

Beyond the Office: Navigating Ergonomic Mismatch and Psychosocial Challenges in Long-Term Remote Work

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the in-depth experiences of long-term remote workers as they navigate physical and psychosocial challenges within their domestic environments. By integrating a Macroergonomics perspective and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), it addresses the gap in reductionist literature that separates physical pain from mental stress. We frame home ergonomics as a complex ecosystem involving space negotiation and "ergonomic improvisation." Methodologically, this qualitative study uses an IPA design with purposive sampling of knowledge-based workers who have: 1) at least two years of full remote experience, and 2) high work intensity on Visual Display Terminals (VDTs). Data from semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. The research identified four superordinate themes: 1) domestic workstation improvisation, where using multifunctional areas like sofas creates an ergonomic mismatch; 2) physiological impact, characterized by high rates of Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSDs) due to sedentary behavior; 3) psychosocial dynamics, where social isolation and telepressure erode mental well-being; and 4) blurring of work-life boundaries, where working in bedrooms or across asynchronous time zones disrupts recovery. It is concluded that conventional ergonomic interventions are inadequate. Instead, a holistic Macroergonomics approach is needed, integrating: 1) workflow redesign, 2) boundary management training, and 3) structured virtual social support to ensure the sustainability and well-being of remote workers.

Keywords: Remote Work Macroergonomics , Ergonomic Improvisation, Workplace Telepressure.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The global transformation to remote work has evolved from a mere emergency response to the pandemic to a permanent paradigm in the modern workforce (Reuschl et al., 2022; Rymaniak et al., 2021). This phenomenon has disrupted the traditional boundaries between professional and domestic spaces, forcing millions of knowledge workers to move their productive activities into the home. While early literature often touted flexibility and autonomy as the primary benefits of telework (Kniffin et al., 2021; Vayre et al., 2022; Brandão & Ramos, 2023), the long-term reality demonstrates the emergence of new complexities related to human interaction with work systems.

Traditionally, office ergonomics has focused on standardizing controlled physical environments, from adjustable chairs to measured lighting. However, the transition to a domestic environment presents significant "ergonomic mismatch" challenges. A recent quantitative study by Davis et al. (2020) found that most home-based work environments fail to meet basic anthropometric standards, which is directly correlated with a surge in Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSDs) complaints. Existing literature has extensively mapped these physical impacts, with consensus that static postures and improvised workstations are key predictors of low back and neck pain (Akkarakittichoke et al., 2021).

On the other hand, the psychosocial dimensions of remote work have also received academic attention. Concepts such as "telepressure," the urge to respond instantly to work communications, and social isolation have been identified as major mental health risks (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015). Research by Allen et al. (2021) highlights how the blurring of physical and temporal boundaries at home disrupts workers' psychological recovery.

Despite a substantial body of research examining the separate physical and psychosocial impacts, there is a significant theoretical gap in the current literature. Most studies adopt a reductionist approach: separating the analysis of physical pain from mental stress or using large-scale quantitative surveys that fail to capture the nuances of workers' "lived experiences." Little research explores how workers actively negotiate spatial and behavioral adaptations ("ergonomic improvisation") in confined domestic spaces and how these physical improvisations dynamically interact with their perceptions of isolation and stress.

In the context of developing countries, where homes are often not designed with dedicated workspaces, these dynamics become even more complex. The current literature is still dominated by studies from developed countries, such as the United States, Italy, Australia, China, France, the Netherlands, Canada, Spain, Israel, the UK, Germany, Lithuania, Romania, Greece, Turkey, Iceland, Ireland, Singapore, Ghana, and Argentina (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020; Galanti et al., 2021; Shirmohammadi & Beigi, 2022). Consequently, understanding ergonomic adaptations for remote workers in environments with limited infrastructure remains very limited.

This research offers novelty by integrating a macroergonomics perspective through the lens of interpretative phenomenology methodology. This approach not only measures "what" is ailing but also explores "how" workers interpret their interactions with less-than-ideal work environments. We argue that ergonomics in the home is not simply about chairs and tables but

rather a complex ecosystem involving space negotiation, boundary management, and coping mechanisms for isolation.

