Wearing Many Hats: Examining the Protective Role of Working During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Amber L. Morgan, Ryan Hulla, PhD, Angela Liegey-Dougall, PhD

University of Texas at Arlington

Introduction

- The impact of the pandemic left many lives disrupted and created a perfect environment for mental health issues to evolve.[1]
- Social-isolation, due to social distancing measures, left college students at higher risk of loneliness.[2]
- However, not everyone experienced the same psychosocial outcomes despite similar COVID-19 experiences.[3]
- Previous research has found that having multiple compatible roles can have a positive (enhancing) effect on psychological well-being.[4]
- Therefore, this study examined the protective power of working students' multiple roles to identify factors that may lessen the psychosocial impact of the pandemic.

Hypotheses:

- **H1:** Greater COVID-19 Impact will predict worse psychosocial outcomes (i.e., greater depressive symptoms, perceived stress, and loneliness).
- **H2:** Working more hours will weaken the relationship between COVID-19 impact and psychosocial outcomes.

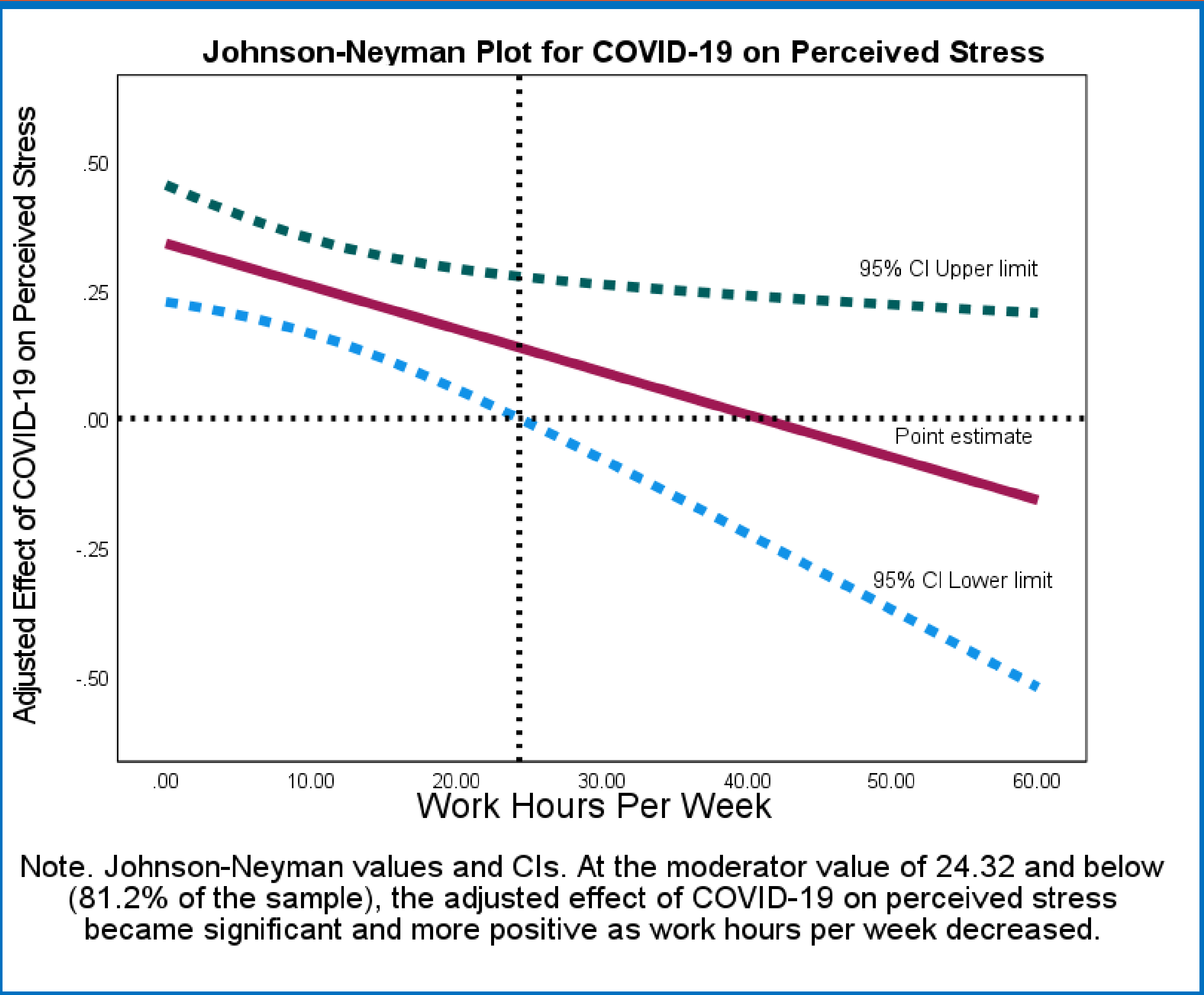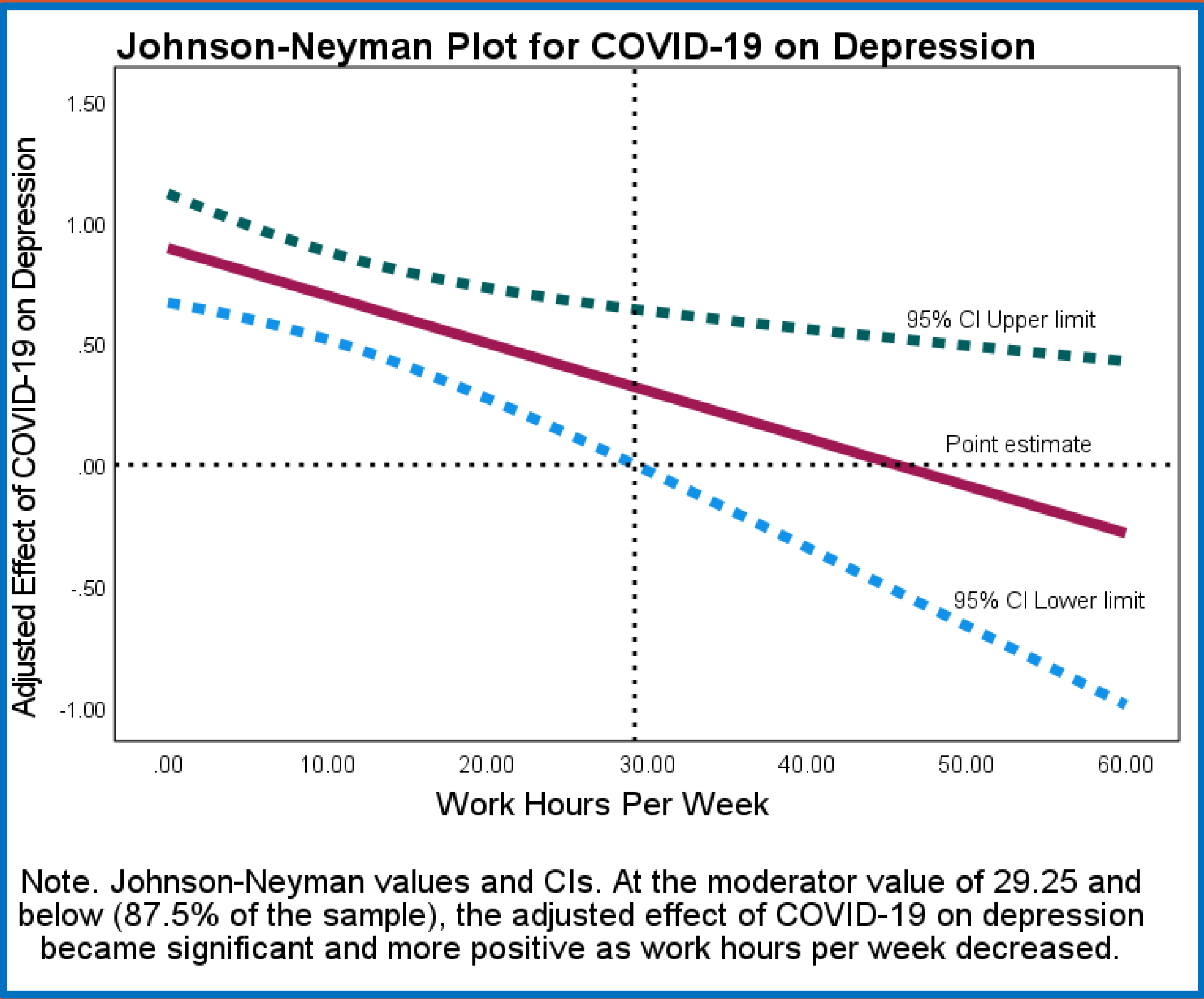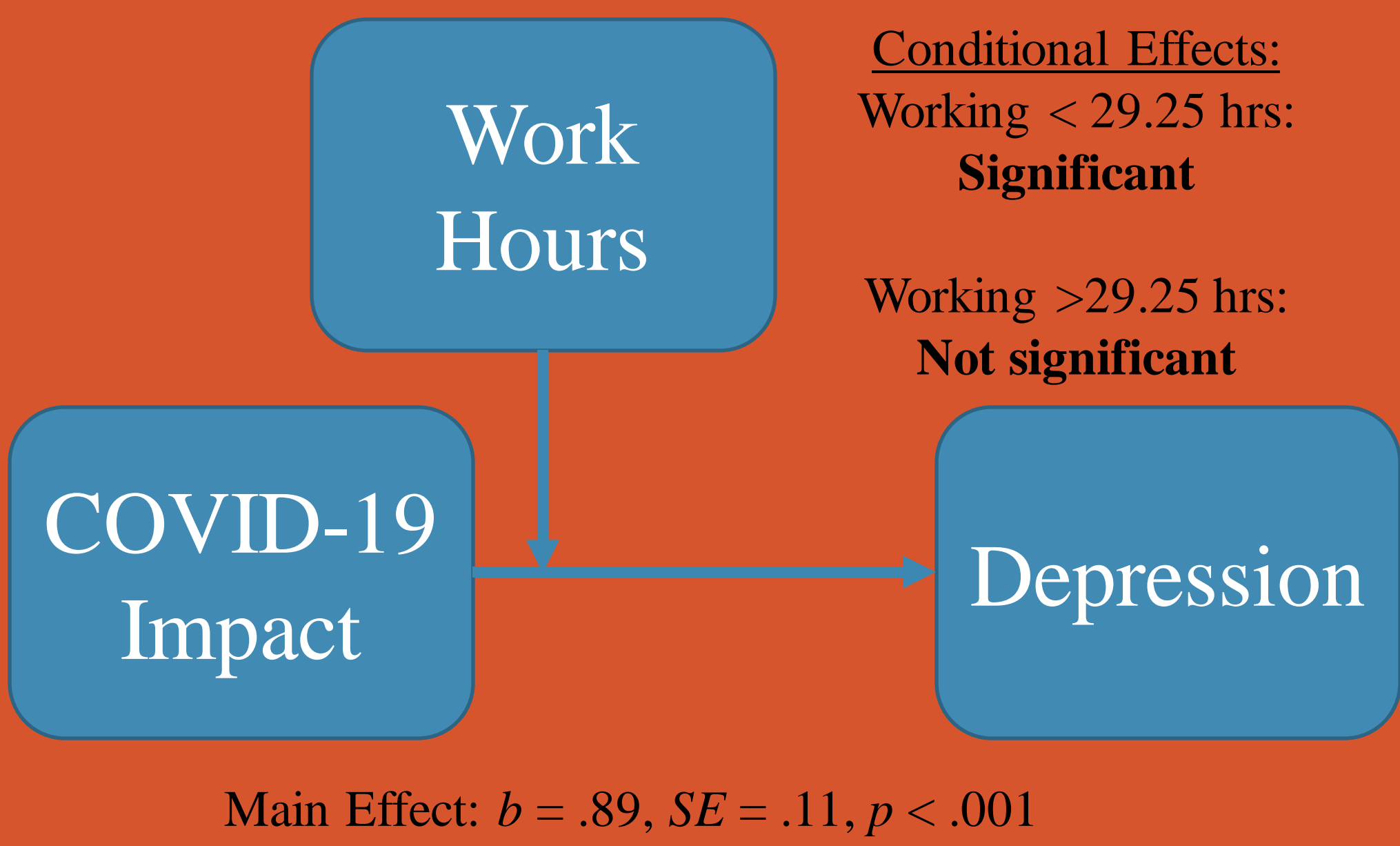## Conceptual Model
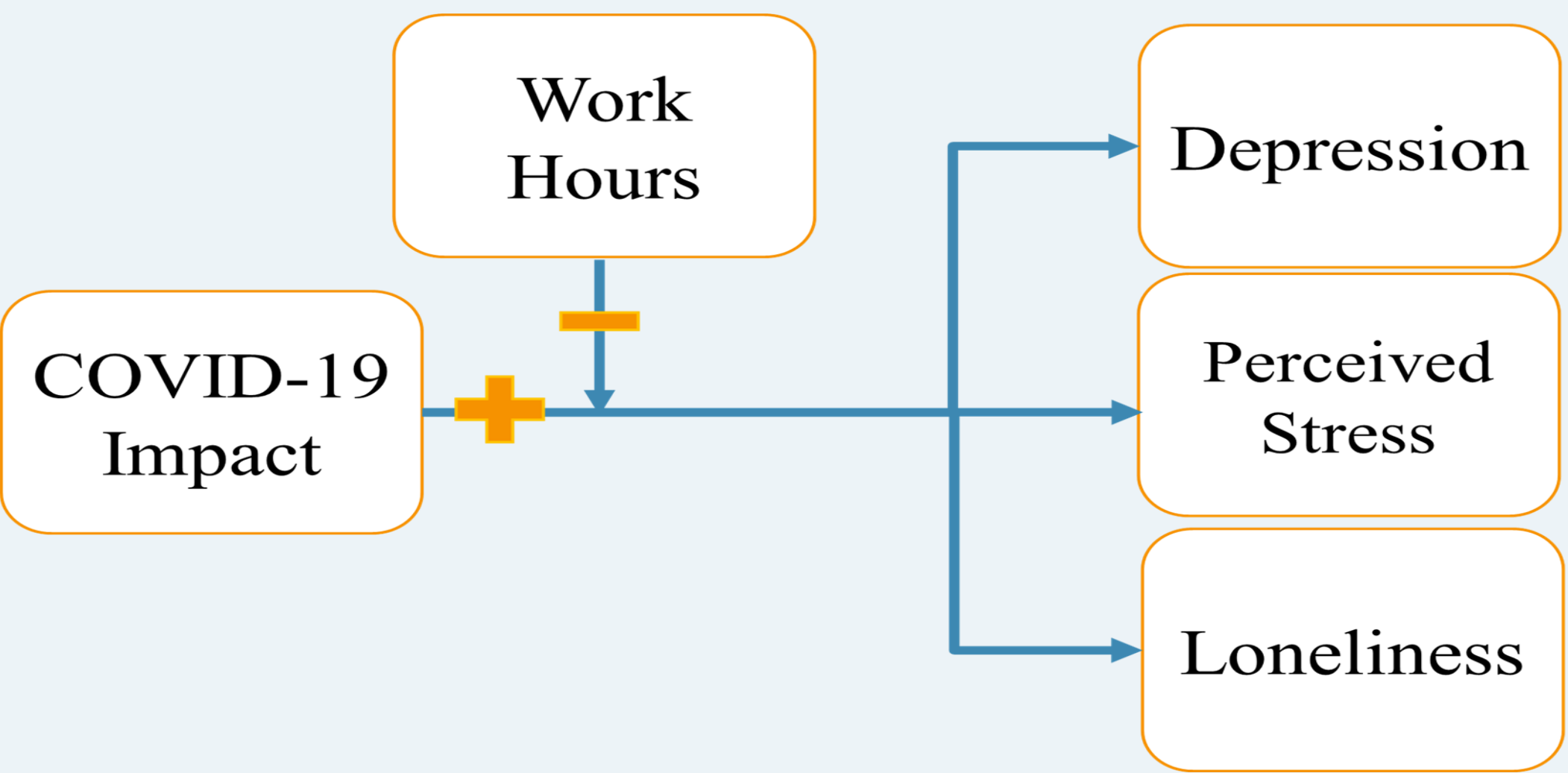
Participants and Procedures

