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Pause for Impact! Evaluating the Efficacy of Microbreaks on Wellbeing and Productivity in Trust & Safety Content Moderation through a Controlled Study

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Agenda

Why Microbreaks Matter in Trust & Safety	Understanding the demands of content moderation, the power of pause, & the cultural barriers in taking a break
The Mircobreaks Study	Introducing a controlled experimental study using scheduled microbreaks in content moderation operations and its findings
The Learnings From Our Microbreaks Study	Key takeaways and organizational implications from a real-world experiment

Why Microbreaks Matter in Trust & Safety

Understanding the demands of content moderation, the power of pause, & the cultural barriers in taking a break

The Demands of Content Moderation Work

Let's talk about content moderation work

- Exposure to sensitive content
- Cognitive load from rapid, high-volume decision-making
- Achieve performance targets (accuracy, average handling time)
- Repetitive tasks
- Risk of potential psychological strain

Impacts Wellbeing & Performance

Increasing need for evidence-based strategies to mitigate its impact and enhance workforce resilience

MUNI FSS

JOURNAL OF PSYCHOSOCIAL RESEARCH ON CYBERSPACE
CYBERPSYCHOLOGY

Spence, R., Bifulco, A., Bradbury, P., Martellozzo, E., & DeMarco, J. (2023). The psychological impacts of content moderation on content moderators: A qualitative study. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace, 17*(4), Article 8. https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2023-4-8

The Psychological Impacts of Content Moderation on Content Moderators: A Qualitative Study

Ruth Spence, Antonia Bifulco, Paula Bradbury, Elena Martellozzo, & Jeffrey DeMarco

Centre for Abuse and Trauma Studies, Middlesex University, London, UK

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Protecting the wellness of online content moderators

May | 2024

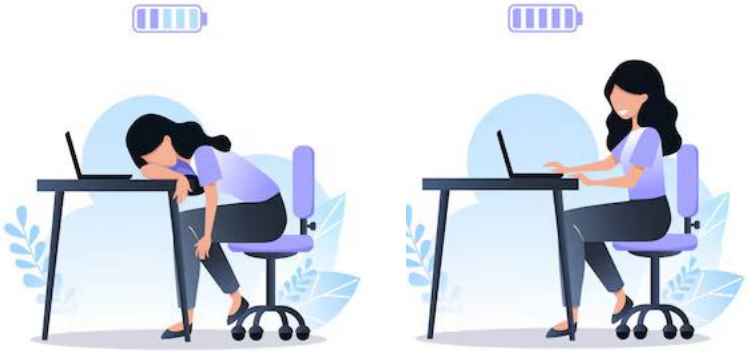
Within the growing mass of User Generated Content (UGC) is a continuous influx of violent, exploitive, hateful, and otherwise harmful images, videos, and speech. This content defeats the purpose of social media as a platform for creative expression and personal connection. Protecting users from egregious content and restoring the Internet to serve its original purpose is largely performed by a noble crop of content moderators. Content moderators are our digital guardians, our superheroes, who are tediously flagging objectionable content making the Internet a safe space for everyone.

The Positive Impact of Microbreaks

What Research Tells Us - Small Pauses, Big Gains

- Reduce mental fatigue and cognitive overload
- Improved focus and sustained attention
- Regulate emotional states and reduce stress
- Boost productivity and task accuracy

Is this applicable in Trust & Safety Operations?



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Meta-Analysis > PLoS One. 2022 Aug 31;17(8):e0272460. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0272460. eCollection 2022.

"Give me a break!" A systematic review and meta-analysis on the efficacy of micro-breaks for increasing well-being and performance

Patricia Albulescu [1], Irina Macsinga [1], Andrei Rusu [1], Coralia Sulea [1], Alexandra Bodnaru [1], Bogdan Tudor Tulbure [1]

Affiliations + expand

PMID: 36044424 PMCID: PMC9432722 DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0272460

Abstract

Recovery activities during short breaks taken between work tasks are solutions for preventing the impairing effects of accumulated strain. No wonder then that a growing body of scientific literature from various perspectives emerged on this topic. The present meta-analysis is aimed at estima... the efficacy of micro-breaks in enhancing well-being (vigor and fatigue) and performance, as well...

