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Fostering workplace recovery in the hospitality industry: The role of supportive break times at work

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Abstract

The study investigates the mechanism of hospitality employees' recovery during break times at work. It adopted semi-structured in-depth interviews targeting twenty-nine hotel employees in Japan. The results provide nine recovery activities falling into four categories: cognitive, relaxation, nutrition intake, and social activities. Eight recovery experiences are also found, including two new types not identified in the previous studies: reconnection and refreshment. Built on the effort-recovery model and conservation of resource theory, it reveals a two-phase structure of recovery experiences, with three groups of primary experiences leading to specific secondary experiences, which suggests that employees undertake multiple recovery experiences until they reach a state of recovery. It also supports the significance of contextual constraints in employees' recovery process at work. The study enhances our understanding of recovery theories within the context of work breaks in the hospitality industry. It assists managers in creating more effective organisational interventions to support employee recovery during breaks.

Keywords: employee recovery, employee well-being, supportive break time, supportive work environment, work stress

Paper Type Research Paper

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1. Introduction

Employee well-being refers to employees' psychological, physical, and social status, indicating how positively they feel about their work (Wright & Huang, 2012). The recent pandemic has emphasised the critical importance of managing employee stress and well-being, particularly within the hospitality industry, which has seen a surge of interest in this area in recent research (Yang & Xu, 2023; Yang & Huang, 2020; Tu & Wang, 2021; Rabiul et al., 2022). The hospitality sector, known for its high demands on employees, ranging from direct customer interactions to emotional labour and physical exertion, presents unique challenges to the well-being of employees. Consequently, there is a growing recognition of the need for organisational interventions designed to enhance employee physical health, provide social and emotional support, and improve overall workplace well-being (Tu et al., 2021; Medina-Garriodo, Biedma-Ferrer, and Bogren, 2023; Huang, Sharma & Yu, 2023). These interventions are beneficial and essential for fostering psychophysiological recovery, thereby supporting the development of sustainable work environments within the hospitality industry (Yang & Xu, 2023).

Recovery, a fundamental component of employee well-being, is the process that mitigates the adverse effects of job-induced strain, restoring an individual's functional systems to their pre-stressor state (Meijman & Mulder, 1998). For employees in the hospitality sector who are regularly exposed to a combination of various physical and emotional stressors, effective recovery is crucial. For recovery to occur, employees first engage in certain types of activities during non-working periods (*recovery activities*), which lead them to certain psychological states, inducing the state of recovery (*recovery experiences*) (Sonnentag et al., 2017). These non-working time periods provide a recovery opportunity and can be categorised into off-from-work and breaks at work.

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In the context of off-from-work, previous studies examined the recovery mechanism and identified its positive effects on employee well-being and workplace behaviours, including increased vigour (Yang et al., 2020), life satisfaction (Gordon & Shi, 2021), positive emotion (de Bloom et al., 2015; Sonnentag et al., 2008), and subjective health (de Bloom et al., 2015). In contrast, the studies investigating recovery during ‘breaks at work’ have been limited (Cheng & Cho, 2021). Personal preferences heavily influence the recovery activities that employees participate in, but these activities are also determined by the surroundings and situations exposed. During off-from-work periods, employees have greater flexibility in choosing the surroundings and conditions in which they conduct activities. Contrarily, during breaks at work, their choice is constrained by various contextual factors such as time (e.g., relatively shorter break time), physical condition (e.g., availability and condition of the breakroom), and people to interact with (e.g., work colleagues). While these contextual factors often impose a certain degree of restriction on recovery activities and experiences, research on the degree of those constraints is limited.

Furthermore, recovery research has predominantly focused on office workers, neglecting the distinct needs of frontline service workers in the hospitality industry, who face various physical and emotional challenges unique to their jobs. Given the diverse nature of stressors in these roles, there is a need for research into tailored recovery strategies that address the specific needs of hospitality workers during work breaks (Cheng & Cho, 2021). Moreover, while existing studies frequently investigate separate recovery experiences in isolation (Chawla et al., 2020), research examining the synergistic effects of multiple recovery experiences remains sparse (Kinnune et al., 2011; Shimazu et al., 2012). There needs to be a more comprehensive theoretical and empirical understanding of recovery mechanisms,

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particularly among hospitality workers during work breaks, highlighting a critical gap in the recovery literature (Chawla et al., 2020).

The current study contributes to expanding the understanding of employee recovery and relevant theories by unfolding how employees engage in recovery within the specific context of work breaks (i.e., break time) and how their recovery activities and recovery experiences are affected by the boundary of time, place, and people as well as the nature of hospitality job stressors. Investigating the potential relationships between various types of recovery experiences also enhances the understanding of employee recovery mechanisms, providing insights into how this construct can be further explored to assess employees' psychophysiological recovery. Given the critical nature of these issues, this study delves into the mechanism by which hospitality employees attain psychophysiological recovery during their break at work. The objectives of this study involve (1) *identifying the types of recovery activities and recovery experiences hotel customer-contact employees engage in during break time at work* and (2) *investigating how the identified recovery activities and recovery experiences, as well as different types of recovery experiences, relate to each other and form the structure to explain the employees' psychophysiological recovery*.

2. Literature review

2.1 Theoretical foundation

Employee recovery has traditionally been discussed in occupational health psychology and organisational behaviour. Nevertheless, its importance is evident in the hospitality industry, in which customer-contact employees' performance directly affects customer evaluation of service quality and satisfaction, and employees' effective psychophysiological recovery is critical to organisational performance (Cheng & Cho, 2021).

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Two theoretical underpinnings elucidate how individuals recover from stress and maintain their well-being. The *effort-recovery model (ERM)* posits that addressing job demands leads to psychophysiological strains, which, if not alleviated, can accumulate and lead to chronic health problems (Meijman & Mulder, 1998). When job demands are absent, such as during work breaks, it alleviates the psychophysiological tensions from work, and an individual's psychophysiological state returns to its pre-stressor level (Meijman & Mulder, 1998). The model highlights the importance of mentally disengaging from work by engaging in activities distinct from work tasks (Sonnentag et al., 2017). Effective recovery through these means promotes better well-being, such as increased vigour, positive affect, and enhanced performance (Yang et al., 2020; Gordon & Shi, 2021; Sonnentag et al., 2017).

