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Title

Feeling Supported and Engaged During COVID-19: The Role of Family and Colleagues in Promoting Teachers' Well-being

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Abstract

The present study aimed at analysing the impact of teachers' perceived family and colleague support and work engagement on their well-being and life satisfaction during the first European wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. While implementing distance learning and complying with school closures, 1036 Italian teachers took part in an online survey. A structural equation path model showed that perceiving to be supported by family members directly influenced teachers' well-being and life satisfaction. The perceived support of colleagues promoted life satisfaction directly and indirectly via increased teachers' work engagement, whereas teachers' well-being only indirectly. Our findings offer insights into how to better support teachers during times of crisis by creating a good and healthy work environment, which promotes teachers' well-being.

Keywords: COVID-19, Teachers, Social support, Work engagement, Well-being, Life satisfaction.

Introduction

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, several countries imposed unprecedented measures to prevent the spread of the virus. School closure was the first enforced in Italy: From March 2020, the schools of the whole country closed until the end of the school year (June 2020; Presidency of the Council of Ministers, 2020). In this completely new situation, teachers worked on the front lines of the pandemic (Pressley et al., 2021), changing their personal life and adjusting to new working conditions to provide students with education.

Consequently, teachers expressed numerous concerns and worries (e.g., the loss of value in teaching; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Author, 2021), felt a high level of anxiety and stress, and reported a lower level of well-being and resilience (e.g., Alves et al., 2021). Furthermore, since teachers faced unprecedented professional challenges, such as implementing a new form of schooling (i.e., distance learning) and merging family and work environments, they experienced high levels of emotional exhaustion, task stress, job ambiguity (Chan et al., 2021) and low levels of job satisfaction (Hilger et al., 2021).

To cope with this situation, self-efficacy (Author, 2021) and adaptive coping strategies (Talidad & Toquero, 2020) helped teachers face these challenges. Thus far, however, only a few studies have attempted to determine other factors that may have protected teachers' well-being (for instance, see Hilger et al., 2021).

The present study aimed at understanding what resources may have helped teachers navigate the personal and professional challenges the COVID-19 pandemic brought about. Based on research conducted on the general population (e.g., Grey et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021), this study focused on how perceived social support, i.e., family and colleague support, may have promoted well-being and life satisfaction among Italian teachers. Furthermore, we also explored the effects of social support in boosting teachers' work engagement, a positive job-related state of mind that may have contributed to fostering teachers' general mental health (i.e., well-being and life satisfaction).

The Role of Social Support in Fostering Well-Being and Life Satisfaction

Social support indicates the perception or experience of being loved, cared for by others, as well as the feeling that people are available to provide support (Wills, 1991). Research suggests that the mere perception of availability of social support can promote positive effects (Taylor, 2011). The perceived support can be informational (i.e., based on information or advice), instrumental (i.e., based on tangible help), and emotional (i.e., based on warmth and affective aid), and it derives from different sources, both formal (e.g., from colleagues and supervisors) and informal (e.g., from family and friends, see Taylor, 2011).

Converging evidence prior to the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that social support from colleagues fosters teachers' job satisfaction, positive affect, and life satisfaction (e.g., Cenkseven-Önder & Sari, 2009) and prevents negative emotions and aversive states from arising (Mahan et al., 2010). What is more, family support was also associated with lower teachers' stress related to school events (Lo Presti et al., 2016). In the same line, it is possible to argue that perceived support provided by colleagues and family members may have helped teachers navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, thus promoting their well-being.

Well-being has been conceptualised in different ways. Although it is generally defined as a subjective condition characterised by positive emotions, scholars disagree on what other features can enrich this definition (McDowell, 2010). Without delving into this debate (for a discussion see Chen et al., 2013), we framed well-being considering the definition of subjective well-being proposed by Diener (2009), namely the subjective perceptions of affective states in addition to life satisfaction. Affective states indicate the affective evaluation of positive moods and emotions, whereas life satisfaction refers to the cognitive assessment of the degree to which a person positively evaluates their life as a whole. We disentangled and measured both emotional and cognitive aspects. For the sake of clarity, we refer to positive affective states with the term *well-being*, and to cognitive assessment with the concept of *life satisfaction*.

