

# Working from home: Social isolation and the impact of communication richness and relationship quality at home

## Introduction

Over the last few years, the number of people partly working from home has steadily increased (Eurostat, 2020). In 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the number has grown again immensely. In Austria, 42% of the respondents of a survey worked at home in spring 2020 (Institut für empirische Sozialforschung, 2020). Home office is known to be correlated with social isolation (e.g. Hislop et al., 2015; de Vries et al., 2019). According to the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), three basic psychological needs exist: the need for relatedness, the need for autonomy and the need for competence. In this study, we focused on the need for relatedness.

We investigated whether it could be satisfied by using media-mediated communication while working from home. Based on findings from Kim et al. (2009), we expected a positive relationship between media-mediated communication use and social isolation. Moreover, we investigated whether "communication richness" of five different communication channels could buffer that relationship. Further, previous research could show that being married with a spousal confidant was negatively associated with loneliness (Hawkley et al., 2008). Therefore, we examined whether the relationship quality at home buffers the correlation between working from home and social isolation.

## Instruments

Scale	Items	$\alpha$	Example	Source
<b>UCLA Isolation</b> (shortened & translated)	8	.86	„Ich habe niemanden, an den ich mich wenden kann.“	Russel et al., 1980; Hawkley et al., 2005
<b>UCLA Connectedness</b> (shortened & translated)	7	.88	„Es gibt Menschen, mit denen ich reden kann.“	Russel et al., 1980; Hawkley et al., 2005
<b>Quality of relationship Inventory</b> (shortened & translated)	6	.75	„Wie sehr streiten Sie sich mit dieser Person?“	Reiner et al., 2012
<b>Communication Richness Scale</b> (self-developed; 5 communication channels)	11	.92	„Diese Kommunikationsart ermöglicht es mir, Emotionen zu vermitteln.“	Lee et al. (2009), Fox and McEwan (2017), Tseng et al. (2019)

Table 1. Scales and items used in the survey

## Research Question

- Does working from home lead to perceived social isolation and which impact do the use of media-mediated communication and the relationship quality at home have on that relationship?

