

The Link Between Workload and Unfinished Tasks and the Role of Self-management

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Abstract

Research has identified possible detrimental consequences of unfinished tasks (Syrek et al., 2017; Syrek & Antoni, 2014; Weigelt et al., 2019; Weigelt & Syrek, 2017). However, contemporary research has focused on the consequences and has left the antecedents largely unexplored. Our study aimed to identify antecedents of unfinished task and look at behaviors that might influence the relationship between workload and unfinished tasks. We argue that workload is a logical antecedent of unfinished tasks since without any form of workload, unfinished tasks cannot exist. Therefore, we expect that workload is one of the main predictors of unfinished tasks. Simply reducing workload to help alleviate the pressure of unfinished tasks may not always be a feasible option (Bowling & Kirkendall, 2012). Also, research has found that inefficient management is one of the more common problems in businesses (Bowling et al., 2015). Therefore, we expect that self-regulatory behaviors, such as self-management, could be beneficial strategies to weaken the link between workload and unfinished tasks. We conducted a survey (n = 133) that consisted of multiple-item scales and used a cross-sectional research design to explore these antecedents and the relationship with unfinished tasks. We hypothesized that workload is positively correlated with unfinished tasks and that planning and goal setting moderate this relationship. Our data analysis revealed a significant correlation between workload and unfinished tasks. However, we did not manage to find the interaction effect we had expected. The results suggest that employees are not destined for unfinished tasks even under high workload conditions, highlighting the potential benefits of self-regulatory behaviors, such as self-management, to manage workload effectively.

Keywords: Workload, self-management, unfinished tasks, planning and goal setting

The Link Between Workload and Unfinished Tasks and the Role of Self-management

Research on unfinished tasks started almost a century ago with the classical study (Zeigarnik, 1927). Even though the research started a long time ago, studies on unfinished tasks are still relevant in contemporary research (Syrek et al., 2017; Weigelt & Syrek, 2017; Weigelt et al., 2019). Research on the effects of unfinished tasks has identified possible detrimental effects on the well-being of workers. For example, a lack of psychological detachment from work (Smit, 2015; Weigelt & Syrek, 2017) and sleep impairment (Syrek & Antoni, 2014). Understanding what causes unfinished tasks could help alleviate this issue. The predominant focus of these studies is on the consequences of unfinished tasks. However, only a few studies have examined the antecedents of unfinished tasks (Smit, 2015). We believe that the identified gap should be investigated since it might help us understand why we have unfinished tasks and where they come from. Workload is an obvious cause of unfinished tasks. One could argue that the relationship between workload and unfinished tasks is almost trivial. For example, when the workload of an employee is higher than they can manage, it is more likely they will end up with unfinished tasks. However, simply reducing the workload of employees might not always be a feasible option. Since employees often don't have much influence over their workloads, as organizational management often dictates their workloads (Bowling & Kirkendall, 2012). In addition, researchers found that a common issue in many businesses is the inefficient management of workload (Bowling et al., 2015). Therefore, we want to look at behaviors that might be adaptive for successfully coping with a high workload instead of simply reducing it. Research suggests that people who practice self-management behaviors actively monitor their environment for ways to improve their efficiency and consequently, their success in the workplace (Jeffrey, 1974). Furthermore, self-management can be inexpensive compared to external rewards and control systems, used by organizations. In addition, some research suggests that behavior is usually maintained more successfully when it is self-reinforced,

compared to when it is externally regulated (Jeffrey, 1974). Due to changing organizational demands, self-management may be increasingly important in modern businesses (Castaneda et al., 1999). For example, with the gradually increasing of people working from home, self-management would not only be a useful tool but also a necessary one, due to the decreased levels of supervision (Castaneda et al., 1999).