The primary objective of this study is to explore the ergonomic experiences of long-term remote workers navigating physical limitations and psychosocial challenges in a domestic environment. By understanding in-depth narratives from practitioners ranging from tutors to digital marketers, this study aims to generate new insights for the development of more holistic and sustainable ergonomic interventions in the hybrid work era.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

Even though the aforementioned research has offered a wealth of information about the effects of telework, the prevalent methods are still quantitative and incomplete. Barber and Santuzzi (2015) concentrated on psychological elements, whilst Davis et al. (2020) and Gerding et al. (2021) concentrated on physical measures. Studies that combine these two domains using a macroergonomics approach to comprehend workers' "lived experiences" of daily ergonomic improvisation are scarce (Hendrick & Kleiner, 2002).

By examining how employees phenomenologically understand and manage both physical constraints and psychological pressures at the same time, this study closes this gap and offers a comprehensive viewpoint that is mainly ignored in the present ergonomics debate.

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design. This approach was chosen due to its high relevance in exploring how individuals interpret their personal and social experiences in specific contexts (Smith et al., 2021). In the context of ergonomics, this design allows researchers to not only measure physical variables but also delve into workers' subjective perceptions of their interactions with work system elements (people, technology, environment, and organization) in accordance with the principles of Macroergonomics (Hendrick & Kleiner, 2002).

The primary objective of this design is to uncover the "lived experience" of remote workers in balancing physical constraints (workspace), health (physical and mental), and productivity in an environment without direct supervision.

2.2. Participants and Sampling Techniques

The sampling technique used was purposive sampling with a criterion sampling strategy to ensure information-rich cases. The names of participants in this study will be disguised using their acronyms. A total of three (3) participants were involved in this study, and their names will be disguised using their acronyms: AKR, SR, and MGD. Based on the characteristics of the targeted data, the inclusion criteria for participants were determined as follows:

- a. Profession: Knowledge workers with a variety of roles ranging from the education sector (tutor/teacher) to the creative and digital sectors (digital marketer).
- b. Duration of Experience: At least two (2) years of full remote work experience. This duration was chosen to ensure that participants had passed the initial adaptation phase and had established stable work patterns or coping mechanisms.

- c. Work Intensity: Working at least 4-8 hours per day with a high reliance on Visual Display Terminals (VDTs).

Sample sizes in qualitative science research are generally small but in-depth. The main focus is not on statistical generalization, but rather on data saturation, where no new themes emerge from the interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

2.3. Research Instruments

The primary instrument in this study was the researcher herself (human instrument), assisted by a Semi-structured Interview Guide. This guide was developed based on the Cognitive and Physical Ergonomics framework, which is divided into eight comprehensive dimensions:

- a. Physical Work Environment: Investigating domestic workspace configuration, lighting, temperature, and noise.
- b. Tools & Technology: Assessing the anthropometric suitability of furniture and hardware/software reliability.
- c. Physical Health & Movement: Identifying symptoms of Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSDs), Computer Vision Syndrome (CVS), and sedentary patterns.
- d. Mental & Emotional Health: Exploring levels of stress, social isolation, and work-related anxiety.
- e. Time Management: Analyzing work-life balance constraints and rest patterns.
- f. Communication & Teamwork: Assesses the effectiveness of virtual collaboration and social support.
- g. Productivity & Focus: Evaluates distractions and perceived work efficiency.
- h. Personal Perspective: A holistic reflection on the sustainability of a remote career.
- i. Instrument validity was ensured through expert judgment by ergonomics and industrial psychology experts before field use.

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2.4. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, both online and offline. Each interview session was audio-recorded with the participant's informed consent. Procedures included:

- a. Pre-Interview: Explanation of the research objectives and assurance of data confidentiality/anonymity.
- b. Core Session: Asking open-ended questions based on a guide, using probing techniques to elicit superficial responses (e.g., pursuing the response "frequent back pain" with questions about duration, sitting position, and type of chair used).
- c. Artifact Observation (Optional): Asking participants to send photos of their workstations for physical data triangulation

2.5. Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using Thematic Analysis using the six-step approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). This procedure is particularly relevant for identifying ergonomic patterns across participants:

- a. Data Familiarization: Verbatim transcription of interview data (such as AKR, SR, and MGD data) and repeated reading.
- b. Coding: Labeling relevant data segments (e.g., "low back pain," "unergonomic chair," "social isolation").
- c. Theme Search: Grouping codes into potential themes (e.g., "Workstation Physical Inconsistency" theme).
- d. Theme Review: Checking the theme for alignment with the data extract and the overall map.
- e. Theme Definition: Formulating academically representative theme names.
- f. Report Writing: Presenting a narrative that connects the theme to current ergonomics literature.

