

How important is recovery? Work breaks and their influence on detachment and well-being

Introduction

Breaks serve to recover from work and thus replenish resources (Kühnel, Zacher, de Bloom, & Bledow, 2017; Zacher et al., 2014). Resources can be built when the individual is no longer exposed to a stressor and hence recovery can arise. Recovery is a central predictor for healthy living, which is why a lack of recovery can lead to psychological and physical damage (Duranová & Ohly, 2016). The effort recovery model (Meijman & Mulder, 1998) also stresses the importance of taking a break in time to restore reduced self-regulatory resources and even generate resource surpluses. The model assumes that individuals should rest for a moment so that their functional systems (e.g. emotional, cognitive) can recover from accumulated stress responses through continuous work, such as fatigue. If, however, the possibilities for relief are delayed, the stress reactions persist to the extent that it becomes more difficult to return to the basic function. In this respect, work breaks can provide the necessary separation from work when it is needed. Accordingly, it has been found that work breaks are associated with increased well-being and reduced stress (Hunter & Wu, 2016; Kim, Park & Niu., 2016; Kühnel et al., 2017; Trougakos, Beal, Green & Weiss, 2008; Zacher et al., 2014). There is also a need for further exploration and identification of potential mediators in this relationship. Due to these reasons the concern of the study at hand is to uncover the relationship between work breaks and psychological detachment in the evening as well as general well-being.

Sample, Method & Instruments

Convenience Sample of N = 104

Age: 19 - 61 years (\bar{M} : 61,5%, $M=32.4$, $SD=10.3$; \bar{F} : 37,5%, $M=32.5$, $SD=9.4$)

Inclusion criteria: working > 20h per week, owning a smartphone

Data collection: October 2019 – December 2019

Online-Questionnaire: Mediation & Moderation in PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013)

Dimension	Source	Items	α	Example ¹
Break Characteristics	Adapted from Sonnentag, S. (2007)	12		"Ich habe Dinge unternommen, bei denen ich mich entspanne." „Ich habe selbst bestimmt, wie ich meine Zeit verbringe.“
a) Relaxation			0,92	
b) Work			0,83	
c) Social			0,62	
d) Control			0,89	
Detachment	Sonnentag, S. & Fritz, C. (2007)	8	0,93	"Heute, während meiner Freizeit, dachte ich überhaupt nicht an meine Arbeit."
Positive & Negative Affect	Abele-Brehm & Brehm (1986)	8	0,92 0,77	"Wie fühlen Sie sich im Moment?" Beispiele: entspannt, nervös, unbeschwert
Emotional Exhaustion		3		"Ich fühlte mich durch meine Arbeit ausgebrannt"
Time Pressure	Semmer, N.K., Zapf, D., & Dunckel, H. (1998)	3		"Heute arbeitete ich schneller als normalerweise, um meine Arbeit zu schaffen."

1 in German Language as used in Questionnaire

Hypotheses²

H1: (a) Relaxing activities (b) social activities and (c) control over break activities during lunch break will be positively related to a positive affect after work.

H1: (d) Work-related activities during lunch break will be negatively related to a positive affect after work.

H2: (a) Relaxing activities (b) social activities and (c) control over break activities during lunch break will be negatively related to a negative affect after work.

H2: (d) Work-related activities during lunch break will be positively related to a negative affect after work.

H3: (a) Relaxing activities (b) social activities (c) control over break activities during lunch break will be negatively related to an emotional exhaustion after work.

H3: (d) Work-related activities during lunch break will be positively related to an emotional exhaustion after work.

H4: (a) Relaxing activities (b) social activities and (c) control over break activities during lunch breaks will be positively related to detachment in the evening.

H4: (d) Work-related activities during lunch breaks will be negatively related to detachment in the evening.

H5: Time pressure will moderate the relationship between (a) relaxing activities (b) social activities (c) control over break activities (d) work-related activities during lunch breaks and detachment in the evening.

