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The effect of mobile technology usage on work engagement and emotional exhaustion in Japan

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have repeatedly found that the use of mobile technology (MT) in the West is a double-edged sword that produces both positive and negative psychological experiences for employees. MT blurs the boundaries between work and non-work contexts, limiting employees' personal space and time as a result, and possibly having a negative impact on their work engagement. Our findings in Japan, however, were different. Japanese workers' total MT usage (i.e., during office and non-office hours) had a positive impact on their work autonomy, which, in turn, led to greater work engagement. Emotional exhaustion was not related to MT usage. The findings from this study imply that MT can result in positive psychological experiences for employees and present some managerial implications for boundary conditions.

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1. Introduction

The emergence of mobile technology (MT), together with the introduction of smartphones and small portable devices, offers much flexibility and convenience for mobile users. Drawing on previous studies, MT is depicted as being portable information technology artifacts offering both voice and data features (Jarvenpaa & Lang, 2006; Sarker & Wells, 2003), all of which enable the users to engage in work and non-work activities, 24/7. MT devices include smartphones, tablets, laptop computers, and personal digital assistants (PDAs). These devices have multiple functionalities for achieving work and non-work activities and allow employees to constantly stay in touch with colleagues, families, and friends, crossing the boundaries of life's activities (Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2007; Covert & Thompson, 2003; Duxbury, Higgins, Smart, & Stevenson, 2013; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Porter & Kakabadse, 2005).

While MT offers much flexibility and convenience for employees, past studies imply that proliferation of MT and its extensive use in a work context may blur the boundaries between work and non-work activities. This either invigorates employees to engage in multiple life demands in a flexible manner or exhausts them with having to fulfill multiple demands regardless of the time of day (c.f., Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006; Golden & Geisler, 2007; Orlikowski, 2007).

Simultaneously, the increasing usage of MT has been said to foster the rise of networked individualism. This refers to MT facilitation of an individual worker to be a central portal of connectivity, thereby enhancing work autonomy to regulate their work patterns (Miyata, Boase, Wellman, & Ikeda, 2005; Wellman, 2002).

The mediating role of work autonomy between MT usage and employee outcomes such as engagement or burnout warrants further research as it has been suggested that these outcomes impact on both employees' productivity and quality of life (Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz-Vergel, 2014). However, to date, only limited research examines such a mediating relationship. Specifically, studies are yet to simultaneously examine the perceptions of both work engagement and emotional exhaustion that may result from the usage of MT. The closest studies within the context of virtual and telework were conducted in relation to wellbeing and stress, reporting the simultaneous occurrence of these outcomes (Richter, Meyer, & Sommer, 2006; Vartiainen & Hyrkkänen, 2010). Despite the potential of work autonomy embedded in a networked individualism-based society, a boundless lifestyle beyond the 'nine-to-five' work day and four office walls' implies the possible simultaneous occurrence of work engagement and emotional exhaustion (Richter et al., 2006). While negative emotional states such as stress and emotional exhaustion might not occur – as MT offers a high degree of autonomy (Richter et al., 2006) – the MT usage of workers poses a question as to whether or not MT usage promotes greater positive effect on work autonomy and work engagement rather than the negative effect of emotional exhaustion.

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Up until now, researchers studied the use of MT – particularly in the West – and found that the workers' MT usage is a double-edged sword. That is, while it enhances workers' job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and perceived control, it also produces workers' work-life conflicts, techno-stress, anxiety, frustration, work overload, and work intensification (Brough & Kalliath, 2009; Day, Scott, & Kelloway, 2010; Diaz, Chiaburu, Zimmerman, & Boswell, 2012; Golden & Geisler, 2007; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Matusik & Mickel, 2011; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; O'Driscoll, Brough, Timms, & Sawang, 2010; Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Teo, Lim, & Wai, 1998). From the boundary theory perspective, which refers to individuals creating and maintaining "boundaries as a means of simplifying and ordering the environment" (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000, p. 474), MT usage is assumed to create tensions for employees as it creates the situation where they must balance the separate boundary spheres of their work and non-work roles (Duxbury & Smart, 2011; Thompson, Beauvais, & Allen, 2006). Similarly, from the job demands-resources (JD-R) perspective, MT is assumed to facilitate both job demands and resources as it enables constant access to work even outside of official working hours, which can be mentally exhausting for employees (c.f., Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Day et al., 2010). These concepts reflect the typical phenomenon reported in Western society. While MT enhances workers' perceived autonomy, flexibility, and connectedness in terms of how, when, and where their work can be carried out, it also tends to put pressures on the workers to be always accessible and responsive to work demands, thus creating stress and tension in both work and non-work domains (Day et al., 2010; Diaz et al., 2012; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Golden & Geisler, 2007; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Kossek et al., 2006; Matusik & Mickel, 2011; O'Driscoll et al., 2010; Schlosser, 2002). Therefore, according to the boundary theory and JD-R model, past literature supports the notion that an increase of job demands exceeds the increase of job resources from MT usage, which may result in the decrease of work engagement and the increase of emotional exhaustion. The empirical studies in the West have supported this line of argument.

