

# Unveiling the Positive Aspects of Functional Presenteeism: Investigating the Role of Autonomous Motivation and Meaningful Work in the Workplace

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## Abstract

*The present study draws on the self-determination theory (SDT) to determine the impact of autonomous motivation on functional presenteeism with the mediating effect of meaningful work. The data was collected from 151 full-time working professionals working in organizations. The data analysis was performed by using the SPSS Process macro. The study aimed to find out the relation of autonomous motivation with meaningful work and the subsequent relation of meaningful work with functional presenteeism, using self-determination theory. Our study found a positive relationship between autonomous motivation and functional presenteeism with the mediation effect of meaningful work. Our findings offer new connections between functional presenteeism and a growing body of literature on SDT. The current study explains the linking mechanism between autonomous motivation and functional presenteeism. This study can contribute to a comprehensive understanding of presenteeism by observing it as adaptive behavior, seeing presentees as diverse groups, and discovering the significance of the work environment by corresponding performance demands and health. It sketches novel opportunities for research and the effective management of presenteeism, health, and performance. Organizations should consider addressing the factors of the work environment in their efforts to promote autonomous motivation and functional presenteeism in their employees.*

**Keywords:** *Autonomous Motivation, Meaningful Work, Functional Presenteeism, Self-Determination Theory, Attendance Behavior, Health.*

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## Introduction

The considerable financial and health costs of presenteeism are well-elaborated. However, presenteeism has a positive aspect, which has been ignored. Emergent pieces of evidence indicate that presenteeism can be chosen as a preference that provides a variety of benefits to an employee who is present at work, despite his illness (presentee) (Karanika-Murray & Biron, 2020a). In accordance with Karanika-Murray and Biron (2020), the solitary emphasis on health in the work environment would merely propose a limited comprehension of presenteeism if the significance of work and its perseverance is overlooked from this comprehension. Individual motives, development of personality, and welfare define a macro-theory which is known as self-determination theory. The theory focuses especially on volitional or self-determined behavior and the societal and cultural environments that stimulate it. It has been displayed in research that

distinct outcomes have been led by different types of motivations (Manganelli et al., 2018). Generally, it has been noticed that autonomous motivation results in positive outcomes such as a higher level of energy, increased work engagement, favorable effects, and mental well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Gagné et al., 2015; Manganelli et al., 2018).

The attributes of the work climate that have been established by SDT and autonomous motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005) incline to promote functional presenteeism. Autonomous motivation can only be endorsed during ill health when work duties can be modified. As reported by Gagné and Deci (2005), the wellness of employees is positively associated with autonomous motivation. Attendance pressures, under-utilized competencies, and the chance of mishandled work will increase if presenteeism is solely considered as negative behavior. So, presenteeism has the possibility to promote good health and performance if the work is managed properly and maintained with sufficient resources. The significance of meaningful work proposes that workers are autonomously motivated to work (Amabile & Pratt, 2016; Steger et al., 2012) for the reason that they seek determination, valence, and significance in their work. The perception of workers about meaningful work has a momentous influence on work commitment, rationally, meaningfulness can also have a progressive influence on the performance of an employee. Few studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between work outcomes and meaningfulness at an individual level (Frieder et al., 2018). Moreover, there are some situations in which attending work with poor health can be perceived as an exhibition of OCB and struggle to contribute to the better performance of an organization (Johns, 2010; Miraglia & Johns, 2016).

Previous studies related to presenteeism have been conducted in developed countries like Europe and America where much attention is given to employee health and productivity. There is need to study the positive impact of presenteeism in the context of developing countries like Pakistan where a considerable percentage of the population is living under the poverty line and people have to put an effort to find a reasonable job due to the high rate of unemployment. Due to high job insecurity and limited opportunities for career development, employees have to follow strict organizational policies related to presenteeism (Bockerman & Laukkanen, 2010; Ferreira et al., 2015; Lu et al., 2013). Therefore, the conceptualization of functional presenteeism is captivating enough to be explored in the context of an under-developed country like Pakistan which will later help practitioners to devise strategies to utilize the positive significance of functional presenteeism to improve the performance of the organizations. The purpose of this study is to find out the role of autonomous motivation in fostering functional presenteeism in employees. It is plausible that when individuals are autonomously motivated, it encourages them to pursue their obligations or duties despite ill health as one's work is meaningful to them. This study makes an effort to examine the distinctive effects of autonomous motivation on functional presenteeism along with the intervening mechanism of meaningful work.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The basic purpose of this article is to examine the role of autonomous motivation as an antecedent of functional presenteeism and the mediating effect of meaningful work. Following are the objectives of this study:

- To study the effect of autonomous motivation on functional presenteeism.
- To study the relationship between autonomous motivation and meaningful work.
- To study the relation between meaningful work and functional presenteeism.
- To study the mediating effect of meaningful work on the relationship between autonomous motivation and functional presenteeism.