The goal of this study is to expand the research on unfinished tasks and fill the identified gap in the research. In addition, we aim to shed light on whether the self-management behavior of planning influences the relationship between workload and unfinished tasks. We want to focus on integrating the concepts of workload, proactive behavior, self-management, and unfinished tasks, adding to the research on unfinished tasks (Syrek & Antoni, 2014; Weigelt et al., 2019; Weigelt & Syrek, 2017).

The Link Between Workload and Unfinished Tasks

Workload and unfinished tasks are unmistakably related to one another. Workload refers to “an all-encompassing term that includes any variable reflecting the amount or difficulty of one’s work” (Bowling & Kirkendall, 2012, p. 222). We suggest that, without any form of workload, unfinished tasks cannot exist. So inevitably, workload is the most obvious precursor to unfinished tasks. Unfinished tasks refer to “tasks that the employee aimed to finish (or make certain progress), but which were left undone (or left in an unsatisfactory state) when the employee stopped working” (Syrek et al., 2017, p. 227).

The link between workload and unfinished tasks has not been extensively investigated. However, considering the relevance of this topic we found it important to further investigate the link between these two constructs, even though the link is almost trivial. To our knowledge, the only article linking some form of workload to unfinished tasks is the article by Syrek et al. (2017). They investigated the link between time pressure and unfinished tasks and found the two variables to be positively correlated. However, this is the only evidence we found linking

the two variables. Hence the importance of this study. Given the information presented in this paragraph, we expect workload and unfinished tasks to be positively correlated.

Hypothesis 1. Workload and unfinished tasks will be positively correlated.

Self-management (Planning)

When an employee has unfinished tasks at the end of the workday/week, a discrepancy arises between the aspired goal and what was achieved at the end of the day/week. Drawing on control theory, people are driven to reduce the discrepancy between the aspired goal and the achieved goal (Carver & Scheier, 1982). In addition, researchers found that achieving personal goals is essential to people's affective well-being (Gabriel et al., 2011; Harris et al., 2003; Klug & Maier, 2015). According to control theory (Carver & Scheier, 1982), individuals try to diminish these discrepancies by using self-regulatory and goal-directed behaviors. One of these self-regulatory behaviors is Self-Management. According to (Castaneda et al., 1999), self-management offers numerous advantages for organizations. Individuals practice self-management when they “manage their own behaviors by setting personal standards, evaluating their performance in terms of these standards, and by self-administering consequences based on their self-evaluations” (Manz & Sims, 1980, p. 362). To measure self-management behaviors we used the SMPS developed by Castaneda et al. (1999). They identified four self-management practices, which refer to, planning/goal setting, catch-up activities, access management, and emotion management. In this paper, we would like to focus on self-management practices, more specifically planning and goal setting. For the sake of simplicity, from now on, when we mention planning, we are referring to both planning and goal setting.

Studies have highlighted the benefits of self-management behaviors very frequently. For example, researchers have found a link between self-management and career satisfaction (Raabe et al., 2007). In addition, planning is a crucial self-regulatory mechanism that facilitates

effective development towards one or more goals (Diefendorff & Lord, 2003). Other researchers found that, specific goals led to increased performance (Latham & Yukl, 1975). Similar research has shown that adhering to a determined strategy results in enhanced task performance (Diefendorff & Lord, 2003). In addition, Diefendorff & Lord (2003) have suggested that people can overcome problems of action by using planning. For example, planning could help getting started on a task, complete tasks faster and persevere through setbacks (Beckmann & Gollwitzer, 1987; Gollwitzer et al., 1990a; Gollwitzer et al., 1990b; Gollwitzer & Brandstätter, 1997; Gollwitzer & Kinney, 1989; Heckhausen & Gollwitzer, 1987; Orbell & Sheeran, 2000).