Conversely, the *conservation of resources (COR) theory* suggests that individuals have finite personal psychophysiological resources, and stress levels increase when these resources are threatened, depleted, or not replenished (Hobfoll, 1989). For optimal functioning, employees must acquire, retain, and protect these resources (Sonnentag et al., 2017). Successful recovery depends on the ability to restore personal (e.g., self-esteem) and social (e.g., a sense of social support) resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Therefore, during work breaks, employees seek to engage in various activities to replenish these resources threatened or depleted by job demands (Hobfoll, 1989). This process fosters recovery and enhances well-being, resulting in high vigour at work, improved employee motivation, and organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) (Hur et al., 2020; Yang & Jo, 2022; de Bloom, Kinnunen, & Korpela, 2015). These two theories are, however, complementary, suggesting the dual importance of refraining from work demands and avoiding activities requiring the same functional systems or internal resources for job demands, as well as the necessity of gaining new internal resources to restore threatened or lost resources (Sonnentag et al., 2017).

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2.2 Recovery activities

For recovery to occur, employees engage in various activities during non-working periods. This study refers to *recovery activities* as those activities that employees intentionally or subconsciously undertake to reduce the adverse effects of strain caused by job demands (Sonnentag et al., 2017). The ERM emphasises that these activities should be distinct from work tasks, while the COR theory suggests seeking social support or engaging in personal hobbies. Kim et al.'s (2015; 2017) research provides a comprehensive typology for this study, categorising recovery activities into cognitive, relaxation, nutrition intake, and social activities.

Despite their context-specific constraints, the literature does not differentiate these activities between work breaks and off-work periods (Cheng & Cho, 2021). Cognitive activities involve mental effort but allow detachment from work, like solving puzzles or reading, which are limited during breaks compared to watching long movies during off-work (Kim et al., 2017). Relaxation activities during breaks may include stretching or short naps, whereas employees might engage in more vigorous sports after work. Nutrition intake activities during breaks typically involve quick snacks or drinks, contrasting with more leisurely dining after work (Kim et al., 2017). Social activities during breaks often involve colleagues, while off-work, they involve friends or family, highlighting different social dynamics.

In summary, recovery activities during work breaks differ significantly from those during off-time due to specific constraints of time, place, and social interactions. However, research on work break recovery activities is limited, especially among hospitality employees. Among the limited studies, Cheng and Cho (2021) investigated the stress-relieving effects of social media use during micro-breaks. Their findings underscore the significance of such activities but are confined to their narrow typology, overlooking a broader range of recovery

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activities. Additionally, the reliability of their survey-based methodology, which relies on participants' retrospective accounts over 30 days, is compromised by potential memory recall biases. To date, no comprehensive study has effectively mapped the recovery activities of hospitality customer-contact employees during work breaks.

2.3 Recovery experiences

Recovery experience is the psychological state following engagement in recovery activities (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). Understanding these experiences enhances the relevance and generalisability of recovery research, particularly during work breaks (Sonnentag et al., 2017; Cheng & Cho, 2021). Sonnentag and Fritz (2007) identify four types of recovery experiences during off-from-work periods: psychological detachment, relaxation, mastery, and control. Psychological detachment involves mentally disengaging from work, reducing strain and restoring resources, which correlates with increased vigour and life satisfaction (Yang et al., 2020; Gordon & Shi, 2021). Relaxation involves activities that calm the mind and body, which is crucial for reducing prolonged activation due to work demands (Sonnentag et al., 2017). Mastery experiences involve achieving a sense of accomplishment through challenging tasks and enhancing skills and self-efficacy (Hobfoll, 1989; Gabriel et al., 2019). Control is the perceived freedom to choose activities and manage time, linked to enhanced self-efficacy and well-being (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007).

Furthermore, recent studies introduce two additional recovery experiences: relatedness and enjoyment. Relatedness involves feeling connected and belonging to a community, often through social interactions (Bosch et al., 2018; Bosch & Sonnentag, 2018). Enjoyment is associated with high vigour and low fatigue, benefiting from positive workplace events and leading to energy replenishment (Demerouti et al., 2012; Celestine & Yeo, 2020). Activities

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like socialising or watching comedies foster positive emotions and reduce stress (Fredrickson, 2001).

While existing studies have enhanced our understanding of employee recovery mechanisms, they exhibit two primary limitations. First, most studies employ a deductive approach to assess the impact of established recovery experience typologies (e.g., Sonnentag et al., 2017) on well-being-related variables (Chawla et al., 2020), neglecting potential undiscovered recovery experiences and their associated activities. Second, the literature needs more investigation into the relationships among different recovery experiences. Research indicates that diverse recovery experiences can synergistically improve outcomes (Chawla et al., 2020); for example, combining mastery and control experiences enhances work engagement more than individual experiences (Kinnunen et al., 2011). Moreover, multiple recovery experiences correlate with higher job productivity (Shimazu et al., 2012). Despite these findings, the interactions, including the sequence of different recovery experiences, remain unexplored.

Furthermore, previous studies often employed the ERM and the COR theory as theoretical foundations. However, the interplay between these two theories in explaining the mechanism of employee recovery has yet to be sufficiently explored. Therefore, the recovery literature needs a comprehensive theoretical and empirical framework, especially concerning hospitality employees during work breaks.