Cultural Influences in Break Taking

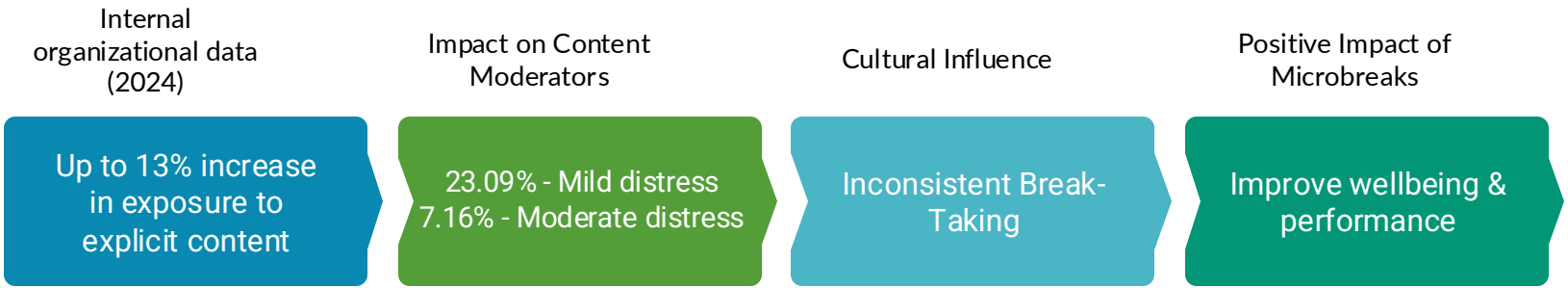
Fewer Breaks = More Dedication

- Minimal break taking mindset
- More evident in Asian cultures

What does our data say?

- Survey of 3000 Asian Moderators
- 91.68 take < 3 breaks
- Only 38% take short breaks < 15 min

The Need to Inculcate Formal Microbreaks for Moderators



Formalized structured microbreaks may have potential benefits for content moderators

The Microbreaks Study

Introducing a controlled experimental study using scheduled microbreaks in content moderation operations and its findings

Study Objectives: Wellbeing, Productivity, Feasibility

Aim: Evaluate the Impact of a 5-minutes Structured Microbreaks on:

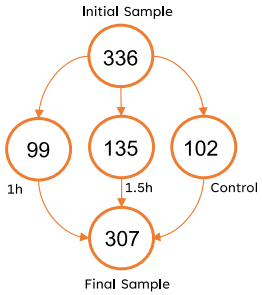
1. Short-term and long-term psychological well-being
2. Work performance
3. Different Frequencies (1h vs 1.5h) - optimal schedule for maximizing both recovery and sustained efficiency.
4. Feasibility of integrating automated microbreak reminders into daily workflows

Why 5-minute Microbreaks?

1. Operational feasibility & existing empirical research on cognitive recovery in high-demand work environments
2. Support from empirical research of microbreaks between 3-5 minutes
3. Optimal balance between operating at peak efficiency and maximized recovery benefits

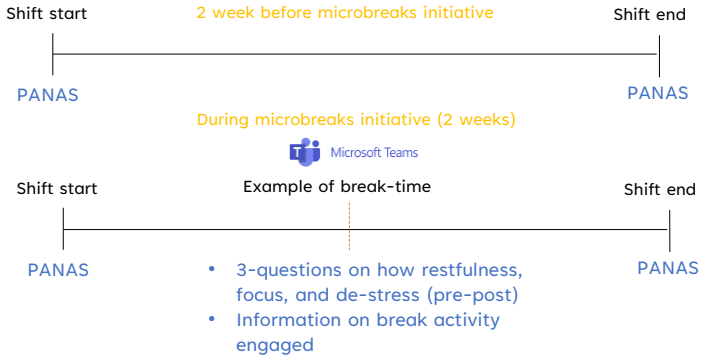
The Study Design

Controlled Experimental Approach



1. All participants were based in Philippines (representative of East-Asian Culture)
2. Minimum 6 months tenure to ensure familiarity and adequate adjustment to nature of work
3. Adapted convenience sampling to assign groups based on shifts and project assignments (operational feasibility)
4. Representation across different T&S workflows

