

Wanting Playfulness to Counter Fatigue from Virtual Meetings: Associations with Social Interaction Anxiety and Workaholism

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INTRODUCTION

Playfulness fosters healthy and sustainable professional lives (Petelczyc et al. 2018). It is positively associated with work satisfaction (Karl and Peluchette 2006) and facilitates creativity (West 2015), innovative behavior, and job performance (Yu et al. 2007). Playfulness can also serve as a coping mechanism to alleviate feelings of boredom or stress caused by job demands, helping workers to sustain productivity and work engagement (Dishon-Berkovits et al. 2023). In this study, we explore preferences for playfulness in the context of virtual meetings (VMs). We aim to understand the potential role of playful features in fostering positive VM experiences

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by investigating their relationship to VM fatigue, social interaction anxiety (SIA), and workaholism. In doing so, we expand the theoretical understanding of how playfulness can support workers who struggle with VM interactions.

VIRTUAL MEETING FATIGUE AND PLAYFULNESS

Many organizations continue to embrace remote work, leading to the prevalence of meetings mediated by VM platforms (e.g., Zoom) as a key form of interaction. However, Zoom (VM) fatigue—mental, social, and physical exhaustion during and after VMs—has become a common issue workers must confront (Fauville et al. 2021). Individuals with SIA, which elevates fear in social situations (Zellars 2007), especially experience heightened levels of VM fatigue. Workaholics—individuals who experience psychological distress and/or impairment in daily functioning from overworking—may also experience more VM fatigue, leading to lower levels of well-being (Taris and Jan 2023). VMs’ lack of nonverbal cues and spontaneous, playful, and humorous conversations, which assist in social interactions (Lim 2023), can also contribute to increased fatigue for such workers.

Consequently, we expect that playfulness in VM can improve VM experiences while not hindering productivity (West et al. 2016), which is linked to enhanced psychological safety (Murugavel and Reiter-Palmon 2023) and meeting effectiveness (Pham & Bartels, 2021). There is evidence that playfulness potentially remedies negative feelings such as anxiety and depression (Proyer et al. 2021) and helps build positive workplace culture (Gallacher et al. 2015). Unfortunately, people with higher anxiety show limited playfulness (Versluys 2017). Similarly, workaholics tend to be uncomfortable with being playful (Kofodimos 1993) perhaps because the stress of excessive working displaces feelings of levity (Burke 2006).

Taken together, we question whether integrating playfulness into VMs can ameliorate VM fatigue experienced by people with higher SIA and/or workaholism tendencies. Little is known about the potential benefits of playfulness in VM, especially for those vulnerable to social workplace interactions. Specifically, we seek to explore preferences for playful features for expression (e.g., emojis avatars, filters) depending on VM fatigue levels experienced by individuals with a greater degree of SIA and workaholism. Hence, we pose these hypotheses and research questions.

H1. (a) SIA and (b) workaholism are positively associated with VM fatigue.

RQ1. How is VM fatigue related to preferences for playful features for expression in VM?

RQ2. Does SIA moderate the relationship between VM Fatigue and preferences for playful features for expression in VM?

RQ3. Does workaholism moderate the relationship between VM Fatigue and preferences for playful features for expression in VM?

METHODS

We conducted an IRB-approved, large-scale survey ($N = 2448$) with a Qualtrics research panel of US-based participants who identified as remote workers and

regularly participated in VMs. We measured VM fatigue by using the Zoom exhaustion and fatigue scale (Fauville et al. 2021), workaholism by using the Bergen Work Addiction Scale (Andreassen et al. 2012), and social interaction anxiety by adapting the SIAS-6 scale (Peters et al. 2012).

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

A bivariate correlation analysis revealed that SIA and workaholism were positively associated with each other ($r = 0.51^{***}$). We then conducted a regression analysis controlling for average daily VM duration (no significant association), revealing that VM fatigue was positively associated with SIA ($\beta = 0.43^{***}$) and workaholism ($\beta = 0.36^{***}$), indicating that people with higher SIA and workaholism were more likely to experience VM fatigue. We next found an interaction effect between SIA and VM fatigue ($\beta = 0.11^{***}$, $\text{adj } R^2 = .15$) and an interaction effect between workaholism and VM fatigue ($\beta = 0.23^{***}$, $\text{adj } R^2 = .15$) on playful VM feature preference, suggesting that for individuals with higher SIA or workaholism, VM fatigue was positively associated with playful feature preference (see Figure 1 and 2). When we combined SIA and workaholism into one regression model, only the interaction effect of workaholism and VM fatigue was significant ($\beta = 0.22^*$, $\text{adj } R^2 = .15$).