Work Engagement: A Boost to Teachers' Well-Being and Life Satisfaction

Work engagement is defined as a ‘positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind’ (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p. 74) characterised by vigour (high levels of energy while working), dedication (a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration), and absorption (being fully concentrated in one’s work). When job resources, such as social support or job autonomy, are high, work engagement increases, boosting positive outcomes, such as well-being (Schaufeli, 2017).

It is well documented that teachers’ work engagement is promoted by social support from colleagues (e.g., Bakker et al., 2008). One study with Italian teachers found that family support as well is related to higher teachers’ work engagement (Fiorilli et al., 2019). Therefore, it is possible to argue that during COVID-19 pandemic, perceiving to be supported by colleagues and family members may have led teachers to feel engaged in their job, despite the stressful situation related to the restrictions.

Furthermore, several studies pointed out that work engagement protects teachers from the insurgence of mental health issues (Simbula & Guglielmi, 2013), anxiety, loss of confidence, and social dysfunction (Pepe et al., 2019). High levels of teachers’ work engagement are associated with lower levels of negative emotions as well as higher level of positive emotions (Burić & Macuka, 2018) and intention to stay within an occupation (Mérida-López et al., 2020). Work engagement may therefore have become an additional boost to promote teachers’ well-being and life satisfaction during school closures.

The Present Study

Based on these premises, this study aimed at testing whether social support perceived by Italian teachers affected their well-being and life satisfaction directly and indirectly, via increased work engagement. In other words, colleague and family support may have promoted teachers’ well-being and life satisfaction directly as well as sustained teachers’ feeling of engagement in their job while complying with the COVID-19 pandemic prevention measures. Work engagement, in turn, may have boosted teachers’ well-being and life satisfaction. Accordingly, we hypothesised that (H1) family support was positively related to teachers’ well-being and life satisfaction directly

(H1a) and indirectly via increased work engagement (H1b) as well as (H2) colleague support was positively related to teachers' well-being and life satisfaction directly (H2a) and indirectly via increased work engagement (H2b).

The present study was conducted in Italy during the last month of the school year (mid-May/beginning of June 2020). At that time, the Italian Government had enforced country-wide school closures since March 2020. Teachers were asked to provide students with education and instruction by implementing distance learning, namely online lessons, group discussions, explanations, and transmission of teaching materials to stimulate learning. Each school managed distance learning by considering its context's needs and resources. In some cases, schools provided technical support to pupils and teachers (i.e., buying software for all teachers to support distance learning or devices for students with low SES). Following the country-wide school closures, Italian teachers had been working from home, isolated from their colleagues and school staff for two months when data collection started.

Method

Sampling Procedure and Participants

The data presented in this paper are part of a more extensive survey on teachers' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic administered to Italian teachers. After obtaining approval from the University Ethical Board, we contacted school Principals of all schools (N = 360) from three Italian regions (Emilia-Romagna, Marche, and Sardinia) to ask them to share the questionnaire among teachers at their schools. We chose these regions according to their geographical area (North, Center, and South). Participation was voluntary, and participants agreed with the consent form presented at the beginning of the questionnaire before filling it out.

A total of 1100 teachers filled in the questionnaire. We excluded 64 participants who have never implemented distance learning during school closures and thus, the final sample comprised 1036 teachers. Socio-demographic information is shown in Table 1.

(Table 1)

Measures

Colleague Support

The subscale Peer support of the Italian version (Balducci et al., 2015) of the Short Stress Indicator Tool (SIT-25; Edwards & Webster, 2012) was implemented. The scale comprised 3 items (e.g., *If the work becomes difficult, I can count on the help of my colleagues*), which were presented alongside a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree). We excluded one item considered inappropriate for the situation (i.e., *I receive the respect at work I deserve from my colleagues*).

Family Support

Family support was assessed using the Italian validated version (Busoni & Di Fabio, 2008) of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988). More precisely, we used the Family subdimension composed of 4 items (e.g., *I can talk with my family about my problems*). The participants reported their agreement on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Completely disagree, 7 = Completely agree).

