

Reliability and responsiveness of Equivital Lifemonitor and photoplethysmography based wristwatch for the assessment of physiological parameters during a simulated fatigue task

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Abstract: Objective: To investigate test-retest reliability and responsiveness of Equivital Lifemonitor and photoplethysmography based wristwatch tools in assessing physiological parameters during a simulated fatigue task. **Methods:** Ten university students (Mean age, 30.6 ± 1.7 years) participated in this pilot study. Participants were asked to perform a 30-minute of a simulated fatigue task in an experimental setup in a lab. The physiological parameters (e.g., heart rate, heart rate variability, respiratory rate, electrodermal activity, and skin temperature) were measured at baseline and immediately after the fatigue task. An intraclass correlation coefficient ($ICC_{2,1}$) was used to evaluate the test-retest reliability of each tool in assessing physiological measures. In addition, the responsiveness of each tool to measure changes from baseline to posttest was calculated using a standardized response mean. **Results:** The Equivital Lifemonitor has shown good to excellent test-retest reliability for the assessment of heart rate ($ICC, 0.97$), heart rate variability ($ICC, 0.86$), respiratory rate ($ICC, 0.77$), and local skin temperature ($ICC, 0.76$). However, photoplethysmography based wristwatch showed moderate to good test-retest reliability for the assessment of heart rate ($ICC, 0.71$), heart rate variability ($ICC, 0.73$), electrodermal activity ($ICC, 0.80$), and skin temperature ($ICC, 0.72$). A large standardized response mean (>0.8) indicates that both tools can capture the changes in heart rate, heart rate variability, respiratory rate, skin temperature, and electrodermal activity after a 30-minute of fatigue task. **Conclusions:** The Equivital Lifemonitor and photoplethysmography based wristwatch devices are reliable in measuring physiological parameters after the fatigue task. Additionally, both devices can capture the fatigue response after a simulated construction task. Future field studies with a larger sample should investigate the sensitivity and validity of these tools in measuring physiological parameters for fatigue assessment at construction sites.

Keywords: Heart rate, reliability, skin temperature, heart rate variability, construction workers

1. INTRODUCTION

Construction industry is the most vulnerable for workplace accidents given the extremely exhausting nature of construction tasks [1]. Additionally, construction tasks are often performed under very hot and humid conditions [2]. Therefore, construction workers are prone to develop the risk of physical fatigue and fatigue-related workplace accidents [3]. Besides the general workforce, fatigue is a more critical issue for older workers who are more prone to fatigue development because of decreased cardiac output, muscle mass, and physical working capacity [4]. Since about 56% of the workers are 50 years and older in regions like Hong Kong, it has become a matter of huge concern [5]. Therefore, early monitoring of fatigue has become necessary to prevent undesirable workplace accidents in construction workers.

Fatigue is the leading cause of construction accidents [6-8]. Mostly, construction accidents are associated with poor work behaviour, poor design (of material, machinery, or workplace), and other factors (such as hot weather conditions) [9,10]. Past studies have pointed out despite significant advancements in technology, training, and communication in the last few decades, the enormous amount of accidents in construction workers might be related to poor work behavior results fatigue [11,12]. A previous study found fatigue to be the topmost reason for workplace accidents at the construction sites [13]. Another study acknowledged fatigue to be one of the primary causes of work place accidents in the building construction industry [14]. Similarly, Wong et al. [15] found fatigue to be one of the important risk factors for falls from height accidents in Hong Kong. In short, monitoring and management of fatigue has become a matter for the safety of construction workers.

Various physiological parameters, including heart rate (HR), heart rate variability (HRV), respiratory rate, electrodermal activity, and skin temperature may be used to monitor fatigue in construction workers [16,17]. For instance, Yi et al. [18] and Aryal et al. [19] have assessed physical fatigue in construction workers using HR metric, and HR and skin temperature metrics, respectively. Recently, Anwer et al. [17] also found positive correlations between physiological parameters (including HR, respiratory rate, and skin temperature) and subjective fatigue scores.

The development of new wearable technologies and recent advancements in physiology have given the opportunities to enable the objective, smooth, and steady monitoring of fatigue during construction tasks. For instance, the Equivital Lifemonitor is a wearable ambulatory device used to measure HR, HRV, skin temperature, and respiratory rate via chest-worn textile-based embedded sensors [20]. Previous studies have indicated the accuracy and validity of Equivital Lifemonitor in monitoring HR, HRV, skin temperature, and respiratory rate [20-22]. However, only one study tested the reliability of this device to monitor physiological parameters [21]. Another wearable device such as photoplethysmography (PPG) based wristwatch has also been used to monitor HR, HRV, and skin temperature by emitting light from light-emitting diodes and then detecting skin blood flow signals by photoreceptors [23,24]. PPG can also measure the electrodermal activity of the skin by two electro-conductors [17]. Previous studies have found high accuracy and validity of PPG based wristwatch to monitor HR, HRV, electrodermal activity, and skin temperature [24-27].

