



Full length article

Effects of breaks on regaining vitality at work: An empirical comparison of ‘conventional’ and ‘smart phone’ breaks

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ABSTRACT

Recently, the popularity of smart phones has brought about changes in how people work and take breaks. This paper focuses on whether taking a break with a smart phones (e.g., browsing the internet or using social network services) has a different association with regaining vitality after ‘conventional breaks’ (e.g., walking or chatting face to face with friends). We surveyed a total of 450 workers in Korea with a diary questionnaire to see if there were differences in the effects of breaks via two theoretical paths of association: positively in terms of vigor and negatively in terms of emotional exhaustion. Empirical results show that psychological detachments by breaks, independent of break modes, did increase vigor and reduce emotional exhaustion, consistent with the existing literature. However, we also found that the effects, particularly in reducing emotional exhaustion, were significantly lower for the smart phone break group versus the conventional group. We discuss some theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

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1. Introduction

Smart phones, an advanced convergent device, enable people to do various activities (e.g., getting information, performing a task, creating a social network) for which there were constraining factors, such as time and space, in the past. This strength has resulted in smart phones spreading rapidly and they are now acknowledged as mainstream media devices. According to a recent forecast (Emarketer, 2014), the world wide smart phone penetration rate is 63.5% in 2014, and is expected to grow further to about 70% in 2018. Smart phones have been changing the way people take breaks, especially for youths who perceive the smart phone to be a necessity (Exacttarget, 2014; Kang & Jung, 2014). With the prediction that the gap in smart phone penetration among generations will become negligible by 2020 (Deloitte, 2014) consider that this perception may grow in many more people, rapidly. The explosion of the smart phone's popularity has influenced the way we take breaks and these changes can be amply witnessed in organizations. For example, employees are able to communicate or share information with colleagues, friends, or family members using Facebook

or mobile instant messenger apps with their smart phones during break time. Also, they can use the mobile internet to surf the web or search for news content. Some will subscribe to a podcast, as they want and enjoy that. However, there are contradictory arguments regarding the effects attributed to the use of smart phones to relax and improve performance at work. For example, taking micro-breaks using smart phones throughout the working day help employees' happiness by the end of the work day (Kim & Niu, 2014). On the other hand, smart phone features such as multitasking functions may result in dispersed sensitivity and reduced concentration (e.g., Ophir, Nass, & Wagner, 2009; Ralph, Thomson, Cheyne, & Smilek, 2013). Previous research reported that smart phones can induce negative effects on physical well-being (Bababekova, Rosenfield, Hue, & Huang, 2011; Park, Kang, & Jeon, 2013). Lepp, Barkley, and Karpinski (2014) found that smart phone use can be related to reduced academic performance and enhanced anxiety, which can negatively impact subjective well-being. Additionally, Kim (2014) found that high levels of psychological disengagement from studying by smart phone-using breaks (e.g., using social network services or playing games) were beneficial for recovery but the effectiveness was weaker than conventional breaks (e.g., napping or walking). However, the existing literature lacks empirical research about whether employees who use smart phone during break times have similar recovery experiences compared

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with those who take 'conventional' breaks. Thus, in the current research, we attempted a comparative study between the effects of break activities using a smart phone and conventional breaks in terms of vigor and emotional exhaustion in returning to work after the break.

The contributions of this study can be viewed in two ways. First, we attempt to verify the use of a smart phone as an effective tool for a break. The purpose of a break during daily work is to support the individual with enough energy to concentrate on the task again (Berman & West, 2007). Recently, the tendency to use smart phones to relax is growing in popularity, but little research exists to provide empirical evidence on the positive influence of using a smart phone during a break on reenergizing. Thus, we aim to provide empirical data to assess whether the effects of using a smart phone during recess are in fact similar to a conventional break.

Second, this research focuses on relaxation at work. Many scholars have found that psychological detachment in relaxation is effective for recovery (Binnewies, Sonnentag, & Mojza, 2010; Bloom et al., 2009; Sonnentag, 2003, 2012). These studies are limited to after work (Sonnentag, 2003; Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005), weekends (Binnewies et al., 2010), and vacations (Bloom et al., 2009), so there is a lack of research investigating the relationship between relaxation during work hours and recovery (Fritz, Lam, & Spreitzer, 2011; Kim, 2014; Trougakos, Beal, Green, & Weiss, 2008). Because most employees spend one-third of their day at their work place, and there are many cases of extra work beyond this, such as working overtime or during weekend, this suggests that workers may already deplete their energy, before vacations and after work. According to a survey among 998 Korean workers in one organization, more 30% of respondents experiences a burnout syndrome when they leave work (Yoo, 2014; July). Thus, this research contributes to filling the void in the literature by investigating the effects of psychological detachment in relaxation on work efficiency during work hours.