In summary, previous research lacks insights into the specific recovery activities and recovery experiences hospitality customer-contact employees engage in during work breaks and how these may interrelate. Recovery activities, constrained by time, location, and social factors, influence recovery experiences, highlighting the need to investigate employees' activities during breaks and the resultant recovery experiences. This study contends that prior

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research has overlooked potential dimensions of recovery experiences, particularly those arising within the unique context of work breaks. This oversight is significant given the demanding nature of hospitality roles and the direct impact of psychophysiological recovery during breaks on post-break performance and overall well-being. Furthermore, to fully understand the complex dynamics of employee recovery, it is crucial to explore how individual or combined recovery experiences influence outcomes and how different recovery experiences interconnect. Therefore, built on the two key theoretical underpinnings (the ERM and the COR theory), this study aims to elucidate the mechanisms of psychophysiological recovery during work breaks by addressing two research questions: *what types of recovery activities and experiences do hotel employees engage in during their breaks, and how do these activities and experiences relate to each other to explain their recovery process?*

3. Methods

The research is underpinned by constructivism, focusing on how hospitality customer-contact employees construct their experiences during break time and how this conceptualisation aids in understanding employee recovery mechanisms at work. Semi-structured interviews targeted employees who spent over 30 minutes in staff breakrooms during meal breaks, as this duration allows for various recovery activities and experiences (Cheng & Cho, 2021).

The data was collected from hotel employees in Beppu, one of southern Japan's major regional tourist destinations. The study targeted university students working part-time at hotels. The part-time employees represent the hotel workforce in Japan, where, on average, 57% of hotel employees are part-time workers (Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare, 2020). Furthermore, this sample is significant for understanding the critical labour issues that Japanese

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society encounters due to its aging population and the high turnover rate among young employees. In Japan, 51.5% of university graduates leave their workplace within three years of graduation (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2021) due to a lack of well-being practices (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2020). Thus, it is an urgent issue for employers to embrace young workers through organisational well-being practices. Given that many young workers enter the hospitality industry as part-timers during their studies, it is essential to understand how young part-time workers perceive and experience their work environment.

Leveraging his professional network, the first author initially contacted managers from three hotels, who introduced ten employees. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were then used to recruit additional participants, resulting in employees from five full-service independent hotels with 300 to 500 rooms catering to leisure and business travellers.

A total of 29 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. The interview questions were developed based on existing literature (e.g., Kim et al., 2017; Bosch et al., 2018; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007), aiming to identify recovery activities and experiences during work breaks. Questions included: "How do you often spend your break time at work?"; "Why do you do that?"; and "How do you feel after doing those activities?". Face-to-face interviews, approximately an hour each, were conducted in a university conference room. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated by a bilingual translator to ensure consistency and accuracy.

The current study employed thematic analysis with manifest and latent coding to identify and categorise keywords and underlying themes related to research inquiries. Initially, the question, "How do you often spend your break time at work?" was used to identify various recovery activities. All mentioned activities were recorded and tabulated based on the number

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of employees endorsing them, assuming higher frequency indicates greater significance. The study then utilised Kim et al.'s (2015; 2017) typology, recognised as comprehensive and relevant to the research objectives, for categorising identified activities.

To identify recovery experiences, a three-phase coding process following grounded theory procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used. Open coding identified common break activities and their resulting feelings. Axial coding categorised similar activities and experiences into groups. Selective coding, informed by previous studies (Kim et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2017; Bosch et al., 2018; Demerouti et al., 2012; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007), identified key themes of recovery activities and experiences. New categories were developed when activities and experiences needed to fit existing conceptualisations. This process also explored potential relationships among different recovery experiences, examining similarities, distinctions, and possible sequential order.

4. Results and discussion

All 29 interviewees were aged 18 to 25, with approximately half female (n=16). They worked in various departments: food and beverage (n=17), front office (n=5), events (n=1), and spa (n=6). Typically, their work schedule consisted of 8-hour days, three to four days per week, with an average tenure of two years. The current study identified 19 actual recovery activities and eight recovery experiences. For simplicity and clarification in further discussion, this study used the terms *actual recovery activities* to reflect what the interviewees undertook during their break time and *conceptual recovery activities* or *categories* to reflect and conceptualise a higher order of actual recovery activities (e.g., relaxation activities, nutrition-intake activities and so forth).

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4.1 Recovery activities

Of the 19 actual recovery activities identified, nine are newly identified, while ten resonate with Kim et al.'s typology (see Table 1). Of the nine new emerging activities, four were assigned to relaxation, one to nutrition intake, one to socialising, and three to the cognitive recovery activity category.

Table 1. Types of recovery activities hospitality employees undertake during break times at work

Conceptual Activities	Actual Activities
Cognitive	Watching video clips (11), Studying something [▲] (10), Reading books (8), Checking websites (7), Playing games [▲] (5), Watching TV [▲] (4)
Relaxation	Taking a nap [▲] (23), Having personal space and time [▲] (15), Sitting and laying down [▲] (13), Looking outside the window/daydreaming (6), Listening to the music [▲] (6)
Nutrition-intake	Eating and drinking (29), Smoking [▲] (3)
Social	Chatting with close colleagues (29), Chatting with senior staffs/managers (20), Checking social media (16), Planning future events with friends (9), Chatting with family/friends (5), Using mother tongue [▲] (2)

Notes. The number in the bracket is the number of the interviewees who undertook the activity. ▲ indicates the activities not specified in Kim et al.'s (2017) study.

The identified recovery activities align with the theoretical foundations of the ERM and the COR theory. The ERM suggests that being psychologically away from job demands helps reduce tension and facilitates the return of an individual's psychophysiological state to its pre-stressor level (Meijman & Mulder, 1998). In line with the ERM, cognitive activities (e.g., watching video clips or playing games) serve to mentally disengage from work, while relaxation activities (e.g., taking a nap or sitting and lying down) help release tension and alleviate fatigue. In contrast, the COR theory posits that employees seek to replenish threatened

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or depleted resources during work breaks to maintain optimal functioning (Hobfoll, 1989). Following the COR theory, nutrition-intake (e.g., eating and drinking) and social activities (e.g., chatting with close colleagues) exemplify efforts to restore physical energy and replenish social and emotional resources depleted during work.