Drawing on control theory, which argues that people try to diminish the discrepancy between the aspired goal and the achieved goal (Carver & Scheier, 1982). We argue that assuming employees strive to finish all their tasks at the end of the week, self-regulatory behaviors such as planning could help employees come closer to their aspired goals. Taking into account the benefits of planning and goal-setting named in the previous paragraph such as increased performance (Latham & Yukl, 1975), overcoming problems of action, and effective development towards goals (Diefendorff & Lord, 2003). We expect that this self-management practice could help employees oversee their workload better and end up with fewer unfinished tasks at the end of the week, even in the face of high levels of workload. In other words, planning will weaken the link between workload and unfinished tasks. Conversely, we expect that when individuals do not engage in these adaptive planning behaviors the link between workload and unfinished tasks will be stronger.

Hypothesis 2 Planning will have a moderating effect on the link between workload and unfinished tasks. More specifically, planning will weaken the link between workload and unfinished tasks.

Methods

Participants

We recruited a total of 113 participants (69 females, 44 males, $M_{age} = 44.21$, $SD = 13.52$) in this study. Participants were recruited through a convenience sampling strategy. The students conducting the survey reached out to their personal and professional networks to ask for participation with the help of cover letters via email. Participation was anonymous and no person-identifying information was captured. The participants represented a diverse array of backgrounds, including various professions, from which 73 were Slovenian, 23 were Dutch, and 17 had other nationalities from different fields of occupation. The sample consisted mainly of working adults. On average, participants worked 36.3 hours per week ($SD = 12.32$).

Research Design and Procedure

We conducted a cross-sectional self-report survey study. We compiled validated measures to a survey consisting of 42 items. The scale aimed at identifying self-management behaviors that can help in coping with high levels of workload. All materials and communications were provided in English, Dutch, and Slovenian. Since the items we used were all in English we used translation-back translation to make sure the meaning that was conveyed was the same across the different languages. Ethical approval was obtained from the university's research ethics board, ensuring that all procedures complied with psychological research ethical standards.

Measures

Workload

For the assessment of workload, we used a five-item scale by Spector and Jex (1998), a self-report measure of job stressors and strain. Participants were asked to provide information

on the strain that the tasks have on the employees and whether they are in situations where the job requires them to work fast or have a vast number of tasks to be finished. Questions were answered on a 5-point Likert scale (1= less than once per month or never, 5= several times per day). An example item is: “How often does your job require you to work very fast?” (see Appendix A). The workload subscale we used was highly reliable ($\alpha = .879$).

Unfinished tasks

For the assessment of unfinished tasks, we used the scale by Syrek et al. (2017). We asked participants to assess their performance at the workplace at the end of the week. The scale consisted of six items. An example of an item is “At the end of a working week, I have not completed important tasks that I wanted to do.” Participants responded to statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha for the six items was .903.

Self-management, planning and goal setting

We used the planning and goal-setting sub-scale of the Self-Management Practices Scale (SMPS) developed by Castaneda et al. (1999) to assess self-management. The subscale we used, consists of seven items. Participants answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1: ‘I never do this’ to 5: ‘I always do this’. An example item on the scale is: “I plan out my day before beginning to work.” The subscale asked participants to indicate how often they performed the specific planning and goal-setting behaviors. To establish the reliability of the subscale we used Cronbach’s alpha (0.785).

Results

Workload and Unfinished Tasks

To analyze our main effect and the effect of the moderator planning we will draw on the correlational survey data and more specifically regression analysis. For our main effect between Workload and Unfinished Tasks, we found a positive correlation ($r = 0.33$, $p < .001$). The data yielded no significant correlational effect between planning and unfinished tasks and between workload and planning as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics

Variable	N	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Age	111	44.27	13.52	-	-	-	-
2. Workload	113	3.11	1	0.188	<i>0.879</i>	-	-
3. UT	113	2.11	0.76	0.125	0.330*	<i>0.903</i>	-
4. Planning	113	3.39	0.71	0.076	0.101	0.109	<i>0.789</i>

Note: * $p < 0.001$. UT is an abbreviation for our dependent variable Unfinished Tasks.