- N = 490 college students enrolled at UTA
- Ages 17-49 (M = 19.8); 110 males and 380 females
- Completed online self-reported questionnaires about demographics, COVID-19 impact, psychosocial constructs (including perceived stress, loneliness, and depression).
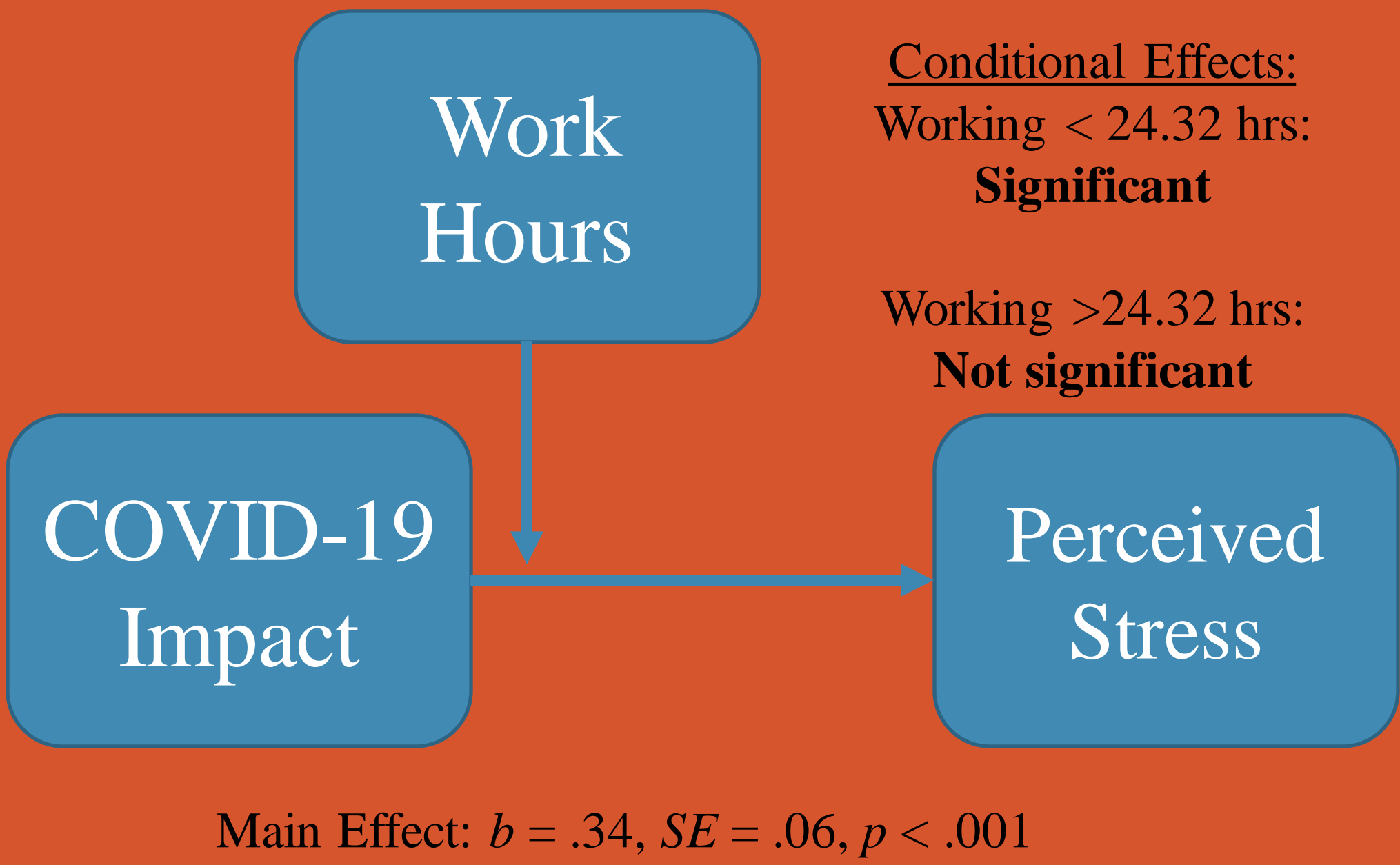
Analyses