Work Engagement

To assess teachers' work engagement, the Italian version (Balducci et al., 2010) of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9; Schaufeli et al., 2006) was used. The scale is composed of 9 items divided into 3 subdimensions: Vigor (e.g., *I feel full of energy in my work*), Dedication (e.g., *I am proud of my work*), Absorption (e.g., *I'm immersed in my work*). Participants replied on a 7-point Likert scale (0 = Never, 6 = Every day). Since the items of Absorption dimension were not normally distributed (i.e., Skewness - 1.069/ - 3.160; Kurtosis - 0.66/12.297), we transformed all the items of the three subscales by squaring them (Barbaranelli & D'Olimpio, 2011).

Life Satisfaction

The Italian validated version (Di Fabio & Ghizzani, 2007) of Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) was used to assess life satisfaction. This scale is composed of 5 items

(e.g., *In many ways, my life is close to my ideal.*) presented alongside a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree).

Well-being

The World Health Organization Well-being Index (WHO-5; WHO Regional Office for Europe, 1998, see Topp et al., 2015) was used to assess well-being. This scale measures mental health considering only positive affective states, and it comprises 5 items (e.g., *During the last two weeks, I felt happy and in a good mood*). The participants responded on a 6-point Likert scale (0 = Never, 5 = Always).

The online questionnaire also comprised demographic questions, namely, age, gender, school level, teaching experience, and living situation (i.e., if teachers lived alone or not during school closures). The exact wording of each item is presented in the Supplementary Online Materials (Table S1).

Data Analysis

We followed a stepwise procedure to test the two hypotheses. We used Mplus Version 6 (Muthén & Muthén, 2007), setting the Maximum Likelihood Robust estimator (MLR) to run all the analyses.

As a first step, we carried out a series of Confirmatory Factors Analyses (CFA) to explore the factorial structure of our variables. We used different fit indexes to assess the quality of the models, such as the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and the Standardised Root-Mean Residual (SRMR). We considered an RMSEA lower than .08 and CFI higher than .90 for an acceptable fit (Bentler, 1990; Rigdon, 1996). To compare models, we used the Satorra-Bentler scaled chi-square formula (Satorra & Bentler, 2010) and the conventional rule of thumb that the smaller the RMSEA and the larger the CFI, the better the fit.

Then, we assessed the measurement model before estimating the structural one (Figure S1 and Table S2, Supplementary Online Materials). Finally, we estimated the total, direct, and indirect

effects of our independent variables (i.e., family and colleague support) on the dependent variables (i.e., life satisfaction and well-being) via work engagement through a structural equation model.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

In Table 2, descriptive statistics, bi-variate correlations, and internal consistency of all the variables are shown.

(Table 2)

Confirmatory Factor Analyses

Social Support

As for social support, we compared two models: a one-factor model, in which all items of both scales loaded one single factor (Model 1), and a two-factor model in which the factor structures of the two scales were estimated (i.e., family and colleague support). Results are shown in Table 3. Model 2 fitted the data significantly better than Model 1. Nevertheless, Model 2 presented a value of RMSEA higher than .08 (RMSEA = 0.111), indicating a problem in the model fit. Therefore, we ran a third model with two factors (Model 3), freeing one error covariance between two items of the family support scale, as suggested by the modification indexes. Model 3 presented an excellent fit with the data, and all standardised factor loadings were significant ($p < .001$) and varied from 0.799 to 0.965.

Work Engagement

Since the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES–9) has been shown to present psychometric problems, and there is no agreement on which is the best factor structure among one-factor and three-factor models (e.g., Kulikosky, 2017, 2019), we decided to test both. First, we compared the one-factor model (Model 1) and the three-factor model (Model 2). Even though Model 2 fitted the data better than Model 1, it presented problems in some fit indices (RMSEA and TLI). We therefore correlated two items following the modification indices and Balducci and colleagues' (2010) procedure. We tested a new 3-factor model with correlations between errors

(Model 3). Model 3 showed a good fit with the data, and the standardised factor loadings were all significant ($p < .001$) and ranged from 0.212 to 0.863. Finally, to simplify the factorial structure of the structural model that we implemented next, we also estimated a model (Model 4) with a superordinate factor that comprised the three latent factors estimated in Model 3. Model 4 and Model 3 reported the same fit indices and factor loadings; thus, we did not compare the two models.