Cronbach's alpha is reported in italics across the correlational matrix diagonal.

Self-Management (Planning)

In our second hypothesis, we argued that workload and planning interact to predict unfinished tasks. More specifically we hypothesized that when planning is low the link will be the strongest and when planning is high the link will be weaker. For analyzing the data, we standardized the independent variable (workload), moderator (planning), the interaction, and the dependent variable. After careful analysis of the data, we found a significant relationship between workload and unfinished tasks ($B=.252$, $SE=.07$, $t=3.616$, $p<0.001$). However, we found no evidence that our moderator (planning) strengthens or weakens the relationship between workload and unfinished tasks ($B=.048$, $SE=.78$, $t=-.606$, $p=0.545$).

Table 2

Regression coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	VIF
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
(Constant)	.006	.090		0.070	.945	-
Workload	.332	.092	0.332	3.616	<.001	1.039
Planning	.072	.091	0.072	0.790	0.431	1.017
Interaction	-.063	.103	-0.055	-0.606	0.545	1.032

a. Dependent Variable: standardized composite score of unfinished tasks

Assumption Checks

To make sure the data was adequate for analysis we performed multiple additional assumption checks (See Appendix A). The tests we performed looked for abnormalities in linearity, normality of residuals, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity. To check for multicollinearity, we used the VIF scores which can be found in Table 2. Regarding linearity and the normality of residuals, we found no violations of the assumptions. The homoscedasticity assumption check showed signs of heteroscedasticity. However, it is only a very slight effect, so we have decided not to take it into account.

Discussion

This study builds on previously conducted research on unfinished tasks (Syrek et al., 2017; Syrek & Antoni, 2014; Weigelt et al., 2019; Weigelt & Syrek, 2017). These studies scrutinized the detrimental consequences of unfinished tasks, such as sleep impairment (Syrek & Antoni, 2014) and psychological detachment from work (Smit, 2015; Weigelt & Syrek, 2017). Since unfinished tasks could lead to these unwanted consequences it is especially relevant to investigate the antecedents of unfinished tasks. We set out to explore whether the amount of workload an employee has is related to unfinished tasks at the end of the week. While the connection between these two variables seems almost trivial, we found it relevant to

investigate this relationship, nevertheless. In addition, we scrutinized whether adaptive self-regulatory behaviors, such as planning and goal setting, moderated the relationship between workload and unfinished tasks.

As we had expected, the data indicated that individuals with a higher workload also had more unfinished tasks at the end of the week. We found a positive correlation; however, it was only moderate. Furthermore, we did not find the evidence for our suggested interaction effect including our moderator planning to our model.

Theoretical and practical implications

In our investigation into the antecedents of unfinished tasks, we found that workload only had a moderate correlation to unfinished tasks. What is remarkable is the fact that workload and unfinished tasks were not as highly correlated as we had expected. This suggests that we are not destined to end up with unfinished tasks when confronted with a high workload. People take an active role in adapting to their workload and are able to manage their tasks. Many adaptive strategies for adapting to workload exist, such as job crafting (Lopper et al., 2024) and self-leadership (Harari et al., 2021). However, we did not manage to find evidence for the effect of planning, since neither planning nor the interplay of workload and planning explained the variance of unfinished tasks, but other strategies might. Even though we did not manage to find evidence for our interaction effect, we still believe that encouraging self-regulatory behaviors such as planning and goal-setting could be beneficial for successful organizational performance. Educating staff members on efficient goal-setting and planning strategies helps improve their task management. For example, training employees how to prioritize tasks and breaking down larger projects into more manageable pieces can help employees finish their tasks even though their workload is high. By providing this kind of training and encouraging these behaviors, companies may provide their employees with the right tools to effectively and efficiently handle their workload and reduce their unfinished tasks.

This could ultimately result in fewer negative consequences related to unfinished tasks and consequently, this could also improve well-being and job satisfaction.