Linear regression and PROCESS v4.0 Moderation Model 1 in SPSS 28. Covariates included gender, income, and age.
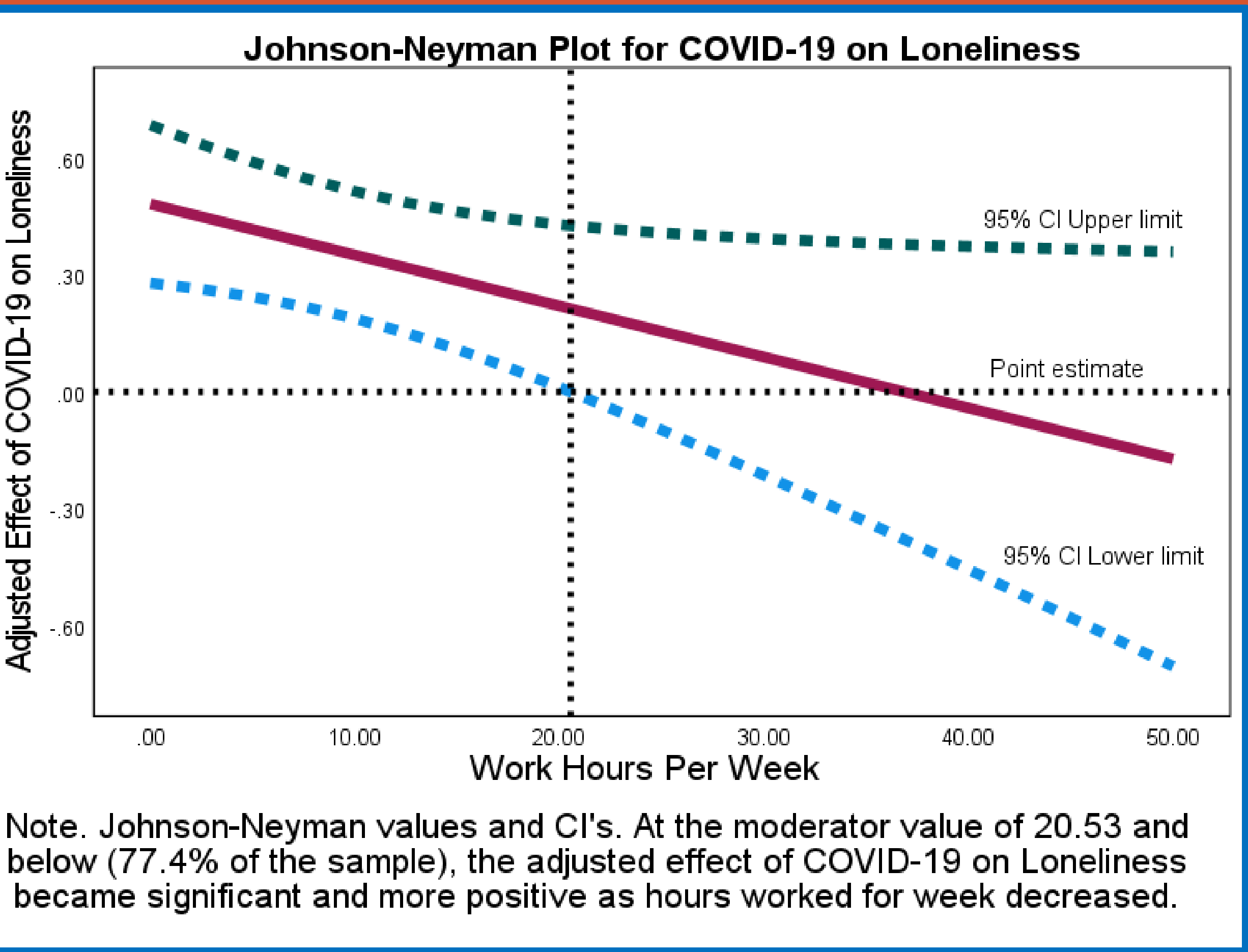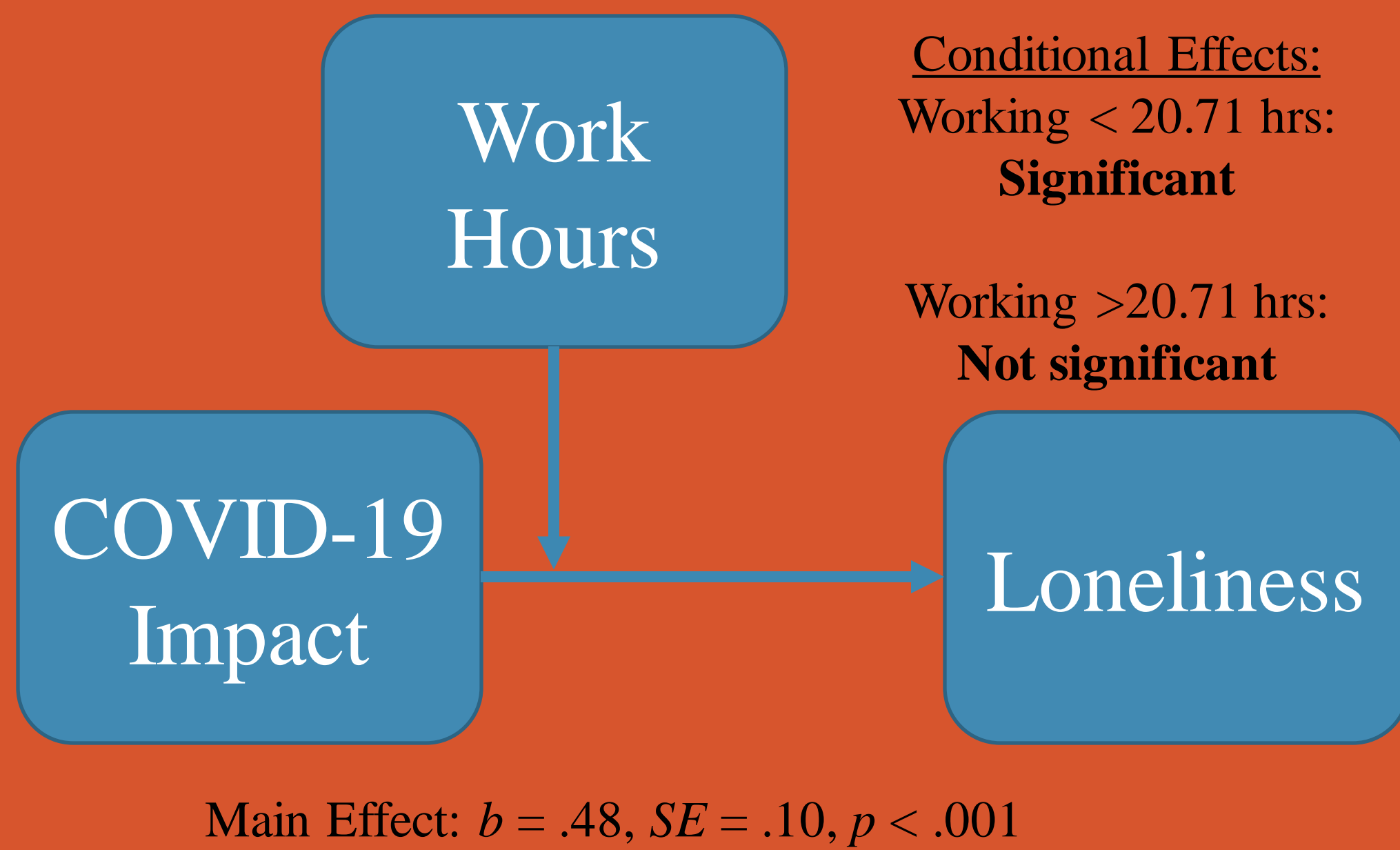
Results