Study Procedure



Data during these phases:
RTC-10
*Productivity (**A**verage **H**anding **T**ime, Accuracy)*

Participant Briefing

Let's Talk About Microbreaks

Endless good microbreak activities

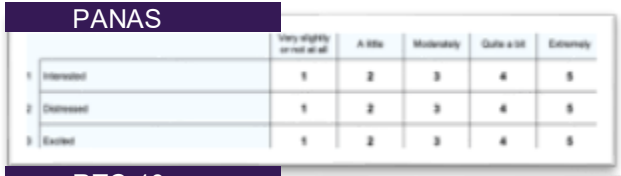
Drink water	Close your eyes	Mindfulness activity	Scroll through social media
Stretch	Zone out	Take a quick walk	Engage in a good conversation
Have a beverage	Eat a snack	Listen to music	Say a prayer
Play a game	Write in your journal	Read a book	Exercise your eyes

Makes you feel rejuvenated & ready

Avoid bad microbreaks

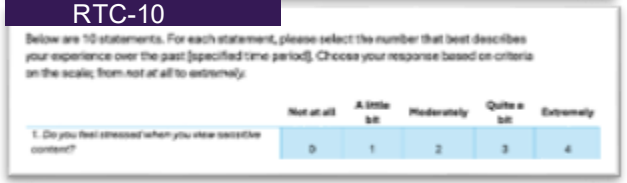
Unhealthy
Emotionally negative

PANAS



	Very slightly or not at all	A little	Moderately	Quite a bit	Extremely
1 Interested	1	2	3	4	5
2 Distressed	1	2	3	4	5
3 Excited	1	2	3	4	5

RTC-10



Below are 10 statements. For each statement, please select the number that best describes your experience over the past [specified time period]. Choose your response based on criteria on the scale; from *not at all* to *extremely*.

	Not at all	A little bit	Moderately	Quite a bit	Extremely
1. Do you feel stressed when you view secretive content?	0	1	2	3	4

Microbreaks Improves Wellbeing

Improved restfulness, focus, and reduced stress regardless of break schedule

Restfulness

Each group showed significant improvements after availing microbreaks

1h group: $\Delta = 0.15$

1.5h group: $\Delta = 0.12$

Focus

Each group showed significant improvements after availing microbreaks

1h group: $\Delta = 0.12$

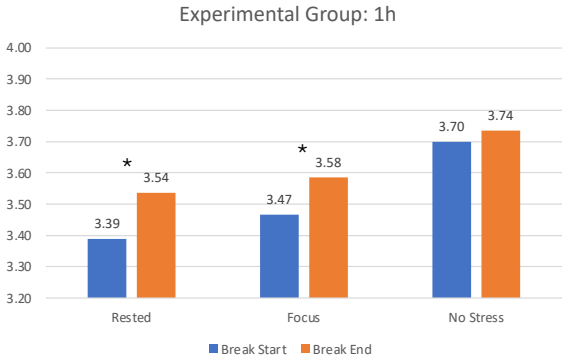
1.5h group: $\Delta = 0.09$

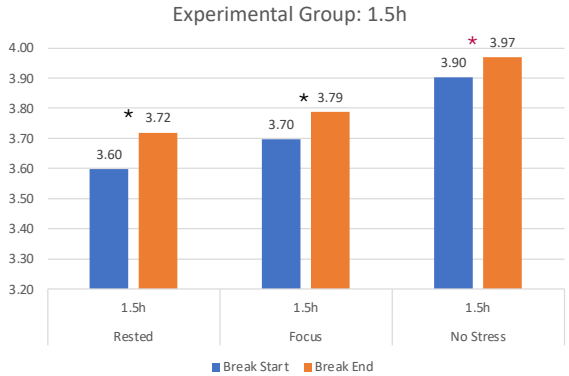
Stress

Only the 1.5h group showed almost significant reduction after availing microbreaks