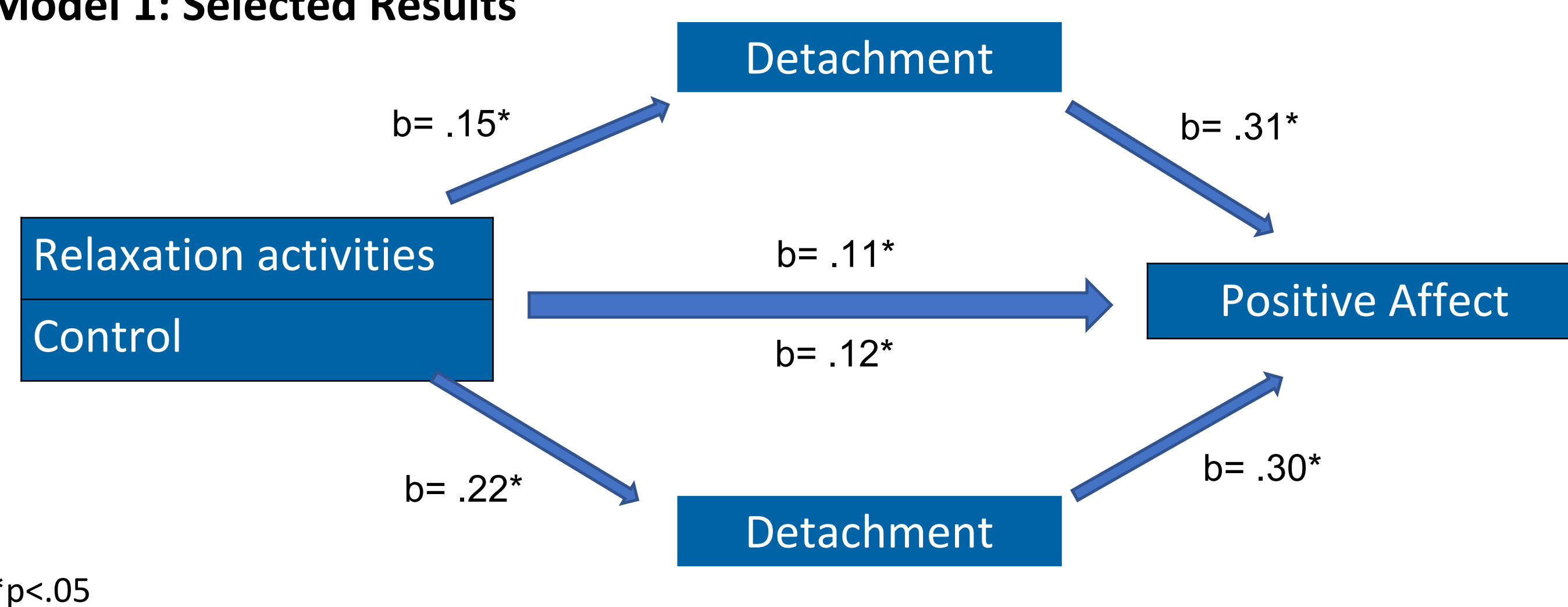
H6: High levels of psychological detachment after work are negatively related to (a) negative affect (b) emotional exhaustion.

H6: High levels of psychological detachment after work are positively related to (c) positive affect.