As expected, greater COVID-19 impact predicted more depressive symptoms, but only for those who worked fewer than 29.25 hours per week. The relationship weakened as work hours increased and became non-significant over 29.25 hours.

Conditional Effects:
Working < 29.25 hrs: **Significant**

Working >29.25 hrs: **Not significant**

Main Effect: b = .89, SE = .11, $p < .001$

Note. Johnson-Neyman values and CIs. At the moderator value of 29.25 and below (87.5% of the sample), the adjusted effect of COVID-19 on depression became significant and more positive as work hours per week decreased.

As expected, greater COVID-19 impact predicted more perceived stress, but only for those who worked fewer than 24.32 hours per week. The relationship weakened as work hours increased and became non-significant over 24.32 hours.

Note. Johnson-Neyman values and CIs. At the moderator value of 24.32 and below (81.2% of the sample), the adjusted effect of COVID-19 on perceived stress became significant and more positive as work hours per week decreased.

Conditional Effects:
Working < 24.32 hrs: **Significant**

Working >24.32 hrs: **Not significant**

Main Effect: b = .34, SE = .06, $p < .001$

As expected, greater COVID-19 impact predicted more loneliness, but only for those who worked fewer than 20.71 hours per week. The relationship weakened as work hours increased and became non-significant over 20.71 hours.

Conditional Effects:
Working < 20.71 hrs: **Significant**

Working >20.71 hrs: **Not significant**

Main Effect: b = .48, SE = .10, $p < .001$

Note. Johnson-Neyman values and CI's. At the moderator value of 20.53 and below (77.4% of the sample), the adjusted effect of COVID-19 on Loneliness became significant and more positive as hours worked for week decreased.

Measures

12-item Coronavirus Impact Scale[5]: Asked participants to self-report how COVID-19 impacted their life in a variety of areas including routine, income and employment changes, food access, medical and mental health care access, social support, stress on self and family, COVID-19 diagnosis self and/or family. (α=.64-.75)

20-item Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale Revised (CESD-R)[6]: Measured depressive symptoms over the previous one week. Items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale from 0 (not at all or less than one day) to 4 (5-7 days; α = .85-.90).

10-item Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)[7]: Asked participants the degree to which they perceived their lives as stressful during the past month on a 5-point Likert scale from 0 (never) to 4 (very often; α = .82),

20-item Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale[8]: Measured subjective feelings of loneliness and social isolation on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 4 (often; α = .91).

Discussion

- Given the recent life changes that occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is pertinent to examine the psychosocial effects of the pandemic and identify factors that alter this relationship.
- The current findings add to role enhancement literature[9] by identifying working status (hours per week) as a mitigator of the psychosocial effects of COVID-19. This indicates that working more hours (up to 20 hours) may have protected against the psychosocial effects of the pandemic due to the additional emotional and social support obtained from work and that those who do not work may have suffered more from social isolation due to the pandemic.
- Neither COVID-19 impact, work hours, nor their interaction predicted psychological outcomes over 20 hours per week, indicating future research should investigate additional aspects of work (e.g., cognitive demands and interpersonal stressors) to explain the relationship between COVID-19 impact and psychosocial outcomes at a greater number of work hours per week.
- Overall, this research is important as it indicates that students should be encouraged to become involved in social activities such as jobs, extracurriculars, and volunteer work as it may be beneficial to their mental health. Additionally, it may help to identify individuals who are at higher risk from negative psychological outcomes after stressors due to their un-involvement in social activities.

References

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