The current study also identified the nature of hospitality jobs and the stressors that affect the selection of recovery activities. For example, unlike office workers, who prefer recovery activities such as stretching and taking a short walk (Kim et al., 2017), hotel customer-contact employees prefer taking a nap or sitting and lying down during their break time. Many interviewees reported that their physical fatigue derived from the physically demanding nature of their jobs. This nature of hospitality jobs led them to undertake more passive and static activities that promote physical relaxation (Kim et al., 2017).

“I have to walk all the time during my shift... it is long hours of standing and walking. My body gets exhausted, and I need to rest my feet as they become painful.”
(EMPLOYEE#1)

Another characteristic of hotel work is continuous customer interaction, which particularly affects customer-contact employees. These employees, whose work is consistently under customer scrutiny, often engage in emotional labour that can induce emotional tension and exhaustion, especially for introverts (Rathi et al., 2013), significantly draining their emotional resources (Chen et al., 2019). Therefore, securing personal space and time is crucial to alleviate these tensions and replenish their psychological resources (Hobfoll, 1989).

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“At work, I am always with someone... customers, managers, and colleagues. Being with someone all the time is so tiring. I can be released from that pressure by having my own space and time in the breakroom.” (EMPLOYEE#12)

It is not only the nature of the hospitality job that influences what recovery activities are sought out. When, where, and with whom the actual recovery activities are undertaken are also found to determine what recovery activities are undertaken. Short breaks, as opposed to longer post-work breaks, restrict options like walking in nature or taking a long hot bath. Additionally, the shared nature of breakrooms often limits the range of activities employees can choose, as they must consider the presence of colleagues.

“I am learning yoga now. However, I cannot do it if I am in the breakroom with someone else. Someone will definitely laugh at me. I must be mindful that other people are in the same room. If I do not have anyone to talk to, I am just to be quiet and nap or lie down.” (EMPLOYEE#2)

4.2 Recovery experiences

As discussed earlier, what one experiences, not a specific activity, is what actually contributes to recovery (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). Thus, this study examined psychological states (i.e., recovery experiences) that the interviewees intended to attain after engaging in recovery activities. The current study found eight recovery experiences, including six existing types and two new types: reconnection and refreshment. Then, the authors allocated actual recovery activities to associated recovery experiences (see Table 2). Furthermore, the study

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identified the two phases of recovery experiences: the first set of recovery experiences (i.e., six primary recovery experiences), followed by the second set of recovery experiences (i.e., two secondary recovery experiences). The six primary recovery experiences are discussed below, followed by the two secondary recovery experiences. Then, the paper presents a theoretical model that illustrates the mechanism of hospitality customer-contact employees' psychophysiological recovery during breaks at work.

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Table 2. Recovery experiences of hospitality employees and associated recovery activities during breaks at work.

Recovery experience	Conceptual recovery activities			
	Cognitive activities	Relaxation activities	Nutrition-intake activities	Social activities
<i>Primary recovery experiences</i>				
Psychological detachment (<i>n</i> =29)	14	10	2	17
Relatedness (<i>n</i> =25)	0	2	0	25
Enjoyment (<i>n</i> =24)	4	1	4	19
Reconnection [▲] (<i>n</i> =14)	1	4	0	5
Control (<i>n</i> =11)	3	2	0	8
Mastery experience (<i>n</i> =9)	5	0	0	7
<i>Secondary recovery experiences</i>				
Relaxation (<i>n</i> =29)	7	19	11	19
Refreshment [▲] (<i>n</i> =28)	6	20	9	14

Notes: The number indicates the actual recovery activities undertaken for recovery experience where an activity may evoke several different experiences. The number in the bracket indicates the number of the participants who had the recovery experience. ▲ indicates new recovery experience emerging from the analysis of this study.

4.2.1 Primary recovery experiences

Primary recovery experiences occur after employees engage in recovery activities but before they achieve secondary recovery experiences. This study identified six primary recovery experiences: psychological detachment, relatedness, enjoyment, reconnection, control, and mastery experience. These experiences can be categorised into three types: absence of job demands, belonging to a group, and self-sufficiency.

The first category, and the only one distinct from the others, is *psychological detachment* (29), which involves leaving job-related concerns behind and engaging in non-work-related thoughts (Sonnentag et al., 2017). This experience is grounded in the ERM, which

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posits that mentally shifting away from work during breaks helps restore psychophysiological states to pre-stressor levels, leading to increased vigour, positive affect, and enhanced performance (Meijman & Mulder, 1998; Yang et al., 2020; Gordon & Shi, 2021). The study found that all interviewees, regardless of the recovery activities they engaged in, experienced psychological detachment, highlighting its crucial role in hospitality employees' recovery. This finding aligns with broader recovery literature, where psychological detachment is the most frequently observed recovery experience (Sonnentag et al., 2017; Chawla et al., 2020).

“When we talk about vacations, we do not think about work, which helps me to switch my brain to holiday mode and look forward to payday.” (EMPLOYEE#8)

The second category involves a sense of belonging to a group, providing psychological security and social bonding. *Relatedness (25)* is characterised by feeling connected, accepted, and valued by coworkers (Bosch et al., 2018). Emotional labour can lead to emotional fatigue, depleting employees' emotional resources (Chen et al., 2019), and prompting them to seek emotional or social support from colleagues. According to the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), sharing emotions and receiving social support during breaks help restore social resources and achieve psychological security, facilitating recovery (Quinn et al., 2012). This restoration of social resources reduces exhaustion and enhances work engagement (Bosch et al., 2018).

“Customers are strangers, so interacting with them always involves stress. When I can freely talk with my close colleagues, it helps me to remove those mental burdens, feeling I have my people who understand me, [that I am] not alone...” (EMPLOYEE#14)

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Enjoyment (24) involves a positive emotional reaction to activities, producing serotonin and dopamine, which counteract negative affect and enhance recovery (Moneta et al., 2012; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). This study found enjoyable interactions during breaks, such as chatting with colleagues about fun topics, heightening positive emotions and replenishing mental resources, aligning with the COR theory's principle of resource restoration. These findings are consistent with broader management literature on 'play at work,' which shows that workplace fun enhances employee engagement, relationships, and well-being (Celestine & Yeo, 2020). However, this study did not find significant evidence of the benefits of management-initiated play, possibly due to the psychological distance between managers and employees in high power distance cultures like Japan, affecting its frequency during breaks.