## Literature Review

### Autonomous Motivation and Functional Presenteeism

Over the past few years, a significant rise in research based on SDT has been viewed in the business enterprise. Autonomous motivation which is significant to self-determination theory, is described as the apparent source or basis of one's behavior (Deci et al., 1985). Particularly, following preceding research, autonomous motivation is associated with higher work performance and satisfaction and anticipates low burnout and fatigue (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Gillet et al., 2016; Olafsen & Bentzen, 2020). Autonomous motivation helps the employees in recognizing their duties related to work which are consistent with their standards. Over the last few decades, most researchers have considered presenteeism as a negative behavior that drastically affects the performance of the employees and the organization. However, a small but rising number of studies has turned to exploring the favorable side of presenteeism. Previous researchers such as Johns (2010) defined it as being present at work while ill whereas Lohaus and Habermann (2019) focused on deprivation of productivity owing to ill health. But, according to Karanika-Murray and Biron (2020), both definitions have ignored the significance of work itself and have only focused on the issues of health. Scholars argued that when the health status of the employees is not severe, then they can perform their duties and responsibilities related to work, and engagement in different work activities can assist people in meeting their basic psychological needs, preserve job management, and sustain employment relations with their co-workers and customers, which is favorable to recover from poor health to some extent (Demerouti et al., 2009; Ruhle et al., 2020; Van den Broeck et al., 2016). As reported by Karanika-Murray and Biron (2020), when work climate is endorsed by flexibility and autonomy (i.e. autonomous motivation) in the organization, it is conducive to functional presenteeism. A growing array of literature indicates that both individuals and organizations are positively affected by functional presenteeism.

H1: There is a positive relationship between autonomous motivation and functional presenteeism.

### Autonomous Motivation and Meaningful Work

According to Wang and Hou (2015), autonomous motivation has a significant effect on inducing certain behavior, as positive consequences are linked with autonomous motivation. People who are autonomously motivated are more likely to experience a behavior deprived of external reinforcement, which induces adaptable effects (progressive effect, apparent competency, and contentment). In accordance with other theorists like Dworkin (1988), autonomy involves approving one's actions on the upper level of reflection. Therefore, autonomous motivation is represented by intrinsic motivation. If people like to engage in an exciting activity, they participate in it with full determination. According to Carver and Baird (1998), individuals who are intrinsically oriented, tend to pursue their aims in a more autonomous (determined) way and would be happier as compared to individuals who are extrinsically oriented. Numerous studies have revealed that motivation, higher levels of satisfaction, and performance increase due to meaningful work (Sánchez-Cardona et al., 2020), which can lead to progressive outcomes for organizations as well as employees. According to May et al. (2004), the refurbishment of meaningful work is perceived as a technique to raise the motivation of employees and their devotion to work. By keeping the view of researchers, it can be assumed that autonomous motivation can have a positive effect on the meaningful work of employees.

H2: There is a positive relationship between autonomous motivation and meaningful work.

### Meaningful Work and Functional Presenteeism

Meaningful work is defined in different ways (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; M. A. Steger et al., 2009) what is most significant though, is that an individual's psychological well-being is determined by meaningfulness (Frankl, 1984). Meaningfulness is described as "the importance of a work objective or persistence, referring

to the person's principles or ideals" (May et al., 2004). It has been found by researchers that meaningfulness used to play an important role in firms to be considered as most significant means affecting positive behaviors of employees in the organization, predominantly concerning work commitment (Demirtas et al., 2017; Fairlie, 2011; Soane et al., 2013). The perception of workers about meaningful work has a momentous influence on work commitment, rationally; meaningfulness can also have a progressive influence on the performance of an employee. Few studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between work outcomes and meaningfulness at the individual level (Frieder et al., 2018). According to Karanika-Murray and Biron (2020), the possibility to endorse presenteeism is also determined by moderators like the seriousness of the health issues, and environmental or underlying pressures to be prolific and accessible mode to keep up a better performance, which collectively explains the usefulness of functional presenteeism for corresponding performance and well-being. Similarly, the behavior related to work attendance is a function of interior and exterior pressures on resources, which can exist together in presenteeism as they do in absenteeism (Nielsen, 2008; Prater & Smith, 2011). Employees may fulfill their job responsibilities despite their illness for the reason that they find contentment in concluding those responsibilities, as a result conserving meaningfulness or signifying obligation to the organization (Bierla et al., 2013). Based on the above discussion, it is being proposed that;