The lack of significant effects of planning on unfinished tasks and the expected interaction effect also suggest that we should broaden our search for self-management and other self-regulatory strategies that might be adaptive for managing high workload and unfinished tasks. For instance, recent studies on self-leadership (Harari et al., 2021) and job-crafting (Lopper et al., 2024) are promising. These are topics that could be further scrutinized, in combination with variables such as workload and unfinished tasks to investigate their effectiveness in organizations.

Lastly, the moderate correlation between workload and unfinished tasks was lower than we had expected. This could mean that people with high workload are not destined to end up with unfinished tasks. However, it could also mean that there are other predictor variables, that describe a similar construct as workload, that might be more suited to predict unfinished tasks. For example, time pressure, included in similar research on unfinished tasks (Syrek et al., 2017) showed a moderate to high correlation with unfinished tasks. However, it is unclear whether workload and time pressure, which seem to be similar constructs, make a significant difference since the scales are also similar.

Strengths and limitations

We used already evaluated survey items to measure our variables. Yielding high Cronbach's alpha to assess reliability, making the data appropriate for analysis. Also, we found no outliers, and the assumptions we used for our data analysis were not violated. This means that our data was satisfactory for data analysis. The cross-sectional design also has its strengths. We used this research design to provide initial evidence on this topic.

However, since we used a cross-sectional research design, it is not possible to draw causal conclusions. Since the measurement of workload planning and unfinished tasks were all

measured at a single point in time. Compared to a longitudinal design which records these measurements at multiple points in time. Consequently, we are not able to say whether workload precedes unfinished tasks. Consequently, it is also possible that unfinished tasks cause more workload. For example, it is possible that workload distributed over a year may not seem high. However, the workload might add up if there is no urgency to finish tasks on time. When the deadline is near the pressure to finish everything on time might give the impression that workload is high. However, this type of high workload is not only the result of management from organizations but also due to the behavior of an employee. This way the workload would be caused by unfinished tasks and behaviors, such as procrastination.

In addition, our sample size, albeit very reasonable with 113 participants, could be an explanation of the non-significant correlations and interactions. We did not manage to find evidence for whether there was an interaction between workload and planning and the effect on unfinished tasks. However, a larger sample size may be able to detect smaller effects and we would be able to state with more certainty whether these variables affected unfinished tasks or not since one of the most important factors for power in statistical tests is sample size (Murphy et al., 2014).

Finally, there are certain drawbacks to the fact that our three most important measures (workload, planning, and unfinished tasks) are all based on self-report questions. The self-reported measurements of these three variables may not always align with the actual, objective, values of these variables. The reliance on perceived values could therefore cause discrepancies. Potentially affecting the accuracy and validity of the findings. For example, our variable planning and goal setting was measured similarly to workload using self-report questions. However, a difference between planning and the execution of the planned action may exist. This would mean that there is a discrepancy between how well someone thinks they plan and how well they execute their plan. Since our scale measures the perceived planning of

individuals and not how well they plan, it can interfere with the result of the study. This might explain the lack of a direct correlation between planning and unfinished tasks, as well as the lack of an interaction effect.

Future research

Since the proposed research model did not explain as much of the variance as we had expected it is important to continue the research on unfinished tasks and their antecedents to be able to better understand where unfinished tasks come from. For example, time pressure could be an interesting variable to include in our model since it might be a more accurate predictor for unfinished tasks. The paper by Syrek et al. (2017) looked at the relationship between time pressure and unfinished tasks and found a moderate positive correlation ($r=0.49$, $p=0.01$). This is a bigger correlation than we managed to find since when we looked at the correlations between workload and unfinished tasks, we only managed to find a weak positive correlation. As a result, time pressure might prove to be a better fit for explaining variance in unfinished tasks. Even though the correlation between the two variables was found, no extensive research on this relationship was conducted. This is why it is important to further scrutinize this link.