“We smile in front of guests, but we laugh with our colleagues during the break. That kind of moment is helpful to recharge mental energy before going back to the guests.”
(EMPLOYEE#11)

The data revealed a new dimension called *reconnection (14)*, where employees feel reconnected to their personal domain, re-establishing a sense of belonging and personal identity separate from their work roles. This finding reflects the unique context of customer-contact employees during work breaks, differing from office workers or non-working periods. Hospitality employees, who must be fully present for customers, often detach from their private lives at work.

“When I work, everything I have in my life is left at the ‘staff only’ entrance door. We all have to leave our phones in our own lockers, disconnecting from the real world and

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concentrating on the customers. Besides, my working area does not have any windows. It is surrounded by walls. I feel I am stuck in there. My working time is like being in jail.” (EMPLOYEE#22)

Physical and psychological separation from private life often triggers a desire to reconnect. Boundary and border theories suggest individuals strive to balance work and non-work domains by establishing clear boundaries (Clark, 2000). When job demands encroach on break time, it disrupts this balance and impairs well-being by preventing recovery activities (Wepfer et al., 2018). According to the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), reconnecting with one's personal domain restores depleted resources, correcting the imbalance and facilitating recovery. Effective boundary management enhances job satisfaction, productivity and performance, and psychological well-being (Sonnetag & Fritz, 2015).

“Checking social media helps me to know what is going on in my real life. You are not completely out of the loop. During break time, checking up on those updates helps me reconnect with my group or community. I feel a sense of relief... something like maintaining a balance.” (EMPLOYEE#24)

Reconnection is conceptually distinct from psychological detachment. Psychological detachment involves leaving job concerns behind, essentially the achievement of mental disengagement from work (Sonnetag et al., 2017). In contrast, while reconnection may help detach from work, it primarily emphasises regaining a sense of belonging to one's private life and maintaining a balance between work and personal domains. Furthermore, reconnection does not always entail leaving job concerns behind, particularly when employees seek social

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and emotional support from individuals outside the work domain, such as friends or partners, by expressing work-related stress and obtaining advice. Compared to relatedness, which involves seeking social and emotional support through bonding with colleagues within the work domain, reconnection seeks such support through bonding outside the work domain (e.g., personal domain). Thus, relatedness requires someone on site (e.g., close colleagues) to provide social and emotional support. In contrast, reconnection does not necessarily require interaction with colleagues and can be achieved through activities alone or with individuals outside of work. Additionally, reconnection differs from control; reconnection emphasises a sense of belonging to one's personal domain, whereas control is more associated with having autonomy over one's actions, implying self-determination and agency (Ouyang et al., 2019).

The third category, a sense of self-independence, includes psychophysiological freedom and self-efficacy. *Control (11)* refers to perceived autonomy over activities during non-work periods (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). Hospitality employees often face strict control at work due to service protocols, emotional labour, and physical demands, leading to distress and reduced self-efficacy (Rosenfield, 1989). Engaging in freely chosen activities during breaks, like using a smartphone or napping, helps replenish psychological resources and achieve emotional balance, facilitating recovery (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). According to the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), regaining control reduces exhaustion (Chawla et al., 2020), promotes proactive behaviour at work (Ouyang et al., 2019), and enhances well-being (Yang & Jo, 2022).

“In this work, everything is structured... how to serve to the guests, what to do next... we just follow what is supposed to be done. But during the break time, I have the freedom to decide what to do. It helps me to release myself from the controlled environment at work.” (EMPLOYEE#19)

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Mastery experience (9) involves a sense of accomplishment through challenging tasks or acquiring new skills in non-work domains (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). Interviewees experienced mastery by achieving personal goals during breaks, like completing homework or reading. This accomplishment, in line with the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), enhances positive affect and replenishes emotional resources (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). However, unlike previous studies (Sonnentag et al., 2017), the limited range of recovery activities available due to time and facilities may explain fewer reports of this experience.

“When I finish my university assignment during the break, I feel a sense of achievement and satisfaction. I do not need to worry about my studies when I return home. In such a situation, I can return to work very happily.” (EMPLOYEE#25)

4.2.2 Secondary recovery experiences

Secondary recovery experiences occur after primary recovery experiences. The study identified two types: relaxation and refreshment. *Relaxation (29)* involves decreased physical and mental activation, easing tension and fostering serenity (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). This aligns with the ERM, which posits that recovery involves both mental detachment from work and alleviation of psychophysiological tension caused by job stress (Meijman & Mulder, 1998). Due to the high demands of hospitality work, employees engage in break activities that reduce bodily and mental activation, alleviating accumulated tension and stress, thus improving performance and increasing organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) (Hur et al., 2020).

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“It is long hours of constantly standing at work. When I lie down, my muscles can loosen up. It recovers me physically. Also, I feel relaxed when I close my eyes and play some good soft music. I feel like everything is slow and calm.” (EMPLOYEE#29)

Refreshment (28) is a new recovery experience described as the rejuvenation of energy and vigour depleted by job demands. Rooted in the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), it involves restoring psychophysiological resources. Activities like eating, drinking, napping, and looking out the window interrupt continuous body and mind activation and replenish lost resources. Increased energy and vigour lead to enhanced job performance (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011), reduced burnout (Leiter & Maslach, 2004), and improved organisational commitment (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002).