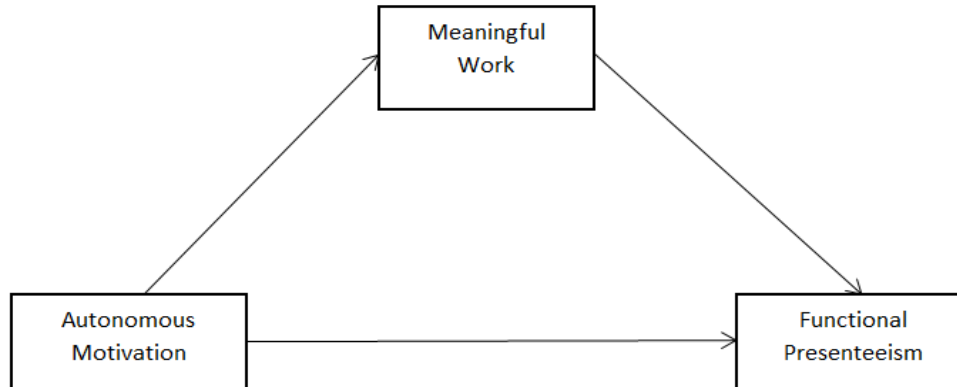
H3: There is a positive relationship between meaningful work and functional presenteeism.

#### **Mediating Role of Meaningful Work between Autonomous Motivation and Functional Presenteeism**

During the last few decades, research on meaningful work has demonstrated that the construct is significant across diverse populations and has imperative effects on the well-being of employees both at work and in other domains of life. Explicitly, meaningful work has proven to foresee outcomes related to work like work motivation, work engagement, job satisfaction, and job performance (Rosso et al., 2010). According to Steger et al. (2012), "all the work activities imply for individuals" and have a "substantial and positive significance" that represents meaningful work. It is often stated that the perception of an individual related to meaningful work refers to their subjective perception that the course of their work has personal implications, adds a comprehensive sense of life, and motivates them (Rosso et al., 2010). As reported by Rosso et al. (2010), people experience meaningfulness in their work when they are autonomously motivated because it forms correspondence between their self-identity and their behaviors related to work. Self-determination theory postulates that autonomous motivation results in good performance, greater determination in work activities, and better well-being (Deci et al., 2017). According to Karanika-Murray and Biron, (2020b), presenteeism is an adaptive behavior when it comprises non-contagious and common health issues. Some researchers have claimed that presenteeism exhibits organizational citizenship behavior and it's adaptive in nature (Karanika-Murray & Biron, 2020a; Miraglia & Johns, 2016) which helps to increase employee performance. Meaningful work is prognostic of the significance of life, personal well-being, and satisfaction of life (Allan et al., 2019; Lysova et al., 2019; M. F. Steger et al., 2012). Scholars have claimed that individuals who endure meaningful work frequently experience intrinsic (autonomous) motivation (Amabile & Pratt, 2016) which results in addressing problems more positively. Therefore, it is essential to identify what facilitates meaningful work and to understand the considerable scope of well-being both in work and an employee's personal life. Based on assumptions of SDT, it is anticipated that the association between autonomous motivation and functional presenteeism will be mediated by meaningful work.

H4: Meaningful work mediates the relationship between autonomous motivation and functional presenteeism

## Theoretical Framework



**Figure 1: Conceptual Model**

## Methodology

The population of the study included full-time employees employed at different levels of an organization, working in national and multinational companies in Pakistan. The data were collected from three major cities of Pakistan comprising Lahore, Islamabad, and Multan based on convenience sampling. The data were collected through an online survey method using Qualtrics (an online survey tool). The online link was sent to more than 200 employees, from which 174 employees responded, 9 questionnaires were dropped due to insufficient data, and 14 questionnaires were excluded from the sample as they had not shown presenteeism. So, the total sample size was 151 in this study.