2.6. Data Validity (Trustworthiness)

To ensure trustworthiness, research validity was maintained using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria:

- a. Credibility: Conducted through member checking, where transcripts or preliminary interpretations were returned to participants (SR, AKR, MGD) to confirm their accuracy.
- b. Transferability: Providing a thick description of the participant's context so readers can assess the applicability of the findings to other contexts.
- c. Confirmability: Maintaining an audit trail that includes raw recordings, transcripts, and analysis notes for methodological transparency.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Result

An in-depth analysis of interview transcripts from three key participants (AKR, SR, and MGD) yielded four superordinate themes that illustrate the complexities of remote work ergonomics. These findings map the interplay between the physical limitations of the domestic environment, the body's physiological responses, and the psychosocial dynamics of workers.

3.1.1. Spatial Configuration and Improvisation of Domestic Work Stations

Field data revealed significant variability in workstation setups, often deviating from formal ergonomic standards. The lack of dedicated workspaces forced workers to resort to risky spatial improvisation. Participants lacked a dedicated space solely for work. Consequently, multifunctional domestic areas such as bedrooms, living rooms, and TV rooms were converted into workspaces. MGD explicitly mentioned a preference for working on a bed or sofa because of subjective perceptions of comfort ("more comfortable and you can lie down"), despite being aware of the postural risks. Meanwhile, SR and AKR exhibited nomadic work patterns, moving between cafes, libraries, and corners of the home.

In terms of furniture, anthropometric mismatches were a prominent issue. SR reported using a “folding table for sitting on the floor” or a table that was “a bit high,” which caused arm fatigue because of unnatural shoulder elevation. In contrast, MGD mitigated this risk by using a height-adjustable gaming chair, while AKR relied on standard office chairs or cafe chairs, which he considered balanced.

Physical environmental conditions (lighting and temperature) also present challenges. While lighting is considered adequate, glare from windows often interferes with screen visibility, forcing MGD to shift seating or SR to dim the laptop screen. Thermal comfort at home is often compromised compared to the office or cafe; both SR and MGD noted discomfort from the heat at home, where fans are the only option, compared to the conditioned environment of public places.

3.1.2. Physiological Impact: Prevalence of Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSDs)

Sedentary work patterns and prolonged static postures in non-ergonomic environments correlated directly with the physical complaints reported by all participants. All three participants reported experiencing back, neck, or shoulder pain after work. AKR stated that these complaints occurred “very often,” while MGD attributed his fairly severe back pain to prolonged sitting. SR added that he experienced tingling in his hands and back pain due to prolonged sitting.

The duration of static work exacerbated these risks. MGD was able to sit without moving for up to 4 hours, although the average duration was 2-2.5 hours, while AKR lasted 2-3 hours. The low frequency of micro-breaks for stretching was a contributing factor; SR admitted that he “rarely did it because he often forgot,” a sentiment echoed by MGD. To mitigate visual fatigue (computer vision syndrome), participants employed reactive strategies. MGD and SR opted to close their eyes, take a nap, or look away to rest their eyes from screen exposure.

3.1.3. Psychosocial Dynamics: Isolation, Stress, and Work-Life Boundaries

Remote working presents a paradox of autonomy and social isolation that impacts workers’ mental well-being. Social isolation emerged as a dominant theme. MGD reported increasing stress levels over time due to “working alone without friends to help” and minimal face-to-face interaction. SR stated that they felt lonely, despite having digital communication groups (WhatsApp), because they didn’t see virtual interactions as a substitute for the physical presence of colleagues. AKR, who identifies as extroverted, felt “sometimes lonely” and missed informal social interactions such as casual chats.

The study also found anxiety related to digital communication. SR and MGD felt anxious if they didn’t immediately respond to messages from their superiors or colleagues, perceiving each message as important or fearing being perceived as “indifferent.” MGD felt pressure to appear productive, particularly because they were working from home.

However, flexibility in time was a key coping mechanism. Participants like AKR found working from home “more relaxing,” while MGD enjoyed the ability to independently manage mealtimes and personal activities. Challenges arise in boundary management. MGD experiences disrupted sleep patterns because of having to follow the European time zone (ending at 10:00 PM WITA), which blurs the boundaries of rest time.

3.1.4. Technology Infrastructure and Distraction Management

While reliable technology is the backbone of productivity, the home environment presents unique distractions not found in the office. Hardware limitations were evident in SR and AKR, who relied solely on a single laptop without an additional monitor. In contrast, MGD demonstrated greater technological readiness, using a tablet (iPad) as a second screen and an external mouse for efficient navigation.