“When I take a break, I am often hungry, which causes me another stress. Thus, eating good food and drinking helps me fulfil my biological needs and refresh my body. Taking a nap also helps me to feel refreshed.” (EMPLOYEE#1)

Refreshment is defined as an additive recovery experience, replenishing psychophysiological vigour and energy, distinct from relaxation, which is subtractive, involving the removal of tension (Sonnetag & Fritz, 2007). Relaxation does not necessarily result in refreshment. Furthermore, refreshment differs from enjoyment, as refreshment is often a product of enjoyment (Demerouti et al., 2012). Positive emotions like enjoyment produce serotonin or dopamine, counteracting negative affect (Moneta et al., 2012). Refreshment is the state of replenished vigour and energy induced by these positive emotions. In contrast, mastery

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experience focuses on the sense of accomplishment from building new skills and competencies (Sonnetag & Fritz, 2007), and refreshment centres on restoring depleted resources.

4.3 Interconnectedness of recovery experiences

Previous research has often treated recovery experiences as discrete and unconnected dimensions, yet multiple recovery experiences can enhance recovery quality (Shimazu et al., 2012). These studies have yet to comprehensively examine the potential number of recovery experiences and their interrelationships, particularly during break time at work. Addressing this gap, the current study found that for hospitality customer-contact employees to achieve effective recovery, they must engage in various recovery activities during breaks, influenced by contextual factors (time, place, and people). These activities lead to six primary recovery experiences (psychological detachment, reconnection, relatedness, enjoyment, control, and mastery), categorised into three types (absence of job demands, belonging to groups, and self-sufficiency). These primary experiences lead to two secondary recovery experiences (relaxation and refreshment), facilitating optimal psychophysiological recovery. Specifically, recovery experiences related to ‘the absence of job demands’ lead to both secondary recovery experiences. While those related to a sense of belonging to groups primarily lead to relaxation, experiences associated with a sense of self-sufficiency lead to refreshment, except for enjoyment, which contributes to both relaxation and refreshment (see Figure 1).

“Watching a movie during the break time helps me escape from the work [i.e., psychological detachment]. After watching the movie and shifting my brain, my mind is quite refreshed, and it gives me back motivation and power to work [i.e., refreshment].” (EMPLOYEE#5)

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“When I look outside the window from the breakroom, it reminds me that there are many other things outside, and I reconnect to my own life [i.e., reconnection]. That feeling makes me relieved and relaxed [i.e., relaxation].” (EMPLOYEE#9)

“When I come to the breakroom, I can do whatever I like. Freely deciding what I do makes me feel I am controlling my time and my things [i.e., control]. Then, this feeling replenishes my mental and physical energy [i.e., refreshment].” (EMPLOYEE#20)

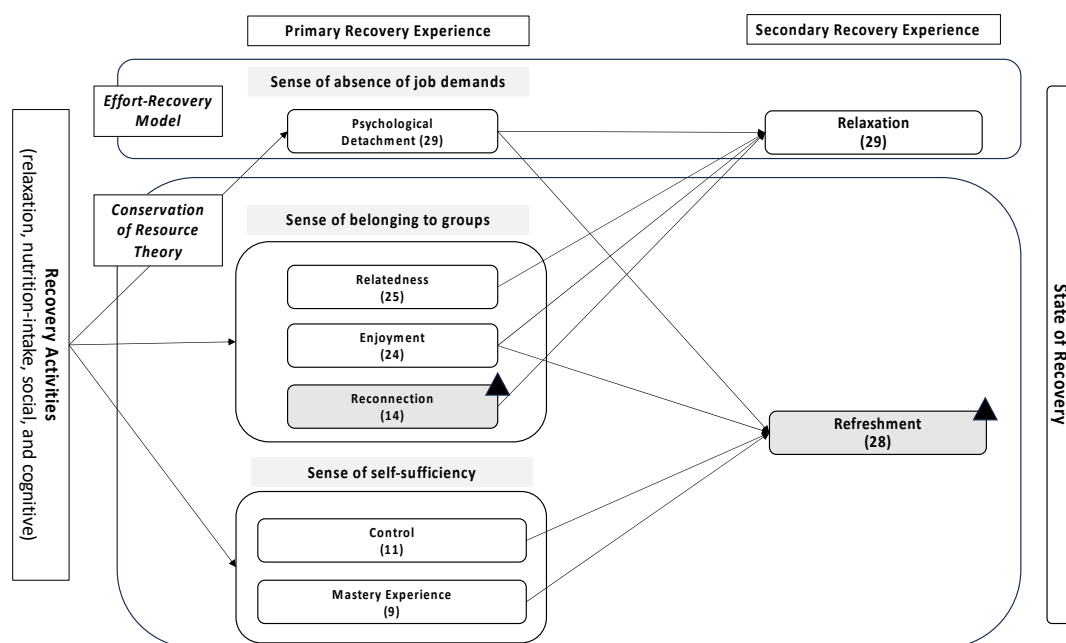


Figure 1. Hospitality customer-contact employees’ recovery during the breaktime at work

▲ indicates new recovery experience emerging from the analysis of this study

The proposed model is grounded in the theoretical foundations of the ERM and the COR theory, which each recovery experience can be categorised within these frameworks. According to the ERM, the absence of job demands (psychological detachment) and

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subsequent alleviation of job stress (relaxation) facilitate recovery. Conversely, the COR theory emphasises the restoration of social resources (reconnection, relatedness, and enjoyment) and personal resources (control and mastery), as well as psychophysiological energy (refreshment), as central to the recovery process.

The model's two-phase structure shows how the theories explain the transition from primary to secondary experiences, highlighting their dynamic interplay. The interaction between the ERM and the COR theory varies depending on the specific sequence of recovery experiences, with some sequences being better explained by one theory while both may equally well account for others. For instance, the ERM posits that the absence of job demands (psychological detachment) leads to stress alleviation (relaxation), while the COR theory suggests that restoring positive affect (enjoyment), control, and self-efficacy (mastery) replenishes psychophysiological energy (refreshment).