2. Research model

In this paper, conventional break is defined as the break without engaging in electronic devices. Examples include taking a walk, talking to a co-worker or friends, and napping. On the other hand, smart phone break is defined as the break using smart phone applications. Examples include checking e-mails, texting on social network services such as twitter, playing games, and watching video clips. The main difference between the two break types is that smart phone breaks, unlikely conventional breaks, operate in the virtual environment. We expect the virtual characteristic will affect the quality of break activities even for the same objective such as chatting with friends by limiting many verbal and non-verbal ways of communication. Therefore we conduct a comparative analysis of the two break types regarding the effect on the level of recovery after the breaks. We use five factors in the model: psychological detachment, positive affect, negative affect, vigor, and emotional exhaustion. We measure the levels of psychological detachment, positive affect, and negative affect during breaks and vigor and emotional exhaustion after the breaks. We set the operational definition of psychological detachment as an individual's perception of being away from work (Etzion, Eden, & Lapidot, 1998; Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005). Positive affect is defined as positive affective state and negative affect is defined as negative affective state due to engaging in break activities during the break (Ekkekakis, 2012). Vigor is defined as a high level of energy and mental resilience (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002) and emotional exhaustion refers to the degree to which one feels drained of emotional energy and fatigued (Maslach, Schaufeli, &

Leiter, 2001) when the employee re-engages in work after the break. We set a hypothetical model, such that psychological detachment was positively associated with recovery through affect, resulting in enhancement of vigor and reduced emotional exhaustion to work (Fig. 1).

3. Why is psychological detachment during a break important for recovery of human energy?

Taking a break plays an important role in providing energy for employees to perform their work efficiently. Resource depletion theory (e.g. Conservation of Resources Theory: CRT and Ego Depletion Theory: EDT) suggests that people will deplete their own energy if they restrain their feelings and make efforts to fulfill their goals (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2001). In this vein, it is important for workers to have respite periods during working time to revitalize their energy because their vigor for work can decline and exhaustion at work can increase due to depletion of psychological and physiological energy when they work too hard without any break. Taking a break is defined as a self-generated interlude in the stream of one's current work activities to re-concentrate on work by engaging in one's preferred activities (Berman & West, 2007). This definition has important meaning in that it links a break as closely related to the extent the preferred activities that are distant from work activities. Generally, individuals may experience relaxation and healing by physical detachment from their work place and taking a rest. However, if they continue to think and ruminate about their work such as unsolved problems during breaks, they would not fully recover regardless of the location and activities for relaxation. In this sense, psychological disengagement from work is important for breaks. Psychological detachment refers to an "individual's sense of being away from the work situation" (Etzion et al., 1998). Applying this definition, psychological detachment from working means not only stopping activities related with working but also disengagement from unsolved problems and lingering issues (Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005). Given that most work demands self-regulation, avoiding the temptation to slack off and concentrating on tasks that so exhaust human available energy, long work schedules can lead to negative experiences, like stress and fatigue (Baumeister et al., 1998; Hobfoll, 1989). Psychological detachment has a positive influence to bar these negative experience, such as stress inducement and energy exhaustion, by disengaging from work mentally. In contrast, a person who continually thinks about unfinished tasks or unsolved problems may not remove the negative experiences and does not gain full benefit from breaks, resulting in the loss of the opportunity to recover energy (Meijman & Mulder, 1998). The importance of psychological detachment has been supported by many empirical literature. Sonnentag & Fritz (2015) reviewed the findings 43 research on psychological detachment (1998–2014) and surmised that the psychological detachment from work has a positive effect on recovery, affect, and fatigue reduction. Moreover, Sonnentag, Kuttler, and Fritz (2010) showed that the physical distance between home and working place is negatively related with the level of psychological detachment using protestant pastor sample in Switzerland. Also, Park, Fritz, and Jex (2011) showed that technology use (e.g. checking work related information using smart phones) at home hinder forming psychological detachment from work.

4. Hypotheses

4.1. From psychological detachment to affect

Affect is defined as a fundamental feeling state that reflects

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