Recovery from Work: A Qualitative Study among Malaysian Academicians

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ABSTRACT

Work stress in higher education frequently spills over non-work hours, leaving academicians increasingly susceptible to exhaustion. While off-job recovery is extensively discussed in Western literature, understanding how academicians' recharge within collectivist cultures remains limited. Grounded in an interpretivist approach, this qualitative study investigated how Malaysian academicians conceptualize recovery, the off-job activities they pursue, and how cultural dynamics influence restorative engagement. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with six full-time academicians from Malaysian public universities, and data were evaluated using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that participants conceptualized recovery as physical resets, cognitive detachment from work colleagues, and emotional boundary protection between work and family life. Academicians engaged in five distinct recovery activities: low-effort leisure, physical movement, non-work social interactions, solitary buffering micro-breaks, and spiritual routines. Crucially, off-job routines offered unequal restorative value; true recovery required role freedom and freedom from social evaluation. Conversely, collectivist family and community obligations often demanded sustained emotional labor, prompting academicians to use solitary buffering to preserve personal composure. These findings emphasize the necessity of culturally sensitive recovery frameworks and institutional policies that respect after-hours boundaries.

Keywords: work recovery, academicians, off-job recovery activities, qualitative design.

INTRODUCTION

For years, work stress has received significant attention as a prevalent issue in higher education, with the majority of academicians reporting increasing job-related demands (Wray & Kinman, 2020). Academic responsibilities rarely end at the office; instead, heavy teaching loads, research publication targets, and continuous administrative tasks frequently leak into after work hours (Houston et al., 2006; Tight, 2010). Because of these demands spill over into personal and evening routines, academicians urgently require adequate recovery from work. Recovery is defined as the psychophysiological process in which load reactions induce and deplete functional systems to return to their baseline levels (Meijman & Mulder, 1998; Sonnentag & Zijlstra, 2006). Without sufficient recovery, prolonged work stress simply leads to chronic fatigue, psychological strain, and long-term health issues.

Prior research on recovery from work initially examined how employees spend their off-job hours, focusing on specific leisure activities and time-use habits (Sonnentag, 2001; Fritz & Sonnentag, 2005). However, most studies and empirical evidence on recovery from work have been conducted exclusively within Western, individualistic settings. In these settings, researchers typically assume than non-work time belong entirely to the individual for personal rest, entertainment, leisure choices, with a clear boundary between work and home domains (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007).

Despite extensive literature, these Western assumptions do not easily fit into Eastern context like Malaysia. In Malaysia, society is largely collectivist in nature, with high values placed on family members, community responsibilities, and religious practices (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Schermerhorn & Bond, 1997). For Malaysian employees, off-job hours are rarely just "free time" for individual hobbies; instead, their time after

work is heavily shaped by caring for extended family, helping children, and fulfilling religious duties (Nasurdin et al., 2010). When looking at academia specifically, where hierarchy and professional devotion are strongly respected, staying reachable to department leaders and responding to students outside working hours is widely viewed as a normal responsibility rather than an unwelcome disruption (Kinman & Jones, 2008; Schermerhorn & Bond, 1997). Consequently, off-job activities in this cultural setting may not automatically lead to complete rest, as home and social roles bring their own demands.

Although scholars have highlighted the need to explore how culture influences work recovery, qualitative research examining how professionals in collectivist societies experience and manage their off-job recovery remains scarce. To address this gap, the current study investigates how Malaysian academicians conceptualize the fundamental meaning of recovery, identified the specific off-job recovery activities they pursue to unwind and replenish their energy, and navigated the cultural and social roles shape their restorative experiences during non-work hours.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recovery from Work

Recovery from work refers to the process of eliminating physical and psychological strain caused by sustained workplace demands and stressful job tasks (Craig & Cooper, 1992; Meijman & Mulder, 1998). In work stress literature, recovery is recognized as the natural unwinding process that counteracts workplace strain. It allows employees to reset their physical systems and replenish the energy stores that were drawn down during the workday (Sonnentag et al., 2017). When academicians experience long periods without sufficient rest, heightened physical and mental tension persists over time, which can ultimately lead to ongoing fatigue, emotional exhaustion, and reduced overall well-being (Meijman & Mulder, 1998; Sonnentag & Zijlstra, 2006).