The cross-sectional design creates a picture of the relationship between workload, planning, and unfinished tasks at a single point in time. It would be interesting to see whether this relationship changes when measurements in multiple different moments are made to see whether an increase in workload would increase unfinished tasks. This would be possible when we use a longitudinal research design. A longitudinal design is seen as a superior research design compared to cross-sectional research. The study of Spector (2019), suggests that a daily diary design could help to overcome the causality issue of the cross-sectional research design. This would enable us to see whether workload and other antecedents such as time pressure or self-management behaviors cause unfinished tasks.

Conclusion

This study aimed to find antecedents of unfinished tasks and fill the research gap we identified in the introduction. Namely, the lack of research on the antecedents of unfinished tasks. We scrutinized whether workload was linked to unfinished tasks and whether self-management behaviors had a moderating effect on this relationship. Our first hypothesis was supported. We found evidence for the link between workload and unfinished tasks. However, the correlation between the two variables was smaller than we had expected. Our second hypothesis was not supported, unfortunately. Our moderator, planning, and goal setting did not seem to have an interactive effect on the relationship between workload and unfinished tasks. Our findings suggest that people are not predestined to unfinished tasks, even when workload is high. It seems that employees are able to use adaptive strategies to manage higher workload. However, it is unclear whether planning and goal-setting strategies are helpful, as no evidence for the direct effect of planning or the interplay of workload and planning on unfinished tasks was found.

A bigger sample size might be able to detect smaller effects and could be an improvement for future research. In addition, a longitudinal design would enable us to support causality in our research design. This would be an improvement since we would be able to say whether our variables precede unfinished tasks.