## Sample & Method

N = 236 | ♀ = 58.5%

**Inclusion criteria:** Participants had to work at least 20 hours/week and at least 1 day/week from home.

**Age:** <30 = 36.9%, 30–45 = 30.9%, >45 = 32.2%

**Living situation:** 82.6% living with others, 17.4% living alone

**Method:** Online survey; One measuring point; German language

**Analysis:** Mediation and moderation analyses via PROCESS Macro (Hayes, 2013), correlations and multiple regressions.

**Data collection:** 04.11.2020–30.11.2020

## Further Analysis

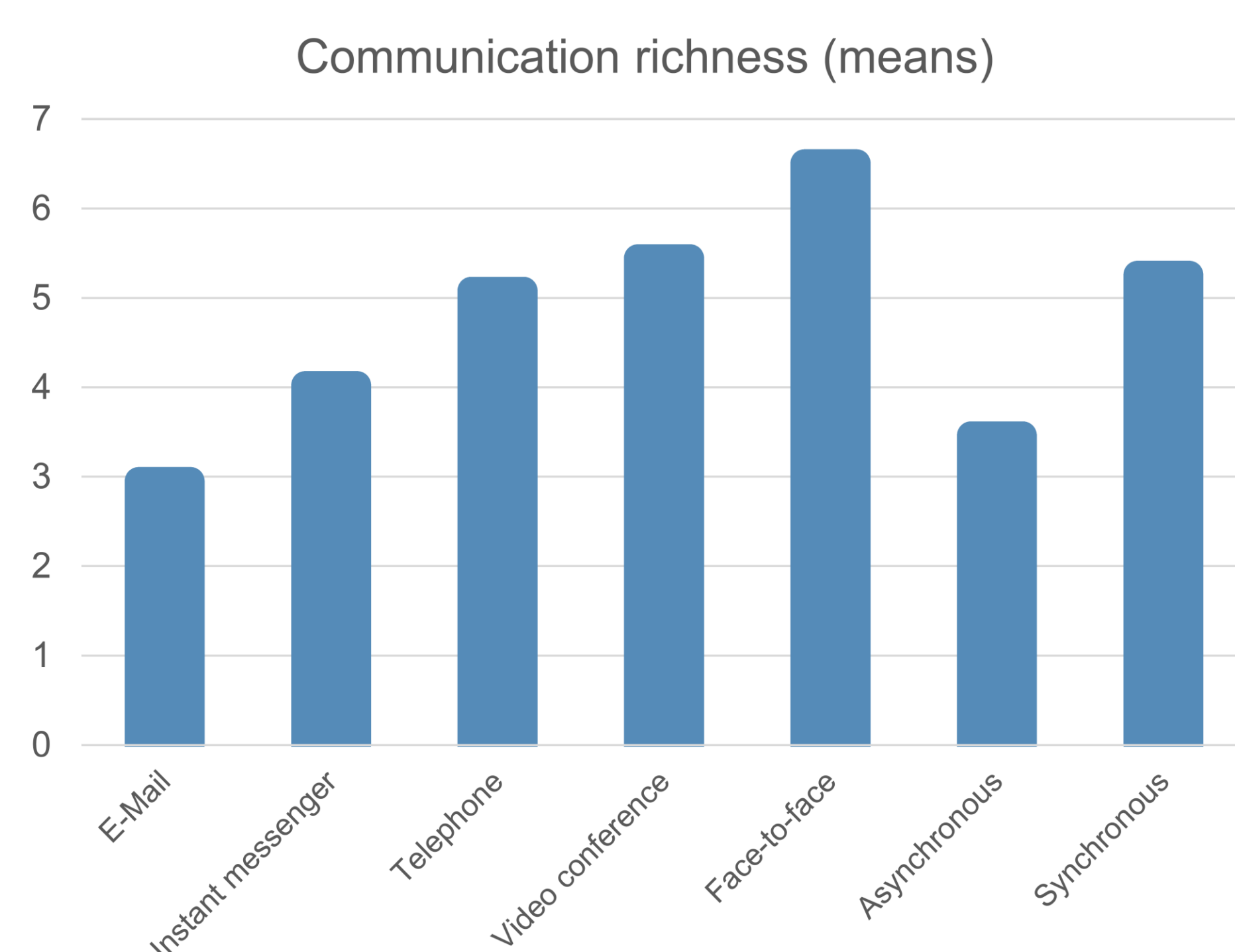


Figure 1. Communication richness for the different types of communication channels