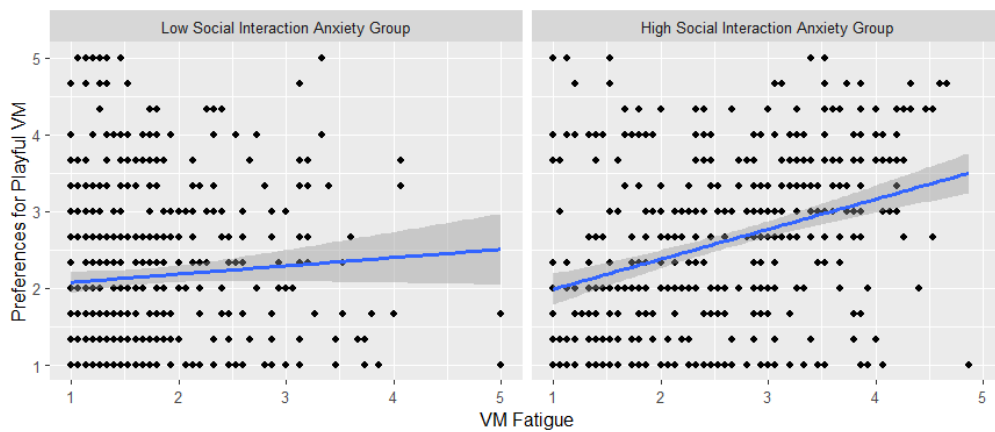


Figure 1: Interaction effect of SIA and VM fatigue on playful VM feature preference. Median split and plots for display purposes only.

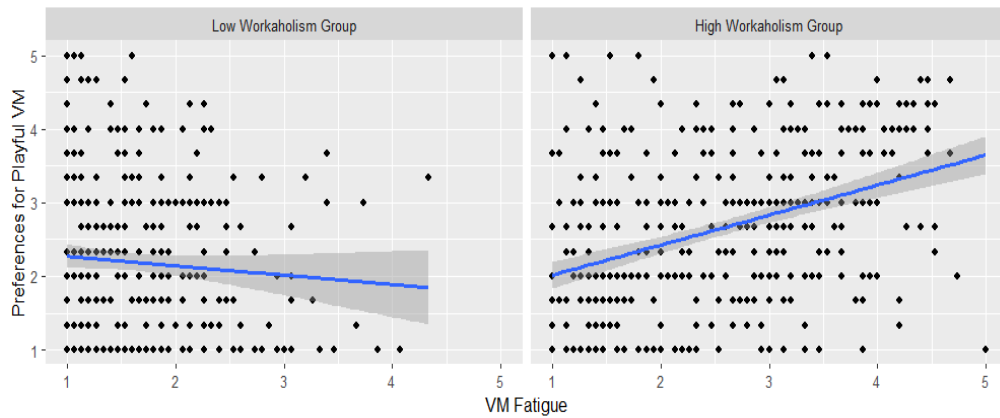


Figure 2: Interaction effect of workaholism and VM fatigue on playful VM feature preference. Median split and plots for display purposes only.

DISCUSSION

Our preliminary findings suggest that playful features can help mitigate VM fatigue. Those with higher tendencies for SIA and workaholism also tended to report higher levels of VM fatigue, and for these individuals, VM fatigue was positively related to preference for playful features in virtual meetings (e.g., humorous emojis, avatars, and filters). In other words, people with higher SIA and workaholism seem to experience greater threats to their well-being because of workplace meetings (i.e., VM fatigue) and thus may address this added stress by integrating playfulness into their workplace interactions.

Interestingly, for users with *low* SIA or workaholism, we did not find a relationship between VM fatigue and playfulness preference. We can speculate that such users may be less motivated to address VM fatigue because their stress levels associated with meetings or work in general tend to be lower and so they are less motivated to use playful meeting features as a coping mechanism. Future research should directly examine this and alternative explanations in playfulness preference, such as differences in average meeting duration (a non-significant control variable in our analysis).

Ultimately, this research suggests that playfulness is a valuable addition to the virtual workplace, at least for users with greater threats to their well-being in the workplace because of SIA and workaholism. To sustain an enthusiastic and active workforce, VM should resemble playgrounds more than boardrooms.

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