Well-being and Life Satisfaction

As for the dependent variables, we compared a one-factor model comprising all the items of both scales (Model 1) and a two-factor model in which the items of the two scales loaded on the two expected structures (Model 2). The analysis showed that Model 2 fitted the data better than Model 1, and the standardised factor loadings of Model 2 were all significant and ranged from 0.522 to 0.866.

(Table 3)

Structural Equation Model

To estimate the effect of colleague and family support on life satisfaction and well-being via work engagement, we ran a structural equation model. Participants' age, gender, school level, teaching experience, and living situation were used as controls.

Our first hypothesis (H1) was partially supported (Figure 1). Family support was positively related to life satisfaction and well-being (H1a), pointing out that teachers who perceived to be supported by family members reported higher life satisfaction levels and more positive affect. However, the perceived support from family was not significantly related to work engagement (H1b).

As for our second hypothesis (H2), the analysis showed that colleague support was directly associated with life satisfaction but not well-being (H2a). However, as expected (H2b), perceived support from colleagues was related to both teachers' well-being and life satisfaction via increased work engagement. This result pointed out that work engagement acted as a boost to enhance

teachers' well-being (indirect effect, $b = .116$, $S.E. = 0.017$, $p < .001$) and life satisfaction (indirect effect, $b = .069$, $S.E. = 0.014$, $p < .001$).

Figure 1

Results of the Structural Equation Model. Only Significant Standardised Estimates and Standard Errors Are Shown

(Figure 1)

Note. Dotted arrows indicate the not significant estimated paths. Measurement model fit, $\chi^2(284) = 634.974$, RMSEA = 0.035, 90% C.I. RMSEA = 0.031 - 0.038, CFI = 0.974, TLI = 0.970, SRMR = 0.034. Structural model fit, $\chi^2(399) = 879.869$, RMSEA = 0.035, 90% C.I. RMSEA = 0.032 - 0.038, CFI = 0.965, TLI = 0.960, SRMR = 0.040. The complete Structural Equation Model with the factor loadings are reported in Figure S1 of the Supplementary Online Materials.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Discussion

This study aimed at understanding the role of formal (e.g., colleagues) and informal (e.g., family) social support in promoting teachers' well-being and life satisfaction directly and indirectly via increased work engagement.

Descriptive statistics provided an overview of some aspects of general teachers' mental health during the first Italian school closures. Teachers of our sample reported a low level of well-being, considering that the cut-off for looking for depressive symptoms with the WHO-5 index is set at 13 (Cedrone et al., 2017). However, participants reported a slightly higher average level of life satisfaction than Italian teachers studied before the pandemic ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.25$; Lent et al., 2011). As for work engagement, our sample reported a higher average work engagement total score ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 1.07$; Simbula & Guglielmi, 2013; $M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.07$; Simbula et al., 2011) and slightly higher absorption and dedication as well as the same level of vigour ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 0.98$, $M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.12$, $M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.01$, respectively; Simbula et al., 2013), than Italian teachers

analysed before the pandemic. Although these comparisons are purely descriptive, teachers reported almost the same levels of work engagement and life satisfaction before and during the pandemic but low levels of well-being according to the criteria of the WHO-5 scale.

The most important contribution of this study is that social support played a fundamental role in fostering teachers' well-being and life satisfaction during school closures. However, family and colleague support were associated differently with these positive outcomes. As expected (H1a), family support was directly associated with higher teachers' well-being and life satisfaction. This direct relationship is consistent with other findings on how family support prevents teachers from developing stress and burnout (e.g., Lo Presti et al., 2016). Differently from previous results on Italian teachers (Fiorilli et al., 2019) and H1b, our findings did not corroborate the importance of being supported by family for enhancing teachers' work engagement.