1h group: $\Delta = 0.04$ $(not\ significant)$

1.5h group: $\Delta = 0.07$





Microbreaks Improves Wellbeing

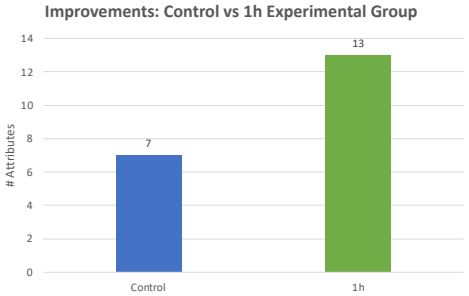
Experimental groups showed enhanced improvement in affective states

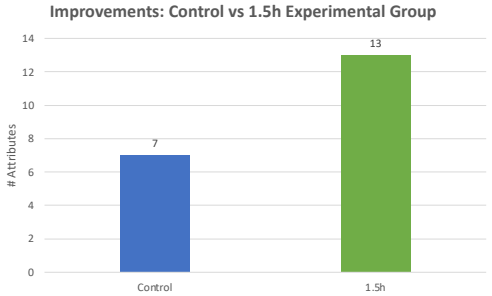
No overall statistically significant mood differences (PANAS scores) across groups

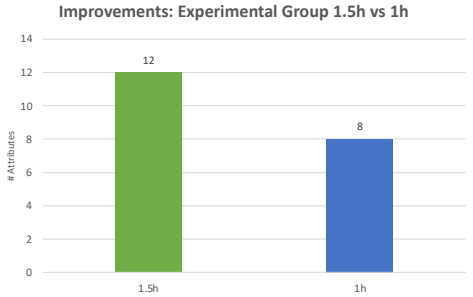
Attribute Level Analysis

For each PANAS attribute:

1. Counted individuals who showed improvement in mood during intervention
   Positive – maintained or increased
   Negative – maintained or decreased
2. Compared which group had the highest number of individuals showing improve
3. Repeated thus across all attributes to see which group has the most consistent emotional gains







Better emotional regulation in experimental groups

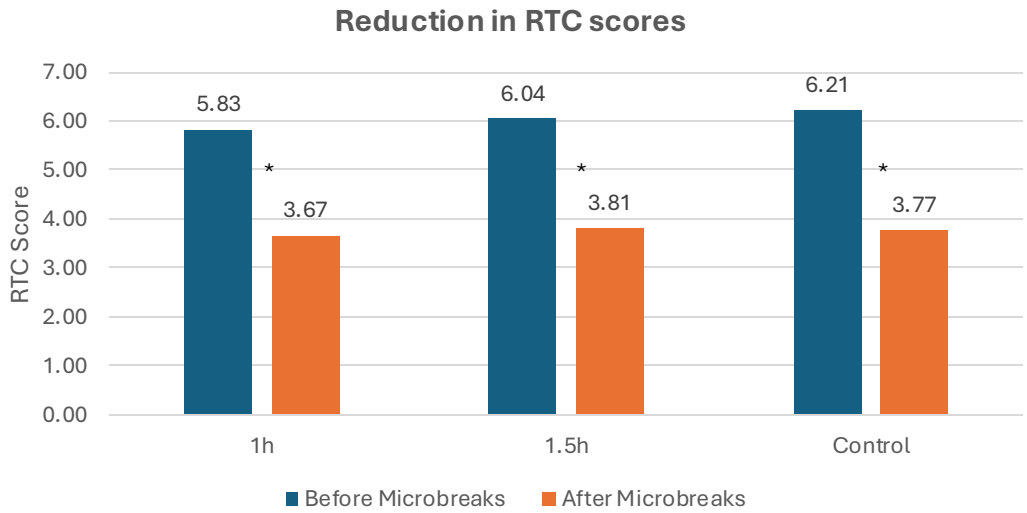
- 1h & 1.5h groups improved in 13 attributes compared to control
- **1.5h group showed improvement in 12 attributes compared to 1h group**