Off-Job Recovery Activities

Early research into how employees recover after work concentrated primarily on specific behavioral activities pursued during non-work hours (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2005; Sonnentag, 2001). Under this activity-based approach, researchers classified off-job behaviors into distinct observable categories to observe how they affect worker well-being. These commonly include low-effort activities (such as resting, watching television, or browsing on mobile devices), physical activities (such as sports, running, and gym workouts), and social activities spent with friends or family members (Sonnentag, 2001). Low-effort routines support recovery by placing minimal mental and physical demands on the individual, while physical exercise encourages a bodily reset and releases accumulated tension. In addition, social interactions often provide emotional reassurance, companionship, and a sense of belonging (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2005).

In higher education, empirical studies show that academicians deliberately rely on targeted activities to protect themselves from heavy teaching loads, research targets, and administrative responsibilities. Academicians frequently turn to physical movement—such as walking, jogging, or swimming—along with social outings with companions outside of their departments to interrupt continuous work-related thoughts and restore depleted energy (Kinman, 2014; Mudrak et al., 2018; Virtanen et al., 2021). Many educators also pursue creative pastimes, casual reading, and quiet solitary moments to rebuild their mental stamina away from their academic duties (Mark & Smith, 2012). Conversely, continuing work tasks at home during the evening, such as grading assignments or replying to institutional emails, directly hinders recovery by extending the workday into personal living spaces and intensifying post-work fatigue (Kinman & Jones, 2008; Mudrak et al., 2018).

Cultural Context: Off-Job Recovery in Malaysia

Most established recovery literature reflects Western contexts where non-work time is viewed as private space with clear boundaries between work and personal life (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). In Malaysia, however, off-job life is strongly shaped by collectivist values, where family obligations, community ties, and spiritual routines are central to daily routines (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Nasurdin et al., 2010).

While Western frameworks often label domestic and caregiving duties as non-work hassles that hinder recovery (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2005), these responsibilities carry deep personal and cultural significance for Malaysian employees. At the same time, academic work culture in Malaysia involves high relational respect and accessibility, meaning work demands and social expectations frequently extend into the home. As a result, off-job routines carry a balance between activities that provide personal relief and duties that require sustained energy, making it vital to examine how Malaysian academicians navigate their cultural environment to achieve genuine recovery.

METHOD

Study Design

This study adopted an interpretivist research philosophy, recognizing that people understand and make sense of their daily lives through their own subjective viewpoints. Because individual experiences of post-work recovery vary depending on personal and social circumstances, an interpretivist lens was well-suited to examine how academicians describe their unwinding process. Semi-structured interviews were utilized to provide an open space for participants to explain how they disconnect from their daily job demands. Since this research explores how after-hours habits, personal boundaries, and cultural dynamics shape replenishment, capturing the distinct voices and personal contexts of the participants was essential.

Participants

A total of six full-time academicians were recruited as participants by using purposive sampling through personal and professional connections (Maxwell, 1996) for interview sessions. Those taking part ranged in age from 35 to 48. Participants were selected from different academic disciplines, mostly working in public universities in Malaysia.

Measures

Three semi-structured questions were put to the participants during the interview sessions. The questions that initiated discussion are listed here:

1. In your own words, what does it mean to you to recharge or recover after a demanding day at work?
2. From the moment your workday ends, what specific activities do you usually spend your time on?
3. Out of those activities you mentioned, which ones genuinely restore your energy, and which ones feel like secondary obligations?

Procedure

In recruiting participants for the interview sessions, respondents were first approached via phone call or text message to take part in the study voluntarily. After participants provided verbal consent to be interviewed, researchers sent an invitation email containing the Participant Information Sheet and an informed consent form detailing ethical guidelines. Then, they were contacted to set a convenient date and time for the interview sessions.

One-on-one semi-structured interviews, which lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, were conducted in English, Malay, or a natural code-switched blend to ensure participants felt comfortable expressing their feelings. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim.