Colleague support (H2) was associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, both directly and indirectly, via increased work engagement. Differently from our expectations, however, perceived support from colleagues was related to well-being only indirectly. These findings confirm the role of colleague support in increasing teachers' work engagement (e.g., Bakker et al., 2008; Lipscomb et al., 2021). At the same time, they corroborated the role of work engagement as a mediator between job resources (such as social support) and positive outcomes (e.g., Schaufeli, 2017). Indeed, both indirect effects were significant, demonstrating how perceiving support from colleagues enhanced firstly work engagement, and in turn, life satisfaction and well-being.

Taken together, these results pointed out that, while facing challenges and job-related changes due to school closures, Italian teachers benefited from perceived family and colleague support in different ways. On the one hand, family members were perceived as a general source of assistance, offering the warmth and emotional support required to get through difficult moments. On the other hand, teachers' perception of colleagues' support was crucial to adjust to new job-related conditions and activities. Knowing that colleagues were available if needed, that they were living the same difficulties, and they would have been willing to help and share job-related concerns

may have helped teachers feel more engaged in their jobs despite the several changes they were facing. Thus, feeling engaged in their job promoted teachers' well-being and life satisfaction.

Limitations

There are some limitations to be addressed in this study. Firstly, this is a cross-sectional study and therefore represents only a snapshot of teachers' experience during the first COVID-19 national wide lockdown and school closures. A longitudinal design may help understand teachers' experience beyond the state of emergency but facing an evolving situation and better explain the effects of social support on life satisfaction and well-being.

Secondly, we chose the WHO-5 scale among numerous assessments of well-being since it is a generic global scale suitable to measure well-being and only contains five positively phrased items (Topp et al., 2015). By using the WHO-5, this study is limited in exploring only positive affect, although subjective well-being has been conceptualised as affective evaluation of both positive and negative emotions (i.e., affective balance) over time in a person's life (Diener, 2009). Future studies would be enhanced with different strategies for measuring subjective well-being (Maddux, 2018) implementing a multimethod approach that comprises people's longer-term levels of pleasant affects and lack of unpleasant affects.

Thirdly, we used self-report instruments with Likert or frequency scales to measure social support. The findings reflect teachers' perception of social support and not the actual support they received from family members and colleagues. However, social support is a complex concept, and it is not easy to distinguish it from social embeddedness or enacted (or perceived-enacted) social support (Barrera, 1986). Future studies should consider using multiple measures to capture the multifaceted nature of social support.

Implications for Practice

Together with other recent results (e.g., Author, 2021; Collie, 2021), our findings provided new insight into how teachers can be supported during times of crisis by adopting concrete actions by school districts and school principals. On the one hand, it is fundamental to improve personal

resources. School districts and school leaders may implement strategies to directly support teachers' mental health, such as prioritising well-being and making counselling and other types of psychological and socio-emotional support available (The International Task Force on Teachers for Education, 2020). In this regard, engaging school psychologists in system level consultative opportunities may promote teachers' growth and well-being (Wood & Hampton, 2020). Furthermore, mentoring programs and peer support networks may be promoted: creating online and face-to-face spaces in which teachers can meet and exchange with their colleagues could increase their perceived formal social support and maintaining or building a healthy working relationship with colleagues, which are considered the roots for the development of teachers' resilience in adverse times (Berkovich, 2018).

Moreover, some practical strategies may be helpful in promoting instrumental, informational, and emotional social support. According to a recent study (Aarnio et al., 2021), helping teachers in planning teaching activities, promoting cooperation in teaching and pedagogical leadership could be useful strategies to foster instrumental support. The authors also suggested that sharing enthusiasm and interests and perceiving a sense of community may promote emotional support. Finally, as concerns informational support, it can be boosted through sharing of technological expertise and pedagogical development expertise.

On the other hand, to promote a positive school environment, job resources should also be increased. Some researchers highlighted the crucial role of school principal leadership in promoting teachers' well-being (Collie, 2021). More precisely, school principals should embody autonomy-supportive leadership, which increases individual empowerment and self-initiation, as well as transformational behaviours, characterised by task management orientation (Gu, 2014). Furthermore, school principals may promote collaborative relationships by supporting sharing responsibility (Author, 2018).