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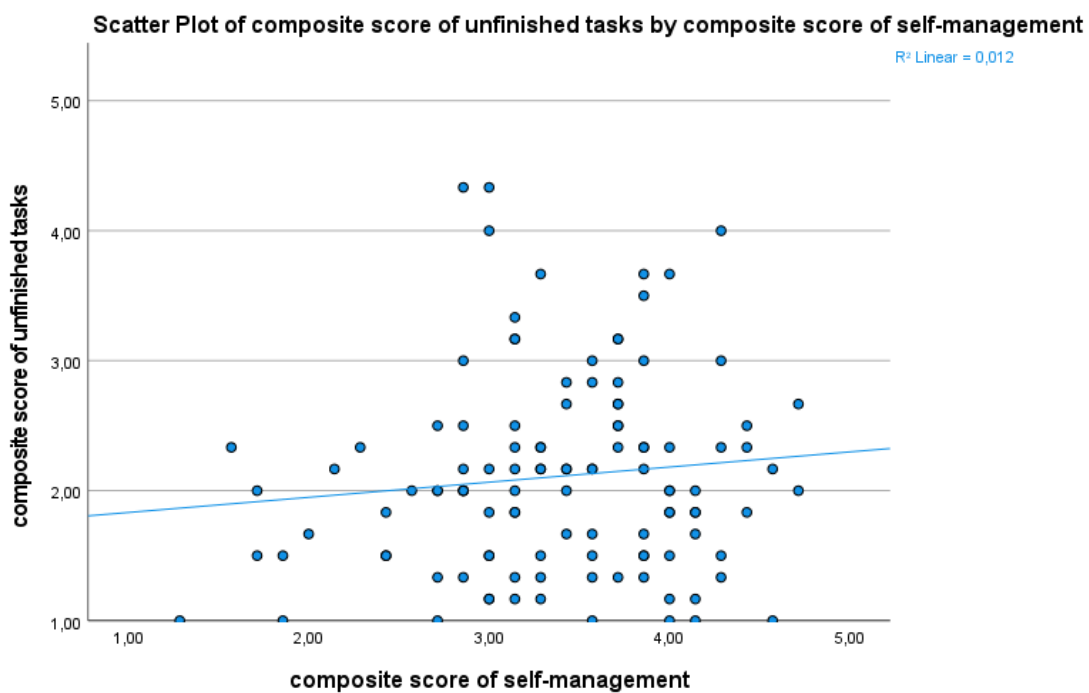
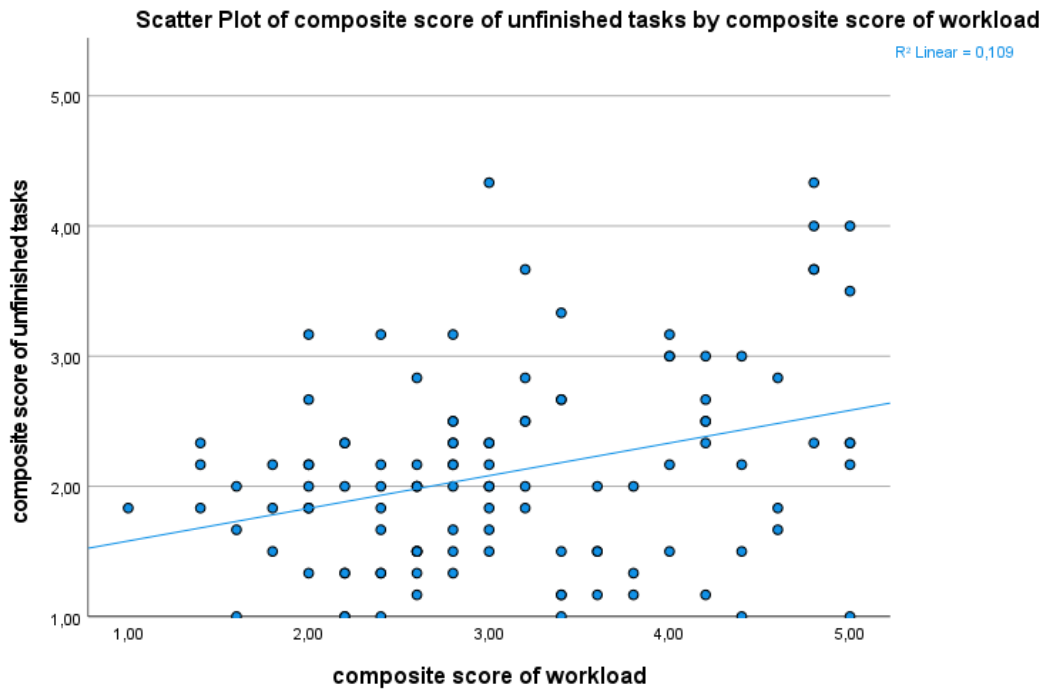
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