In this study, we draw on social construction and networked individualism perspectives into the aforementioned theoretical framework to question a different phenomenon within the Japanese context. The social construction perspective toward MT usage views that technologies are both constructive of and constructed by social, cultural and historical contexts, which are embedded in personal and communal networks (e.g., Miller & Slater, 2000; Wellman, 2002). Social constructivists commonly agree that the effects of MT emerge out of a social context, where workers' responses to MT's constraints and affordance to each other influence their psychological conditions (cf., Boudreau & Robey, 2005; Orlikowski, 2007; Orlikowski & Yates, 1994; Van Dyne, Kossek, & Lobel, 2007; Volkoff, Strong, & Elmes, 2007).

The social context of the Japanese workforce is characterized as having significantly high MT usage and excessively long working hours (including work-related socializing hours) that are reinforced by their work culture of conformity (Davies & Ikeno, 2002; Imamura, 2009; Iwasaki, Takahashi, & Nakata, 2006; Japan Broadcasting Corporation, 2013; Mouer, 2009). Unlike Western society, where the emphasis is placed on self-autonomy and self-regulated behavior to gain independent success, Japanese society is characterized by socially regulated behaviors to maintain social connectedness (Dennis, Cole, Zahn-Waxler, & Mizuta, 2002; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Markus, Kitayama, & Heiman, 1996). Notably, its downside is the tendency among the people to subordinate their own unique perspectives or even sacrifice their own health in order to protect group harmony and to conform to the desires and needs of the others (Karlova, 2012). The continuous social connections of the Japanese people, regardless of the type of activity, may mean that they may not separate their work and non-work spheres as much as Westerners do. Another unique psychological feature of the Japanese workforce is their avoidance of uncertainty and their crisis mentality, both of which may put great value on constant connection with colleagues, families, and friends (Barr & Glynn, 2004; Herstatt, Verworn,

& Nagahira, 2004; Hofstede, 2001). MT therefore may support the notion of 'Nagara' (i.e., while-doing-something-else) culture of simultaneously cohabiting work and non-work domains of Japanese workers and MT may function more as "a medium of lightweight 'refreshment' analogous to connecting with others at any time of the day (Fujimoto, 2003; Ito, Okabe, & Matsuda, 2006, p. 9) In this context, we pose this central question: *Will Japanese workers in Japan report atypical psychological experiences of MT usage that have not been observed in the Western workforce?* The following sections explain the development of the conceptual model and associated hypotheses that address the central research question.

In order to deduct our hypotheses within the context of Japan, we firstly conducted a qualitative study to understand how the MT usage is socially constructed positively or negatively and, accordingly, how the socio-psychological condition of MT usage in Japan may be different from that of the West. Based on the qualitative findings and aforementioned theoretical framework, we developed our conceptual model and hypotheses.

2. Conceptual model development and hypotheses

Based on the positive psychology of optimal human functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), we selected work engagement and emotional exhaustion as opposite constructs (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). By testing the effect of MT usage on these opposite constructs, we sought to strengthen our findings (Ajzen, 2013). Using the perspective of social constructivists, networked individualism and the finding of our qualitative study, we assess the effect of the Japanese workers' total MT usage (i.e., combining both work and after-work hours) on work engagement and emotional exhaustion (c.f., Leonardi & Barley, 2010). In the West, the conventional prediction may be that the employees' MT usage during and after work hours may deplete their mental resources, which, in turn, may reduce work engagement and increase emotional exhaustion (Duxbury & Smart, 2011). Among the Japanese employees, however, we predicted the effects to be the opposite.

We conducted exploratory interviews with ten Japanese workers in technologically advanced areas in Japan, namely, Tokyo, Osaka, and Kanagawa. Those participants were approached through the author's direct ($N = 2$) and indirect contacts ($N = 7$) in those regions. An overview of the samples' characteristics is provided in Table 1. We asked the interviewees 'why they use MT and how they think and feel about MT affecting their quality of life'. We also asked their perceptions on Japanese workers' reaction to MT usage in general. Interviews lasted for an average of 45 to 60 min and were tape-recorded and transcribed. A National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) translator translated the Japanese data to English. The data were then analyzed based on grounded theory, i.e., letting the data speak to us rather than making any assumption about the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2001).

Although we conducted our interviews without having any assumptions about the positive or negative influences of MT usage on the interviewees' lives, all of them reported its positive influence. This was significantly different from the Western perspective of paradoxical or neutral (counterbalancing positive and negative) reports of the MT effects (e.g., Day et al., 2010; Duxbury & Smart, 2011). While some interviewees acknowledged that MT usage sometimes disrupted family or private time, all reported that it enhanced the quality of both work and non-work life. For example, one interviewee said, "My work satisfaction with MT is 90% for my business; 10% just depends on my ability to manage my clients and colleagues." Another reported, "My quality of life got better, as it is more convenient and maximizes my time." The other interviewee said, "Quality of life is improving. Mainly communication quality is getting better." Another said, "Mobile technology definitely has a positive influence on my family because I can get messages from my

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