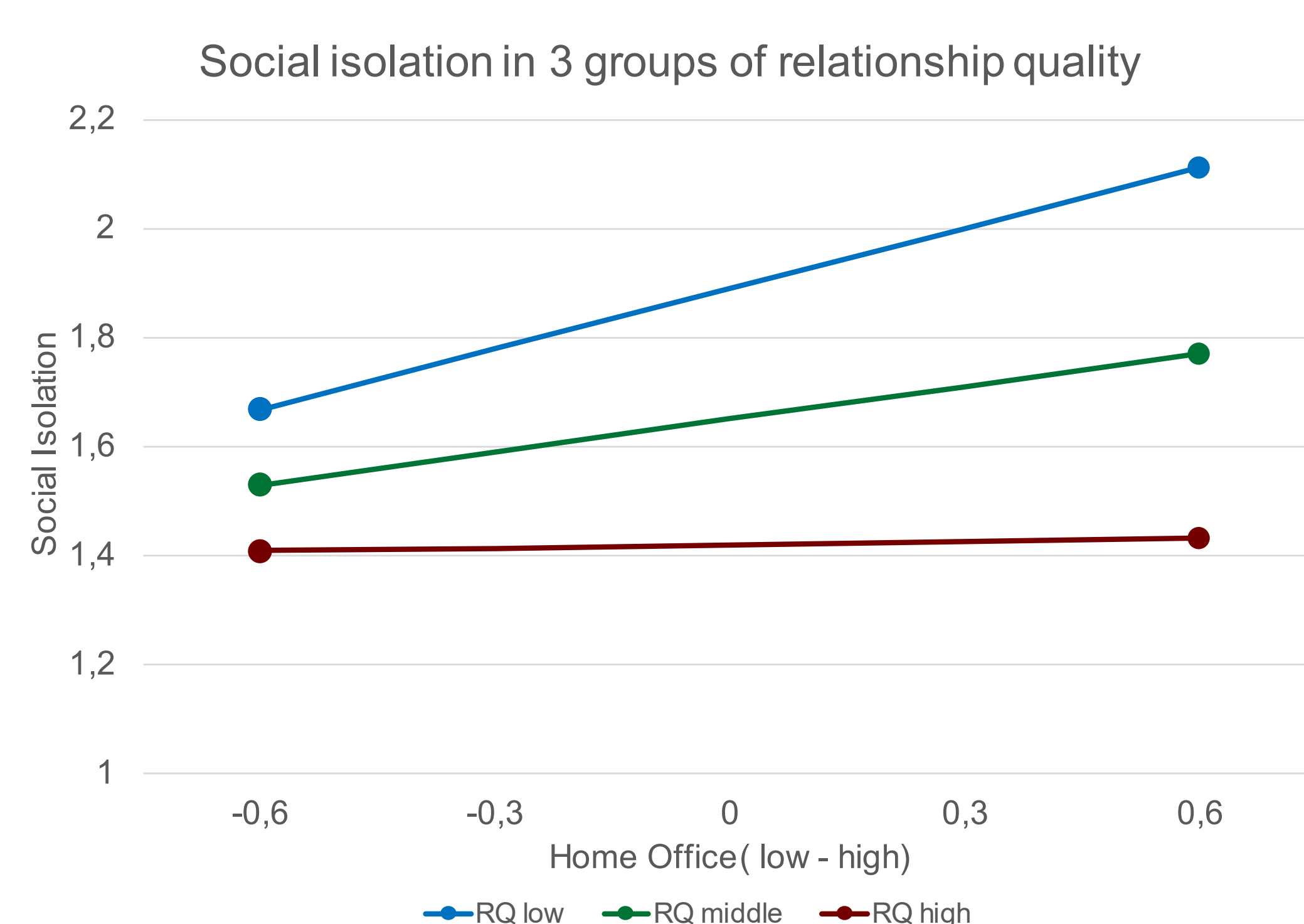


Figure 2. The moderating effect of relationship quality on the relationship between home office and social isolation

## Results

- ✓ H1a: Working from home leads to more perceived social isolation.
- ✗ H1b: Working from home leads to less perceived social connectedness.
- ✗ H2: Working from home leads to greater use of media-mediated communication.
- ✗ H3a: Media-mediated communication is positively correlated with perceived social isolation.
- ✓ H3b: Media-mediated communication is positively correlated with perceived social connectedness.
- ✗ H4: The communication richness buffers the relationship between media-mediated communication and perceived social isolation.
- ✓ H5: The perceived higher quality of relationships at home can buffer the relationship between working from home and perceived social isolation.