In other cases, recovery experiences derived from the COR theory, such as reconnection, relatedness, and enjoyment, lead to relaxation, as described by the ERM. This suggests that employees initially experience the replenishment of social support and psychological security through 'a sense of belonging to groups' (Quinn et al., 2012). Such obtained psychological security and comfort help release psychophysiological tension from job stress, resulting in relaxation as a secondary recovery experience. Conversely, psychological detachment, theoretically derived from the ERM, leads to refreshment based on the COR theory. The ERM posits that the absence of job demands not only alleviates the tension or stress (relaxation) but also sometimes facilitates cognitive replenishment, particularly when employees engage in cognitive recovery activities (e.g., watching favourite video clips and playing games), which restore cognitive energy (Sonnentag, Binnewies & Moiza, 2008). This cognitive energy replenishment promotes overall recovery, aligning with the premise of the COR theory.

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Moreover, enjoyment, as a recovery experience, leads to both relaxation and refreshment, albeit through different mechanisms. Enjoyment is achieved by restoring psychological safety and comfort from a sense of belonging to groups and gaining positive affect as an emotional resource. The former alleviates job stress (relaxation), while the latter replenishes energy (refreshment). As psychological detachment and enjoyment contribute to both secondary recovery experiences (relaxation and refreshment), they are integral to creating optimal recovery sequences that enhance employee recovery efficiently.

Previous studies often employed the ERM and the COR theory as theoretical foundations, quantitatively examining the relationships between specific recovery experiences and their associated outcomes. However, the interplay between these two theories in explaining the mechanism of employee recovery has been underexplored. Therefore, the model developed in the current study not only identifies the types and categories of recovery experiences hospitality employees engage in during work breaks but also elucidates the dynamic interplay between these two widely used theoretical frameworks. Specifically, it clarified how they both, separately and complementarily, help understand the mechanism of employee recovery.

5. Conclusions

This study explored how hospitality customer-contact employees recover during work breaks. It identified 19 recovery activities, nine of which were not included in Kim et al.'s (2017) typology. Additionally, it discovered eight recovery experiences, introducing two new types. A two-phase recovery experience framework was developed, showing how primary recovery experiences typically precede secondary ones.

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5.1 Theoretical implications

The current study advances the understanding of employee recovery in hospitality management by applying and validating the dynamic interplay of the ERM (Meijman & Mulder, 1998) and the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) to customer-contact employees' breake-time recovery. The proposed model categorises recovery experiences within these frameworks: the ERM emphasises psychological detachment and relaxation through the absence of job demands, while the COR theory focuses on restoring social (relatedness, enjoyment, and reconnection) and personal resources (control and mastery), as well as psychophysiological energy (refreshment). Furthermore, the proposed model's two-phase structure highlights the transition from primary to secondary recovery experiences either simply following one of the ERM and the COR theory principles or the interplay between these two. The links from psychological detachment and enjoyment to secondary recovery experiences add to the validation of the interplay between the ERM and the COR theory. Overall, the results reinforce the synergy between these theories in explaining employee recovery among hospitality workers during breaks.

Another novel contribution of this study is the identification of a sequential structure in employees' recovery experiences, a dimension overlooked mainly by previous research, which has focused primarily on the isolated effects of various recovery experiences (e.g., Bosch et al., 2018; Gordon & Shi, 2021) or their combined effects (Kinnunen et al., 2011; Shimazu et al., 2012) without considering potential interrelations (Chawla et al., 2020). This study uncovered a two-phase structure where certain primary recovery experiences precede and potentially trigger secondary recovery experiences. This insight challenges traditional views and elucidates a more complex recovery mechanism, enhancing understanding of the recovery process.

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The discovery of new recovery activities and experiences in this study underscores their context-dependence, supporting recent calls in the recovery literature to account for contextual influences like work break types, job tasks, and environments on recovery processes (Sonnentag et al., 2017). Bosch et al. (2018) emphasised the need to explore how job tasks, such as customer contact versus office work, affect recovery needs during breaks. This study fills this research gap through an inductive approach that highlights the role of contextual factors, including time, place, and social interactions, in shaping employee recovery activities and experiences during breaks. Additionally, developing a new typology for recovery mechanisms provides a valuable framework for examining recovery processes among similar employee groups across various service industries, enhancing understanding of specific recovery dynamics.

5.2 Practical implications

Organisational support within breakroom environments significantly influences the effectiveness of recovery activities. Drawing on the ERM and the COR theory, we propose managerial strategies to enhance breakroom settings by focusing on essential recovery activities and experiences. First, the study identified eating and drinking as popular recovery activities. Following the COR theory, which emphasises the importance of restoring resources (Hobfoll, 1989), improving the quality of meals and beverages offered in staff canteens can effectively replenish physical resources and energy depleted during work. However, the implementation of such interventions may vary depending on the organisation's financial resources. In hotels with larger budgets, staff canteens could offer gourmet meals and beverages, including options for specific dietary preferences. In contrast, hotels with more limited budgets might focus on providing cost-effective, nutritious meals, potentially

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partnering with local vendors or using in-season produce to maintain quality while managing costs.

Second, new recovery experiences—reconnection and refreshment—are derived from specific recovery activities, and promoting these activities can enhance recovery effectiveness. Reconnection is derived from activities such as using social media and chatting with family, which help employees reconnect with their personal domain and rebuild their internal resources. Following the COR theory, interventions that facilitate these activities and restore depleted resources during work breaks are beneficial. Hotels with more financial resources might design staff rooms with distinct areas that offer privacy for phone calls or social media use. Departments like the front desk, where staff may need to decompress quickly, could benefit from these more private spaces. In contrast, hotels with tighter budgets might not have the resources for extensive redesigns, but they could ensure that staff areas have reliable Wi-Fi and designate a quiet corner or a small room where employees can make personal calls away from the workplace's hustle.