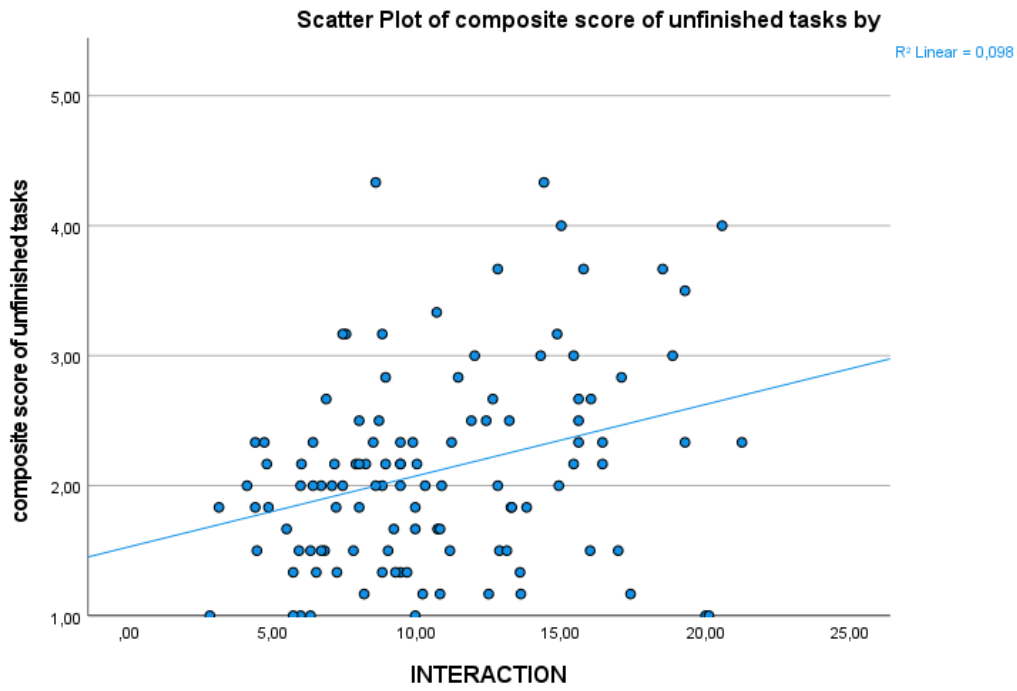
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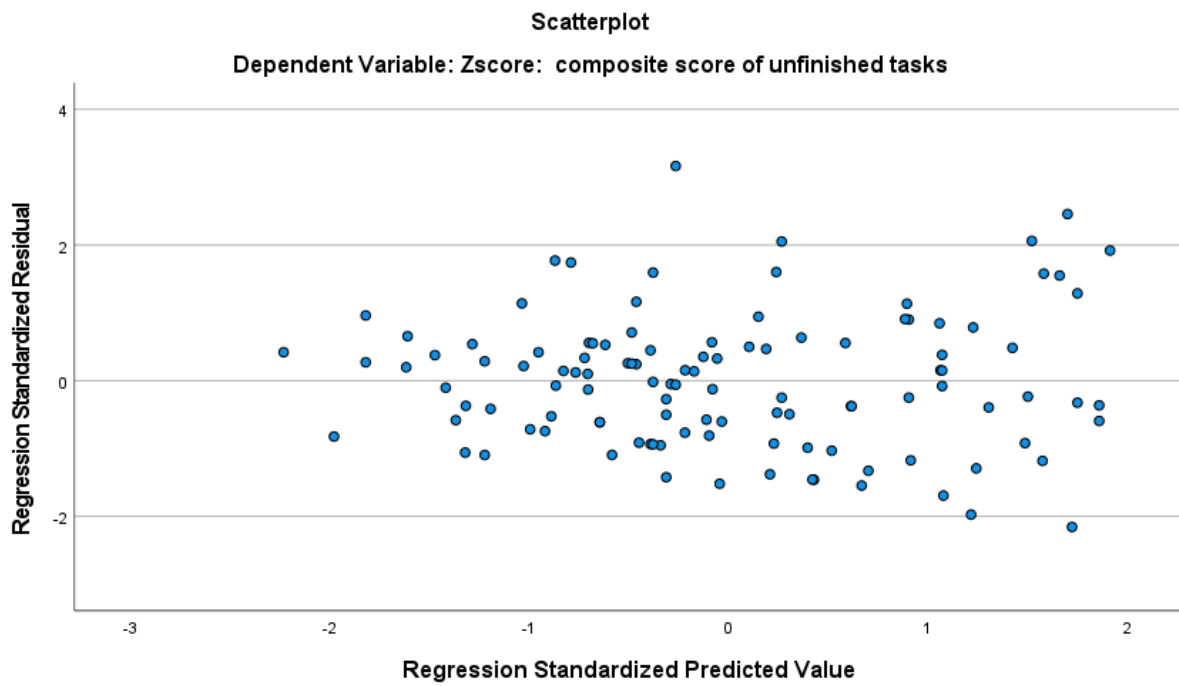
Appendix A

Linearity





Homoscedasticity



Normality of residuals