Increasing teachers' personal resources as well as enhancing job resources may spark teachers' work engagement (Author, 2017). Indeed, as shown by two meta-analyses (Knight et al.,

2017, 2019), effective interventions for work engagement relied on building personal and job resources, increasing workers' mental health, and decreasing stress. Therefore, developing a health-promoting school system focused on improving teachers' well-being and social support may also positively impact work engagement.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Italian Teachers (N = 1036)

	N (%)	M (SD)
Sex		
Male	146 (14.09)	
Female	890 (85.91)	
Age		49.67 (2.28)
Years of experience		18.81 (11.22)
Geographical area		
North (Emilia-Romagna)	648 (65.70)	
Centre (Marche)	234 (23.70)	
South (Sardegna)	104 (10.60)	
Degree		
High School Diploma	194 (19.60)	
Master's Degree	638 (61.68)	
Doctorate	197 (19.60)	
School level		
Primary school	359 (34.72)	
Middle school	168 (16.21)	
Secondary school	509 (49.07)	
Living situation		
With family	871 (84.07)	
With flat mates	5 (0.48)	
Alone	144 (13.90)	

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics, Bivariate Correlations, and Internal Consistency of the Variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Colleagues support	-	.20**	.26**	.25**	.22**	.22**	.23**	.09**
2. Family support		-	.09**	.09**	.08**	.04	.31**	.09**
3. Work engagement_tot			-	.93**	.90**	.78**	.27**	.34**
4. Vigour				-	.75**	.60**	.28**	.41**
5. Dedication					-	.56**	.23**	.26**
6. Absorption						-	.21**	.17**
7. Life satisfaction							-	.22**
8. Well-being								-
Max- Min	1 - 5	1 - 7	0 - 6	0 - 6	0 - 6	0 - 6	1 - 7	0 - 25
Mean (SD)	3.35 (0.96)	5.61 (1.44)	4.81 (1.12)	4.38 (1.53)	4.96 (1.32)	5.11 (0.91)	4.93 (1.22)	14.08 (5.05)
Cronbach's Alph	.94	.93	.89	.88	.84	.46	.88	.81

** $p < .01$

Table 3

Fit Indices and Model Comparison of Models Estimated Through Confirmatory Factor Analyses of All the Variables

Models	df or Δ df	χ^2 or $\Delta\chi^2$	RMSEA (C.I.)	CFI	TLI	SRMR
Social Support – family and colleagues						
Model 1 – one factor	14	1814.351	0.352 (0.339-0.366)	0.423	0.135	0.319
Model 2 – two-factor	13	177.874	0.111 (0.097-0.125)	0.947	0.915	0.018
Model 3 – two-factor modified	12	13.952	0.013 (0.000-0.035)	0.999	0.999	0.008
Model 1 vs. Model 2	1	289.471***				
Model 2 vs. Model 3	1	81.038***				
Work Engagement						
Model 1 – one factor	27	371.242	0.111 (0.101-0.121)	0.888	0.851	0.065
Model 2 – three-factor	24	253.644	0.096 (0.086-0.107)	0.925	0.888	0.060
Model 3 – three-factor modified	23	113.421	0.062 (0.051-0.073)	0.971	0.954	0.029
Model 4 – three-factor modified + superordinate factor	23	113.421	0.062 (0.051-0.073)	0.971	0.954	0.029
Model 1 vs. Model 2	3	102.857***				
Model 2 vs. Model 3	1	77.578***				
Well-being and life satisfaction						
Model 1 – two-factor	35	1105.604	0.173 (0.163- 0.181)	0.646	0.545	0.168
Model 2 – three-factor	34	129.976	0.052 (0.043- 0.062)	0.968	0.958	0.028
Model 1 vs Model 2	1	209.879***				

Note. *** $p < .001$

Figure captions

Figure 1

Results of the Structural Equation Model. Only Significant Standardised Estimates and Standard Errors Are Shown