Third, the study identifies that napping or lying down are key relaxation activities contributing to refreshment. According to the ERM, effective recovery involves mentally detaching from work and alleviating psychophysiological tensions caused by job stress (Meijman & Mulder, 1998). Hotels with more extensive resources might furnish their staff rooms with comfortable sofas, cots, or even nap pods, creating dedicated sleeping areas where employees from high-stress departments, such as food and beverage, can take brief, restorative naps. On the other hand, hotels with more limited resources could enhance relaxation by providing comfortable reclining chairs or simple cots in a designated rest area, ensuring that staff can lie down during their breaks. Refreshment can also be achieved in social activities. Hotels with larger budgets might organise larger-scale events, such as themed staff parties or

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wellness days, to foster social engagement and refreshment. Front desk teams, often working in high-pressure environments, could benefit from these morale-boosting activities. On the other hand, hotels with more limited budgets could host smaller, more frequent gatherings, such as potluck meals or casual game nights, which are cost-effective yet still promote social interaction. Both types of hotels could implement round tables in break areas to facilitate face-to-face interactions, enhancing the sense of community and support among staff.

Implementing these practices or introducing these facilities is a crucial step that depends heavily on an organisation's financial resources. While it is true that quantifying the return on investment for such initiatives, particularly in employee-focused areas, can be challenging, the importance of enhancing employee well-being cannot be overstated. It is a key factor in maintaining service quality and achieving organisational prosperity. Moreover, with the increasing global awareness of employee rights and corporate social responsibility, companies prioritising employee well-being are gaining favour with investors. While these initiatives might present initial costs, managers can manage risks by developing a detailed plan and monitoring costs and outcomes. Whether through high-budget interventions in luxury hotels or more modest, cost-effective measures in budget hotels, investing in and continually evaluating staff breakrooms supports employees' psychophysiological recovery. It signals them that the organisation values their well-being and performance.

5.3 Limitations and future research

The limitations of this study present opportunities for further research, particularly in validating the proposed model. The newly identified recovery experiences—reconnection and refreshment—derived from hospitality workers need validation against established frameworks like those by Sonnentag et al. (2017). Future studies should develop measurement

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scales for these experiences and assess their impact on outcomes such as exhaustion, vigour (Casper & Sonnentag, 2020), self-efficacy, and work engagement (Bosch et al., 2018), along with performance metrics. Additionally, this research categorised primary recovery experiences into three types. Future research should use quantitative methods like exploratory factor analysis to validate these categories and examine their individual and combined effects on desired outcomes. The two-phase structure of recovery experiences also needs validation to better understand the recovery mechanisms during work breaks.

Another limitation involves unclear relationships between identified recovery activities and experiences. The study documents associations but does not clearly establish causality, complicated by factors such as employees partaking in multiple activities at once, one activity leading to various experiences, and different activities yielding a single experience, often influenced by available amenities like Wi-Fi or staff restaurants. Future research must delineate the connections between specific recovery activities and primary recovery experiences to substantiate the proposed model, employing more advanced methods to investigate these relationships.

The sample selection, focusing solely on part-time customer-contact employees aged 18 to 25 in Japan, precluded comparisons across different employee categories, such as customer contact versus back-office workers, part-time versus full-time staff, or varying age groups. Job demands can influence recovery preferences; for instance, desk-bound back-office might prefer more active recovery activities, while full-time employees, facing greater job demands and longer hours, may benefit more from cognitive activities, which help them to detach from work. Older workers might also require recovery activities tailored to physical restoration due to age-related factors. Some findings of the current study align with previous studies in similar contexts involving different sample sets (e.g., Cheng & Cho, 2021; Yang &

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Jo, 2022; Kuriakose & S, 2023). Given the nature of the hospitality jobs and human needs (Clark, 2000; Wepfer et al., 2018), the newly identified recovery experiences, reconnection and refreshment, may not be unique to a specific sample set. However, certain recovery activities, such as ‘using mother tongue’ for foreign workers or ‘studying something’ for university students, may only apply to the current study sample. Thus, while the sample selection is justified, the generalisability of the results is limited.

Furthermore, the potential for generalisation to other contexts, such as different segments within the hospitality sector, luxury versus budget hotels, or different cultural settings, remains uncertain. Recovery preferences and activities might vary significantly due to differences in organisational resources and cultural norms. For example, employees in luxury hotels may have access to different recovery opportunities compared to budget hotels, and cultural factors might influence the value placed on certain recovery activities, such as socialising or napping. Future research should consider how recovery processes differ across various hotel types and cultural contexts to enable organisations to tailor interventions effectively. This would lead to more targeted and effective interventions that address the diverse recovery needs of different organisational settings and employee demographics.

The study also omits a detailed cost-benefit analysis and comprehensive discussion on liability issues related to enhancing employee well-being. Future research should explore strategies for organisations to achieve a satisfactory return on investment in these practices, including conducting employee satisfaction surveys, assessing perceived organisational support, evaluating job stress levels, and analysing potential investor interest. Developing a detailed inventory of costs, benefits, and potential liabilities tailored to different hospitality organisations, considering factors like size, type, employee demographics, available resources, strategic plans, and current revenue, is crucial.

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Lastly, the limited availability of comparable research on employees' psychophysiological recovery during work breaks in other service industries constrains our ability to conduct thorough cross-industry comparisons, which are essential for assessing the generalisability of our findings. As recovery research grows, future studies should investigate recovery processes across various service sectors, enabling more comprehensive comparisons across industry contexts. Expanding research on employee recovery beyond the hospitality industry will yield deeper insights into the unique and shared recovery mechanisms that influence employee well-being across diverse work environments. Such broader investigations will be instrumental in refining theoretical frameworks and developing tailored interventions to support employee recovery in various service settings.

The recent global pandemic has heightened concerns about the well-being of hospitality employees, making organisational and managerial interventions into well-being practices a critical concern for the industry (Yang & Xu, 2023; Yang & Huang, 2020; Tu & Wang, 2021; Rabiul et al., 2022). These interventions are essential not only for maintaining service quality but also for retaining staff. Despite the plethora of strategies available, the discussion on effective employee recovery at work has been notably absent in hospitality literature. This study addresses this gap by exploring the complex mechanisms of psychophysiological recovery among hospitality customer-contact employees during work breaks. It enhances our understanding of employee recovery within this specific context and highlights how hospitality organisations can better support the psychophysiological recovery of their customer-contact employees at work.

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Declaration of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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