception of ageism affects the willingness of managers to engage in remote work, building on the framework that was provided in this thesis. Those findings could be highly relevant for organizations to manage demographic risk effectively and maintain a competitive advantage in the future.

Practical Implications:

There is a strong trend towards remote work in organizations which will most likely continue. Therefore, the findings of this thesis are not only highly relevant for the ageing individual but also for companies to prevent ageism from happening in their work environment. Just by raising awareness to ageism and age biases, age discrimination can already be significantly reduced (Kleissner & Jahn, 2020, p. 118).

Contribution:

My paper contributes to the literature on age discrimination and WFH arrangements.

Paper type: Conceptual

Further readings:

Allport, G. W. (1954). *The Nature of Prejudice*. Addison-Wesley.

Cuddy, A. J. C., & Fiske, S. T. (2002). Doddering but dear. In *The MIT Press eBooks* (pp. 3–26). <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/1157.003.0004>