### Instruments and Measures

The questionnaire started with demographic items (age, gender, and experience) then participants completed the measures related to autonomous motivation, meaningful work, and functional presenteeism.

#### Autonomous Motivation

Autonomous motivation was assessed by using a scale of The Motivation at Work scale (MAWS) (Gagné et al., 2010) which consisted of six items and accompanied by 1= not at all to 7= exactly. The sample item included “I do it because I enjoy this work very much”. Autonomous motivation is represented by identification, introjected, and intrinsic motivation in this scale.

#### Meaningful Work

Meaningful work was measured by using a meaningful work scale (May et al., 2004) containing six items and a five-point Likert scale was used to measure the items (1= strongly disagree and 5= strongly agree). The sample item included “The work I do on this job is meaningful to me”.

#### Functional Presenteeism

Functional presenteeism was measured with the scale developed by Lohaus et al., (2021) Participants were asked about how often they had stayed at home due to illness during the past 12 months (absenteeism) and attended work despite illness (presenteeism) (Aronsson et al., 2000; Gerich, 2016). The scale contains



seven items which were related to the positive impact of presenteeism at an individual level. Each phrase of an item was started with “Working in spite of illness had the tangible advantage that . . .” and the second part of an item was phrased e.g. “... It shows loyalty to a professional standard”. The five-point scale was used to measure the items (1 = “do not agree at all” to 5 = “totally agree”). Those Participants were eliminated who stayed longer at home (N=14) for more than 60 days (Gerich, 2016; Lohaus & Röser, 2019).

## Results

### Sample Characteristics

Participants comprised of 66.2 % males and 33.8 % females. Concerning age groups, 68.9% of the participants were among 20-30 years, 27.2% were among 31-40 years and 4% were above 40 years. 58.2 % of employees stated that their experience was around 1 to 5 years, 23.2 % stated that their work experience was between 5 to 10 years, 9.3% stated work experience around 10 to 20 years and 8.6% stated that their experience was more than 20 years.

### Descriptive Statistics

The results in Table 1 display the descriptive statistics and alpha reliabilities of different variables. It also displays the values of the mean and standard deviation of all the variables used in this study. To analyze the data SPSS Process macro was used in this study. To test the research model, the procedure was pursued by using Process Macro (model 4) in SPSS (Hayes, 2022). Cronbach’s Alpha was checked to measure the reliability of scales whose value should be greater than 0.7 by acceptable standards. The values for Cronbach’s alpha for autonomous motivation were (.865), meaningful work (.875), and functional presenteeism (.835). The results in Table 1 show the values of correlations of the variables comprised in the present study.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics, Correlations & Alpha Reliability

Variables	Mean	SD	Correlation		
			1	2	3
Age	1.31	0.46			
Gender	1.35	0.52			
Experience	1.67	0.96			
Autonomous Motivation	4.48	1.21	(.865)		
Meaningful Work	4.03	0.74		(.875)	
Functional Presenteeism	3.19	0.62			(.835)

N = 151, p < .05\*\*, p < .01, SDV= Standard Deviation, Alpha reliabilities in parenthesis

The results in Table 2 demonstrate that the path (direct effect) from autonomous motivation and meaningful work was positive and significant ( $\beta = .270$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) depicting that the employee higher in autonomous motivation was highly likely to experience meaningful work. The results supported hypothesis 2. The direct effect of meaningful work on functional presenteeism was positive and significant ( $\beta = .302$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), demonstrating that the employees scoring higher on meaningful work would probably undergo functional presenteeism, thus supporting hypothesis 3. The direct effect (path) from autonomous motivation to functional presenteeism was positive and significant ( $\beta = .282$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) showing that if employees are autonomously motivated then it will lead to functional presenteeism. The results accepted hypothesis 1. The indirect effect of autonomous motivation on functional presenteeism was significant ( $\beta = .081$ ) through meaningful work as the bootstrapped confidence interval did not include a zero (CI: 0.018, 0.153). The results supported the hypothesis 4.

Table 2: Main effects and mediation of Meaningful Work in the relation between Autonomous Motivation and Functional Presenteeism.