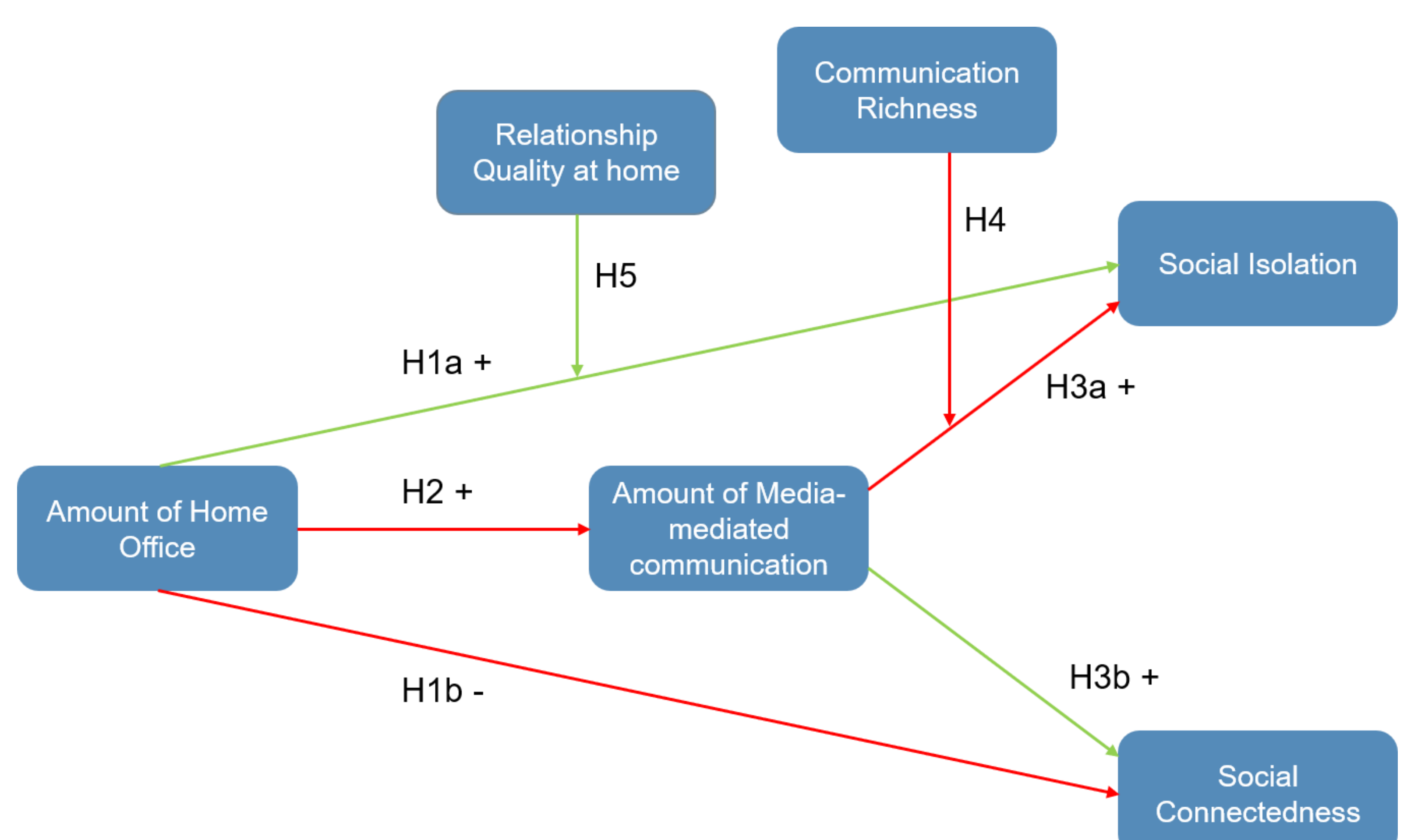


Figure 3. The research model

## Discussion

The present study showed that a high amount of home office is associated with increased social isolation. This result is in line with previous studies which found that the amount of time spent working from home influences the experienced isolation (Golden et al., 2008). Moreover, we found that media-mediated communication is positively correlated with perceived social connectedness, but it did not show a significant relationship with social isolation. This implies that the more one communicates using media-mediated communication, the more connected one feels. In line with current literature, synchronous media (video conference & telephone) were considered higher in communication richness as compared to asynchronous media (e-mail & instant messenger) (Lal & Dwivedi, 2009; Tseng et al., 2019). Video conferencing, after face-to-face-contact, showed the highest richness. Contrary to our predictions, we did not find any moderating effect of communication richness which could be due to the amount of use: Video conferencing was the media least used in our sample, whereas e-mail, which has a relatively low richness, was used the most. Furthermore, the study showed that relationship quality buffers the relationship between the amount of home office and perceived social isolation, meaning that people who experience good relationship quality at home and high amounts of home office feel less isolated than people experiencing bad relationship quality. We were not able to confirm the relationship between the amount of media-mediated communication and social isolation. Also, no relationship was found between the amount of home office and media-mediated communication leading to the assumption that one does not communicate differently when working from home than working in the office.

## Practical Implications

- Organizations should aim to prevent high levels of social isolation in their employees. It is not recommendable to send people into home office full-time without any sufficient team integration providing connectedness or adequate possibilities to stay in contact with colleagues. Face-to-face meetings should be carried out on a regular basis.
- People working from home permanently should try to prevent social isolation by establishing social contacts proactively and staying in contact with colleagues. Using media-mediated communication could enhance perceived connectedness.
- Further research should examine the relationship between the amount of communication use, communication richness and perceived social isolation/connectedness when working from home.

## Limitations

- This is a cross-sectional study, therefore no causal relationship could be established.
- Time spent in home office was only measured in days, not hours.
- Some items did not clearly refer to the working context (e.g., UCLA scale).
- The items measuring relationship quality possibly generated socially desired answers.



Literature

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