Microbreaks Improves Wellbeing

No microbreaks specific effect found on psychological impact of content

Reduction in the RTC-10 scores over time across all groups

- Likely influence from concurrent wellbeing programs and support initiatives
- Potential effect of microbreaks could not be isolated due to broader organizational initiatives



Microbreaks Improves Productivity

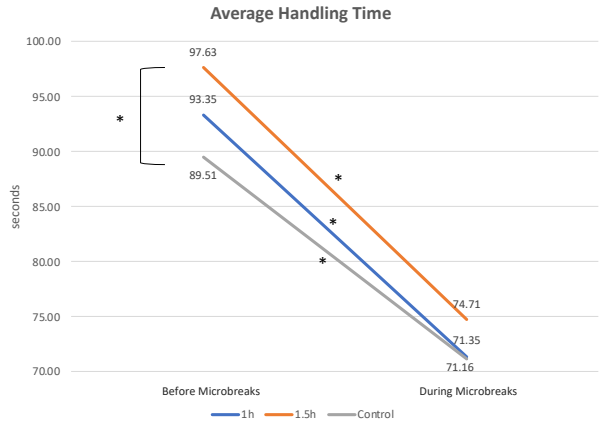
Efficiency gain across all groups, accuracy gains unique to 1.5h break schedule

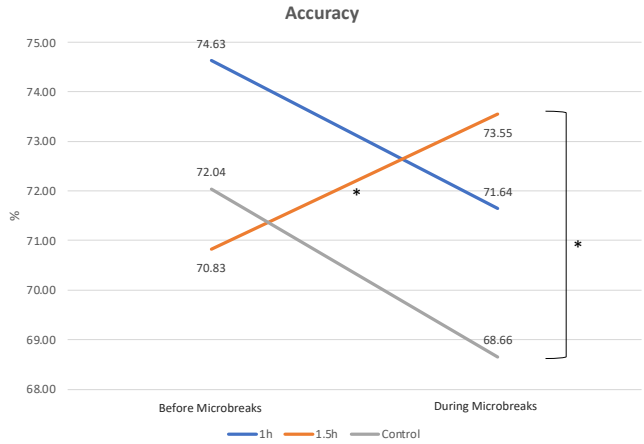
Average Handling Time

- All groups show a significant reduction in AHT over time
- 1.5h group showed the greatest reduction in AHT over time

Accuracy

Accuracy only improved in 1.5 group overtime.





Microbreak Every 1 hour or 1.5 hours?

Why the 1.5h microbreak schedule struck the right balance

	Measure	1h Microbreak Schedule	1.5h Microbreak Schedule
Wellbeing	Restfulness	**Improved more**	Improved
	Focus	**Improved more**	Improved
	Stress Reduction	No change	**Slightly improved**
	PANAS Attribute Gains	8 improved	**12 improved**
Productivity	AHT Reduction	Improved	**Largest Improvement**
	Accuracy Improvements	No change	**Improved**

The Learnings From Our Microbreaks Study

Key takeaways and organizational implications from a real-world experiment

Implications, Limitations, Future Directions

1. Implications

- Aligns with recovery theories like the Effort-Recovery Model and Conservation of Resources Theory
- Structured 5-minute breaks every 1.5 hours enhance focus, emotional regulation, and task performance
- Microbreaks can be scalably embedded into workflows using automation (e.g., Teams prompts)
- Clear break-taking guidelines + leadership modeling can help shift workplace culture, especially in Asian contexts

2. Limitations

- Participants assigned by operational teams, not randomization → potential group-level bias
- Conducted during active workplace initiatives → difficult to isolate microbreaks' effects, esp. for RTC-10
- Relied on self-reported data for mood/stress — subject to social desirability and recall bias
- Findings may not fully generalize to all Trust & Safety workflows or geographies

3. Future Directions

- Incorporate physiological metrics (e.g., HRV, cortisol, EEG) for richer understanding
- Explore AI-personalized microbreak scheduling based on workload or attention states
- Conduct longitudinal studies to measure sustained impact over time
- Examine synergy between microbreaks and other operational or wellbeing interventions

Thank you!

"Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes – including you". - Anne Lamott

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Please let us know if you have any questions, comments, or suggestions!

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