Data were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework: (1) familiarizing with the data through iterative reading of interview transcripts; (2) generating initial codes for semantic patterns (specific off-job activities) and latent meanings (cultural meanings of rest and spiritual routines); (3) searching for themes by clustering shared patterns; (4) reviewing candidate themes against the full dataset; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the narrative report integrating verbatim participant excerpts translated into English. To ensure reliability and avoid interpreter bias, a portion of the

coded transcripts was reviewed by another researcher with expertise in qualitative work-life research, and any disagreements were resolved through mutual discussion.

FINDINGS

The current study employed a qualitative approach to explore how Malaysian academicians discover the meaning of work recovery, the off-job recovery activities they pursue, and their daily engagement in the recovery process. The findings reveal that Malaysian academicians conceptualize recovery as physical rest, cognitive escapism, and emotional reliefs. Although their main recovery activities align with Western norms, Malaysian academicians recharge in culturally unique ways. They depend largely on spiritual practices and casual after-hours socializing with friends to cope with work-related stress.

Meaning of Recovery from Work

Accordingly, most participants conceptualize recovery from work beyond the theoretical definitions. Instead, they defined recovery as a physical reset, a mental break from work, and an emotional shield against work stress.

Theme 1: Recovery as Pure Physical Reset (Sleep and Napping)

Some participants defined recovery simply as listening to their bodies by sleeping or taking naps. When their energy was drained, recovery meant letting the body completely shut down rather than engaging in active leisure:

> *"Whenever I feel exhausted or sleepy, I just sleep. I describe my fatigue simply: when tiredness sets in, it turns into sleepiness, and the only solution is sleep... Physically, when I am tired, sleep is the only answer to recover. That is all there is to it". — Candidate 2*

Similarly, Candidate 5 conceptualized recovery as an essential physical break during the workday, needed to reset their mind back on track:

> *"If there are no pressing meetings or discussions, I lean back in my office chair and close my eyes for 5 to 10 minutes... Whenever stress peaks, I feel the need to 'take five' and take a quick nap to reset". — Candidate 5*

Theme 2: Recovery as Disconnecting from Work and Colleagues

Beyond physical reset, other participants viewed recovery as deliberately disconnecting from their professional lives. For them, recovery meant establishing clear boundaries around whom they spent time with after hours to prevent work matters spilling into their personal time:

> *"Taking weekend getaways is one of my forms of distraction... But after work, I am not the type of person who hangs out with colleagues. Even though I am an educator, I intentionally avoid hanging out with academic members after hours because they will inevitably talk about work matters again". — Candidate 1*

In a similar vein, Candidate 3 described true recovery as completely stepping away from campus life through university sports events, where they could temporarily leave their academic role behind:

> *"That is when we truly recover; it turns out our stress just disappears because we travel out for three to five days... During that time, we do not think about our academic tasks. Our entire focus shifts to ensuring our team wins and the tournament runs smoothly". — Candidate 3*

Theme 3: Recovery as Emotional Boundary Protection between Work and Family

With continuous online connectivity, other participants defined recovery as setting emotional boundaries at the end of the workday. They needed time to take a brief pause to unwind before engaging with family, preventing work stress spilling over into interactions with their spouse and children:

> *"When you return home exhausted and drained, and your young children are demanding attention, to be frank, it is quite stressful... During that initial window, I prefer to focus on my own quiet moments first, so that I do not get triggered into irritation or lose my temper. It wouldn't be fair to the children". — Candidate 6*

Off-Job Recovery Activities

Participants engaged in five distinct categories of off-job recovery activities to unwind and replenish their depleted resources.