Distractions at home ranged from domestic to digital. The "temptation" to engage in non-work activities was high; MGD mentioned the temptation to watch movies, play games, sleep, and even the "temptation to skip showering." SR felt distracted by the desire to clean the house or watch Korean dramas. However, AKR and MGD noted that digital notifications were less distracting because they were considered part of the task.

Overall, while participants experienced psychological comfort and flexibility at home, the data revealed significant trade-offs in terms of physical health risks from awkward postures and mental strain from social isolation.

3.2. Discussion

This study aims to explore the ergonomic experiences of remote workers through a macro-ergonomics lens encompassing physical, cognitive, and organizational aspects. Key findings suggest that the transition to a domestic work environment creates a phenomenon of "ergonomic improvisation" that poses significant risks to musculoskeletal health and psychosocial well-being. This discussion will outline the implications of these findings across four key dimensions.

3.2.1. Anthropometric Gaps and Improvisation of Domestic Workspaces

The research findings highlight a significant discrepancy between ergonomic workstation standards and the domestic realities of remote workers. As reported by participants (MGD and SR), the use of non-work furniture such as sofas, beds, and dining tables creates anthropometric mismatches that force the body to make postural compensations. Ergonomics literature recognizes this as an ergonomic mismatch. The phenomenon of MGD working while lying down or SR working on the floor confirms the findings of Davis et al. (2020), who stated that the home environment often fails to provide the adjustability necessary to maintain a neutral posture.

The lack of a dedicated workspace forces workers to engage in spatial negotiation within the home. According to a study by Xiao et al. (2021), a physical workstation at home's satisfaction correlates positively with physical and mental health. When participants like AKR have to resort to cafes for comfort, this indicates a failure of the home environment to support sustained attention and physical comfort, ultimately triggering additional cognitive load to adapt continuously to the new environment

3.2.2. Escalation of Risk of Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSDs) and Sedentary Behavior

The consistent reporting of back, neck, and shoulder pain by all participants (AKR, SR, MGD) confirms that telework is strongly correlated with an increased prevalence of MSDs. This finding supports analyses by Moretti et al. (2020) and Radulović et al. (2021), which identified low back pain as the most common complaint in the work-from-home population.

The main factors exacerbating this condition are extreme sedentary behavior and a lack of active breaks. MGD, who can sit for up to four hours without a break, demonstrates the loss of structured breaks typically institutionalized in the office (such as walking to the meeting room or pantry). Gerding et al. (2021) explain that the lack of ergonomic supervision and social cues for breaks at home leads workers to maintain prolonged static postures, which biomechanically impede blood circulation and increase paraspinal muscle tension.

3.2.3. The Paradox of Autonomy: Social Isolation and Telepressure

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3.2.4. Boundary Blurring

This study found that working from home erodes the physical and temporal boundaries between work and personal life. The case of MGD, who experienced sleep disturbances due to following European time zones and working in the bedroom, demonstrates a failure in boundary management. Boundary Theory (Ashforth et al., 2000) states that individuals need clear role transitions. Working in the bedroom (a rest area) creates role ambiguity, making it difficult for the brain to switch to rest mode, ultimately triggering insomnia and decreased sleep quality.

Conventional ergonomic interventions that focus solely on chairs and desks have proven inadequate. The findings of this discussion suggest the need for a holistic macro-ergonomics approach, including workflow redesign, boundary management training, and the provision of more structured virtual social support.

4. CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the permanent transition to remote work in domestic environments creates complex challenges that go beyond the mere availability of physical furniture. Using an interpretive phenomenological approach, it was found that workers engaged in “ergonomic improvisation” using makeshift facilities such as mattresses and folding tables, leading to serious anthropometric mismatches. These less-than-ideal environmental conditions, coupled with extreme sedentary behavior, were directly correlated with high rates of Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSDs) such as back and neck pain in participants. On the psychosocial side, the autonomy offered by remote work is distorted by social isolation and the phenomenon of telepressure, where workers feel anxious and pressured to respond to work messages immediately. The loss of clear physical and temporal boundaries between work and personal life has also been shown to disrupt workers’ rest rhythms and hinder psychological recovery. This study concludes that conventional ergonomic

interventions focused solely on work tools are no longer adequate to address this dynamic hybrid work ecosystem. Therefore, a holistic macro-ergonomic approach is needed that not only improves workstations but also integrates workflow redesign, boundary management training, and virtual social support.

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