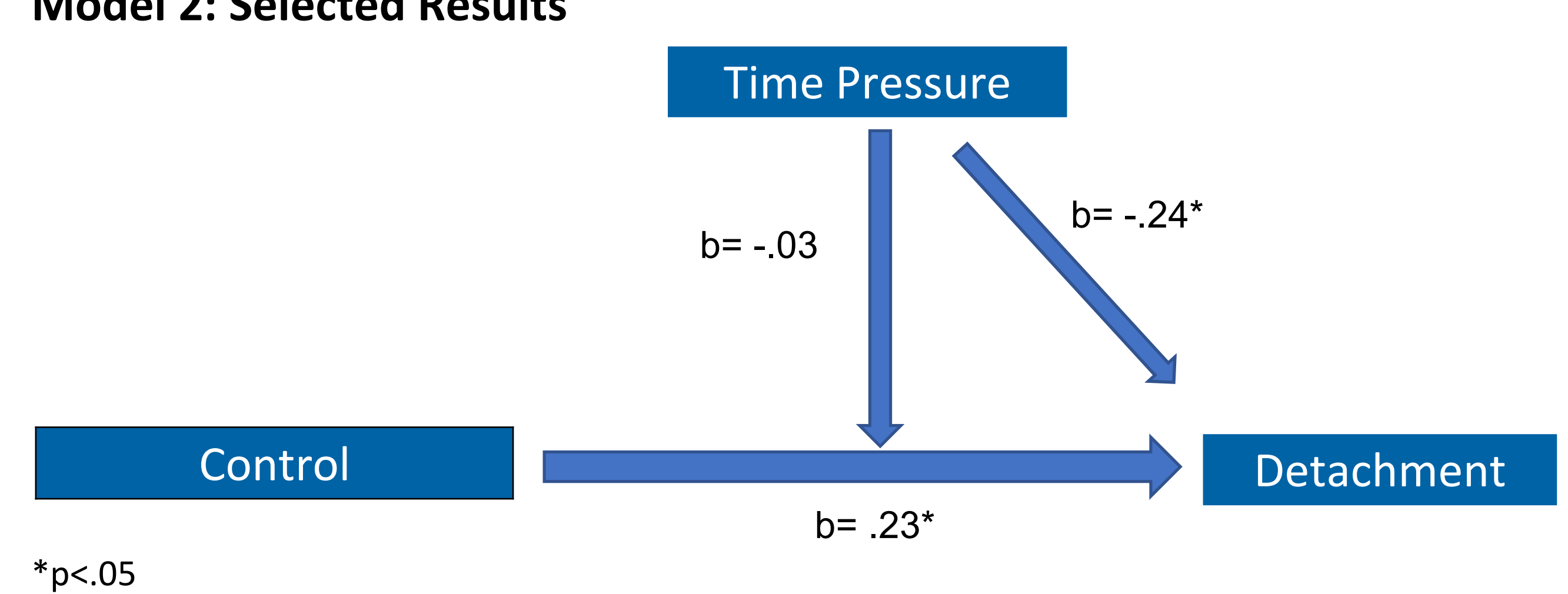
H7: Psychological detachment mediates the relationship between (a) relaxation activities (b) social activities (c) control over break activities and (d) work-related activities during the lunch break and positive affect.

²red = Hypotheses rejected; green = hypothesis accepted

Model 1: Selected Results



Model 2: Selected Results



Discussion

This study showed that control over break activities during lunch break is positively related to positive affect and detachment and negatively related to emotional exhaustion after work. Supporting the findings of Frederickson (2001), a relationship was found between relaxing activities and positive affect. However, we could not find any relationship with negative affect. According to the study social activities are neither positively related to positive affect and detachment nor negatively related to emotional exhaustion after work. For work-related activities this study could not show any relationship with any of the outcome variables. This could be due to the fact that working during the lunch break reduces the number of unfinished tasks and therefore also reduces rumination in the evening (Syrek & Antoni, 2014). Since rumination is positively related to job exhaustion (Kinnunen et al., 2019) this could be a possible explanation.

Results have also shown that high levels of psychological detachment after work are negatively related to negative affect and emotional exhaustion and positively related to positive affect after work.

These results are consistent with the stressor detachment model (Sonnentag et al., 2014) and current studies (Demerouti et al., 2012; Feuerhahn et al., 2014; Sonnentag et al., 2005).

Practical and Theoretical Implications

- Organizations should not specify how their employees are to spend their lunch breaks. Certain ground rules can be agreed upon, however, in general employees should be granted full control over their break-time activities.
- Organizations should encourage their employees to detach from work in their free time to prevent impairments in the long-run.
- Further research should explore the role of micro-breaks and role switching during work-day.

Limitations of this study

- Only convenience sample
- Many possibly confounding variables
- Low motivation of the participants due to the design of the study