Low-Effort Leisure and Passive Comfort

Several participants turned to low-effort home activities requiring minimal cognitive efforts, pairing simple warm beverages with light screen-based leisure, social media or entertainment:

> *"My minds pretty much made up: I just want a hot cup of coffee and a light snack. Sitting down, scrolling through my phone, and sipping my coffee—that's really how I recharge. I spend a lot of time on social media, but that's honestly just my favourite way to unwind..." — Candidate 2*

> *"I love watching Korean dramas, and after that, I usually sing some karaoke at home. Heading out for a scenic drive to get some fresh air also works wonders whenever I need to release tension". — Candidate 4*

Physical and Kinetic Activities

To recover from accumulated physiological and psychological strain, few participants engaged with physical movement and exercise routine after work hours:

> *"I usually just do Zumba at home". — Candidate 4*

> *"I decided to switch to a healthier lifestyle. Whenever I feel overwhelmed at work, I actively engage in physical activities such as jogging and swimming". — Candidate 1*

For Candidate 3, coordinating sports tournaments served a dual purpose: fostering physical activity while providing a refreshing break from mental exhaustion.

Non-Work Social Interactions

While social interaction was widely recognized as restorative, participants maintained clear boundaries regarding whom they spent time with. Connecting with others was only truly refreshing when it excluded workplace colleagues, preventing professional talk from resurfacing:

> *"I usually catch up with my high school friends. We grab lunch, talk about what's going on in our lives, and plan trip together. It's the best way to completely take my mind off work". — Candidate 2*

> *"When I travel, none of my companions are academicians—they are entrepreneurs, bankers, or run local food businesses… Every few months, a few close friends from primary school and I get together at a restaurant. That is how I really disconnect and step away from university stuff". — Candidate 1*

Furthermore, family-centred leisure served as source of recovery, reinforcing shared collectivist values:

> *"Going for simple walks or weekend outings with my family always melt my stress away". — Candidate 3*

Self-Rewards and 'Me-Time' Buffering

A prominent pattern observed among participants was carving out transitional micro-breaks immediately following the workday. These brief intervals served as a crucial psychological buffer, allowing individuals to detach from occupational strain before assuming domestic and caregiving responsibilities:

> *"Eating good food is essential for me. On my commute home, I pass by a shopping mall and deliberately take an hour having meal alone before picking up my child from daycare... Other times, right after work, I stop by the petrol station to get an ice cream that I can enjoy in peace without having to share". — Candidate 1*

Religious and Spiritual Practices

Rooted in Malaysia's predominantly Islamic and collectivist context, participants frequently turned to spiritual practices as a primary coping mechanism for inner peace, psychological grounding, and mental resilience:

> *"As Muslims, we rely closely on our religious routines, especially the five daily prayers. Whenever work feels overwhelming, praying gives me a direct space to plead for strength and patience to get through the fatigue". — Candidate 6*

Cultural Context and Restorative Engagement in Off-Job Recovery

Even though, most participants engaged in diverse off-job recovery activities beyond work hours, their experiences revealed that not every activity actually helped them recharge. Within the Malaysian cultural context, participants made a clear distinction between activities that gave them real rest and those that involved family duties or household chores:

Genuine Replenishment: Experiencing True Recovery through Freedom

Based on participants' insight, true recovery meant having moments where no one expected anything from them. An activity felt truly restorative only when they could step away from being an academic and stop worrying about being judged. Taking quiet time alone—like eating a meal by themselves or pausing during the drive home—helped them reset because they had no one else to attend to. In addition, daily prayers and spiritual routines gave Muslim participants deep emotional relief, allowing them to release their work stress rather than feeling like another task. Spending time with friends outside of academia was also refreshing, as they could simply be themselves without needing to talk about work.

The Cultural Setting: Balancing Restorative Leisure with Family and Community Roles

At the same time, participants found that family and community life could be both comforting and draining. In Malaysian culture, spending time with family and fulfilling household duties is deeply valued. However, many participants noted that taking care of children and managing a home right after work felt like starting a second job. Instead of resting, they had to keep giving their energy to others. Because of this, several academicians chose to take a short break alone—such as sitting in the car or delaying their trip home—just to calm down and regain their patience before stepping into their family roles.

DISCUSSION

The study explored how Malaysian academicians experience off-job recovery within a collectivist dynamic, ffering significant insights in expanding Western literature on recovery from work.