	B	S.E	T	P
<b>MW regressed on autonomous motivation</b>	.27	.036	7.49	.0000
<b>Functional Presenteeism regressed on MW</b>	.30	.120	2.50	.013
<b>Functional Presenteeism regressed on autonomous motivation</b>	.28	0.504	5.23	.0000
<b>Results of Bootstrapping for the Indirect Effect of IV on DV through the Mediator</b>				
	<b>Boot</b>	<b>S.E</b>	<b>LLCI</b>	<b>ULCI</b>
<b>Effect</b>	<b>.081</b>	<b>.034</b>	<b>.018</b>	<b>.153</b>

Note. N = 151. CI = Confidence Interval, LL = Lower Limit, UL = Upper Limit

## Discussion

The present study comprehends the association between autonomous motivation and functional presenteeism by forming meaningful work as an intervening mechanism. The present study found a significant relation between autonomous motivation and functional presenteeism supporting our first hypothesis. This study also showed a significant association between autonomous motivation and meaningful work, and the findings also revealed that meaningful work is positively associated with functional presenteeism. Researchers revealed that the induction of meaningful work is observed as a practice to foster motivation in employees and their dedication to job responsibilities (May et al., 2004). This study advances a novel and consolidative aspect of functional presenteeism, relating it to the established literature on SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2002, 2019). The motivation and performance of an employee can be promoted by creating an environment that supports autonomy (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). An autonomous work environment should be developed by organizations that promote meaningful work in contributing to functional presenteeism.

Therefore, it should be recognized by employers that presenteeism is favorable for the employees as well as for the organizations to some extent if it is properly managed. Such positive manifestation, as reported by Kaiser (2018), is accomplished when both reliance and strength of climate are higher in the organization. When such kind of environment is induced in the organization, employees will be devoted to accomplishing the goals of the organization and will also fulfill their obligations concerning other personnel. Moreover, researchers claimed that the impact of presenteeism can be constructive if sufficient resources endorse some extent of compliance and the modification of job tasks, relying on the health status of an employee. Employees show presenteeism as they find contentment in fulfilling those tasks, thus achieving meaningfulness or displaying their vow to the organization (Bierla et al., 2013).

## Conclusion

The present study has tested the impact of autonomous motivation on functional presenteeism (those who attended their work despite illness and continued their job responsibilities). Our study revealed that if employees are autonomously motivated and their work is meaningful to them, then they can perform their work activities while ill. According to Ashby and Mahdon (2010), when employees are provided with a flexible work environment, presenteeism (functional presenteeism) can be fostered due to a more optimistic attitude towards the duties and responsibilities of work. The outcomes of the present study confirmed the positive relationship between autonomous motivation and functional presenteeism with a partial mediating effect of meaningful work. Our study also found a significant association between autonomous motivation and meaningful work, and the relationship between meaningful work and functional presenteeism was found to be positive. Studies that emphasize presenteeism are rapidly growing. This study mainly focused on the positive side of presenteeism (functional presenteeism) and the role of autonomous motivation which leads to functional presenteeism. On the other hand, though it is essential to recognize functional

presenteeism as an important aspect of today's economy, cautiousness is necessary to evade a continuous decline in the well-being of employees working in an organization.

### Practical Implications

This study has significant practical implications for managers, as it emphasizes the positive impact of presenteeism. To understand that in what ways work resources sustain the desired adaptability to functional presenteeism can offer a preliminary step in finding better procedures for handling presenteeism in such a manner that enables individuals to balance their demands of performance with their health problems. The managers can stimulate functional presenteeism in employees through the use of autonomous motivation to promote meaningfulness in their work which can encourage employees to perform their duties more productively.

### Future Recommendations

This research provides valuable insights for researchers as well as practitioners. This study helps to reconsider the positive side of presenteeism. Organizations can use the findings of this study to evaluate the performance of their employees and can devise new strategies related to work arrangements to facilitate their employees. Other researchers should recognize the social, occupational, and cross-cultural aspects and changes in the working environment that can impact the behavior of employees related to presenteeism. This study also helps to discover the kinds of individual, work, and organizational resources that are significant to the diverse kinds of presenteeism and that can assist functional presenteeism. This study has collected data from a single source as all the data is collected from the employees working in organizations, and it can result in self-reporting bias. Future researchers can use multisource for the collection of data by using manager-employee dyads. Moreover, other approaches like interviews or diary studies can be used to have deep insights that how employee's motivation and meaningful work may or may not effectually contribute to functional presenteeism.

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