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Proceeding Paper

Coffee in the Workplace: A Social Break or a Performance Enhancer? †

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Abstract: Coffee is a socially rooted drink with pharmacological properties. It is embedded in different everyday rituals, including 'coffee breaks' during working hours. This paper analyzes the role of coffee at workplace. Focusing on three professional areas associated with high pressure and responsive demands, we explore the social expression of coffee use at work, and how it is mobilized as a tool for managing sleepiness, fatigue, stress, and concentration problems, amongst other work-related issues.

Keywords: coffee; caffeine; workplace; performance management

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1. Introduction

As a common beverage in many societies, daily coffee consumption is embedded in different social rituals [1], including the 'coffee breaks' routines at workplace. Besides being a socially rooted drink, coffee's main bioactive compound (caffeine) is claimed to have cognitive enhancing properties associated with fatigue reduction and improvement of mental alertness, concentration, and short-term memory, amongst other performative effects and benefits [2]. Yet, the effect of chronic coffee consumption on the brain is currently starting to be studied [3]. In a context of increasingly competitive economies, where the work rhythms and performance demands are extremely high in many professional environments, what is the role of coffee in managing everyday imperatives at work? Focusing on individuals working in three professional areas—public security, social communication, and healthcare—associated with high pressure and responsive demands, this paper explores the social expression of the use of this stimulant, and how it is mobilized to deal with various issues, including sleepiness, fatigue, stress, and concentration problems.

2. Materials and Methods

This paper draws on an ongoing sociological study on 'performance consumptions' at work, i.e., the use of medicines, food supplements, and other products to improve physical, intellectual, and social performance in the workplace, in Portugal. The analysis presented below is based on qualitative data from seven focus group discussions with a total of 33 participants, and on the interim results of a quantitative survey applied to workers from the three professional areas mentioned above (n = 406). The study was approved by the ethics committee of Egas Moniz and all the participants gave informed written consent to contribute.

3. Results and Discussion

A major critical aspect identified across all professions relates to a time dimension. This regards not only the high number of working hours but also the intensive pace of work, the predominance of irregular working hours (mainly due to rotating shift systems or flexible schedules), multitasking, and the need to quickly adapt to new practices and routines. According to the survey, almost half of the respondents work more than eight hours a day, 40% accumulate different professional activities, and 50% work night shifts. Thus, unsurprisingly, most respondents consider their work rhythms as very, or excessively, intense. Overall, professional demands are high in different domains, particularly concerning intellectual (concentration, mental agility, memorization) and relational (emotional control, communication, conflict management) performance. This has implications on sleep patterns, both in terms of quantity and quality of sleep, which, in turn, also affects work performance—as a vicious cycle.

In these highly demanding professional environments, the pressure for both intellectual and relational performance often leads to the adoption of different strategies to manage stress, increase alertness, improve concentration, and be more productive. In these working contexts, coffee appears as a central resource in managing everyday work performance. According to the survey, 86% of the respondents usually drink coffee on a daily basis. Most coffee users drink up to four cups a day, but, in some cases, intake is much higher. Such high consumption (i.e., five or more coffees daily) is particularly expressive among participants who work for long hours (especially those working 9 to 12 h a day, 49%), who work night shifts (77%), and/or who have other complementary professional activities (47%). Despite the known potential side effects of coffee, where high doses (more than 400mg, cf. EFSA [4]) not only exceed the beneficial ceiling that has been reported as effective for certain performance purposes but may also negatively affect the very concerns caffeine is aimed to address (e.g., increasing anxiety [3]), there is a general reliance on drinking coffee, more than, for instance, on using medicines or food supplements for similar purposes. Among other aspects, the broad acceptance of such a daily consumption practice is linked to its ambivalent social status, as both a substance with pharmacological properties and a common beverage both inside and outside work. While most coffee users' main goal is to stay awake during working hours, more than a third of the survey respondents use it with the aim of having a short break during working time. These coffee breaks are described as moments to decompress, to stretch out the body, to get fresh ideas, and, many times, to socialize with colleagues—which may, as well, have a positive impact on both intellectual and relational performance.

Such multifaceted purposes of coffee use—both social and functional—and its social legitimacy in performance management makes it a privileged tool for managing increasingly fundamental aspects of professional life, which needs further research.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of Egas Moniz (protocol code CE 857, approved on the 20 February 2020).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented are not publicly available, as this was not included in the informed consent obtained from study participants.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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