First, Malaysian academicians viewed recovery as a physical reset and mental break, which is aligns with the Effort-Recovery Model (Meijman & Mulder, 1998). Consistent with prior research, sleep, naps, and low-effort leisure helped to reduce fatigue and replenish depleted resources (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2005; Sonnentag, 2001). However, while detachment is commonly regarded as mentally switching off from work matters (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007), most participants emphasized on "relational segmentation" where they consciously avoiding coworkers after hours to prevent work issues from spilling into their personal time.

Second, spiritual practices have emerged as powerful resources for Malaysian academicians, despite the fact that common recovery activities like relaxing, exercising, and socializing are empirically enhancing academicians' well-being (Kinman, 2014; Mudrak et al., 2018). Malaysian academicians significantly depended on Islamic prayers and religious routines in order to find inner peace, emotional patience, and mental strength, whereas Western studies mostly focus on recreational leisure (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007).

Finally, the findings highlight how collectivist values shape work-family boundaries among Malaysian (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Unlike individualistic settings where home life is often treated as personal rest time, family duties in Malaysia bring meaningful yet demanding social responsibilities (Nasurdin et al., 2010). As shifting immediately from teaching to family care can feel draining, Malaysian academicians relied on "solitary buffering" in order recharge energy where they need to take short transition break like sitting in car or having a quick meal alone. Ultimately, genuine recovery in this context requires role freedom, a state where individuals are free from both academic performance pressure and caregiving responsibilities.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

From a practical perspective, this qualitative study presents preliminary research on off-job recovery experiences among academicians in Malaysia. These findings may help to explain how university educators unwind and restore their energy, as well as help us understand this recovery process in other developing and collectivist nations. Although findings can be similar to what is published in Western research, this study discovered a slight difference in how Malaysian academicians achieve true recovery from demanding work routines. Despite participating in diverse post-work activities, how they perceive genuine recovery differs, possibly because culture influences how people manage family responsibilities and personal space. Because work stress often spills over into home life through continuous digital connectivity, university management and faculty leaders need to focus on establishing clearer off-hour communication boundaries that respect employees' personal time. Indeed, it is important for universities to encourage a culture that discourages after-hours messaging, allowing academicians the necessary time and space to truly recharge before attending to their families.

LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The qualitative approach used in this study provided a nuanced understanding of Malaysian academicians lived experiences with off-job recovery and cultural dynamics. To ensure that the data captured diverse perspectives, participants from different academic departments and backgrounds were selected, allowing the study to gather a wide range of recovery routines. Nonetheless, there are some limitations.

First, the study involved only six participants from public universities; while this allowed for in-depth insights, the small sample size indicates that the findings cannot be generalized to Malaysian academicians in both private and public settings. Second, the possibility of response bias must be considered, as participants who voluntarily joined the study may already be more conscious of their work-life boundaries. Apart from that, recovery experiences were self-reported, meaning participants shared what they usually do after work, which might differ from their daily actual routines. Finally, because Malaysian culture is collectivist and characterized by high relational courtesy, some participants were initially hesitant to describe family obligations as exhausting or draining. We used informal probing and conversational rapport to help them speak openly about the tension between family duties and personal recovery. Future research should consider using quantitative daily diary methods or longitudinal tracking across academic semesters to capture real-time shifts

in recovery states and examine these cultural dynamics across non-academic sectors with large samples from diverse professions.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this study discovered that Malaysian academicians engage in off-job recovery activities in a manner somewhat similar to patterns observed in Western literature, utilizing low-effort leisure, physical exercise, social activities, solitary buffering, and spiritual practices. However, our findings revealed that not all off-job routines offered the same restorative value. True recovery was achieved only when academicians experienced role freedom—having moments completely free from performance evaluation, workplace scrutiny, and interpersonal demands. In contrast, while family and social roles were culturally meaningful, they frequently acted as ongoing responsibilities that demanded further energy, prompting educators to deliberately create quiet transition moments to protect their emotional boundaries. Despite some similarities with Western recovery models, cultural context plays an important role in shaping how Malaysian educators' recharge. In a collectivist society where family and community roles are prominent, setting clear personal boundaries and taking quiet moments alone are vital strategies for academicians seeking genuine recovery from heavy workloads.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the publication of this paper.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets used and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Please note that the raw qualitative interview data were collected and transcribed in the local language.

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