Although Equivital Lifemonitor [21,22,28] and PPG based wristwatch [24-27,29] have been validated in many studies, the reliability and responsiveness of these devices have not been well tested during construction tasks. Additionally, some prior reports found that Equivital LifeMonitor and PPG based wristwatch had high movement artifacts [20,24], and therefore, it may affect the usage of these devices during construction tasks. Therefore, the current pilot study aimed to investigate test-retest reliability and responsiveness of the Equivital Lifemonitor and photoplethysmography based wristwatch in assessing physiological measures during a simulated fatigue task.

2. METHODS

2.1. Participants

Ten healthy university students (Mean age, 30.6 ± 1.7 years) participated in this pilot study. Individuals with a history of musculoskeletal disorders, neurological disorders, or cardio-pulmonary diseases were excluded. The study followed the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and the protocol was approved by the Ethical Committee of the University (Reference Number: HSEARS20190824004). The written informed consent of the participant was obtained before data collection. A self-reported questionnaire was used to collect demographics and physical health.

2.2. Simulated fatigue task

Participants were performed a manual material handling task to develop self-identified physical exertion. Participants were asked to simulate a manual material handling task by carrying a wooden box of 15 kg from one point to another over a distance of 10-meter and continued this task for a 30-minute. This load was a typical weight handled by construction workers [30]. The simulated fatigue task was conducted using a modified experimental setup as published in the past studies [17,19,31]. Specifically,

there was a two point (pickup and dropoff) over the distance of 10-mtere. Participants were asked to pickup the loaded wooden box from the pickup point and took it to dropoff point and after 1-minute of rest they continued this task till they achieved a self-identified fatigue level > 15 out 20 on Borg-20 scale [32].

2.3. Measurements of physiological parameters

HR, HRV, respiratory rate, electrodermal activity, and skin temperature parameters were measured at baseline and immediately after the 30-minute of fatigue task. These parameters were measured using the Equivital Lifemonitor system and a PPG based wristwatch (Figure 1). The physiological parameters were measured twice over 10 minutes of rest to determine the test-retest reliability of two devices. Additionally, the parameters were measured immediately after the fatigue task to determine the responsiveness of both devices in assessing physical fatigue.

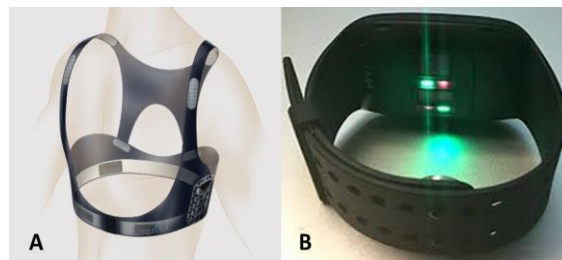


Figure 1. (A) Equivital Lifemonitor vest, (B) E4 photoplethysmography (PPG) wristwatch (Picture reproduced with permission)

2.4. Statistical analysis

The SPSS version 22 (IBM Inc., Chicago, IL) was used for conducting the statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard error), and an intraclass correlation coefficient ($ICC_{2,1}$) were used to evaluate the test-retest reliability of each device to assess physiological measures. In addition, the responsiveness of each device to measure changes from baseline to posttest was calculated using the standardized response mean (SRM). The level of responsiveness was determined as follows: $SRM > 0.8$ (large), 0.5 to 0.8 (moderate), and 0.2 to 0.5 (small) [33]. The data was statistically significant if alpha level = 0.05.

3. RESULTS

Table 1 illustrates the baseline and post-fatigue data of all variables. Mean HR was increased by about 49 beats/minute after the fatigue task. Similarly, the mean respiratory rate was increased to about 13 rates/min after the fatigue task. The mean changes in the electrodermal activity and skin temperature after the fatigue task were $2.3 \mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$ and 2°C , respectively.

Table 2 indicates the test-retest reliability and responsiveness of two devices in assessing the physiological parameters after a fatigue task. The Equivital Lifemonitor has shown good to excellent test-retest reliability for the assessments of HR ($ICC, 0.97$), HRV ($ICC, 0.86$), respiratory rate ($ICC, 0.77$), and skin temperature ($ICC, 0.76$). However, PPG based wristwatch showed moderate to good test-retest reliability for the assessments of HR ($ICC, 0.71$), HRV ($ICC, 0.73$), electrodermal activity ($ICC, 0.80$), and local skin temperature ($ICC, 0.72$). In addition, both devices showed a large $SRM (>0.8)$ to measure cardiorespiratory and thermoregulatory parameters after the fatigue task.

Figure 2 depicts the test-retest reliability of the Equivital Lifemonitor and PPG based wristwatch in assessing HR and HRV. The Bland–Altman plots indicate that most of the scores were not beyond the limits of agreement.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Error	95% CI
Age (Y)	30.6	1.7	25.6 – 33.7
Height (m)	1.7	.03	1.6 – 1.7
Weight (kg)	68.5	1.2	63.6 – 71.6
Heart rate at baseline, Beats/minute	74.1	5.9	57.8 – 86.4
Heart rate at post-fatigue, Beats/minute	122.9	6.1	106.1 – 139.6
Respiratory rate at baseline, N	15.1	1.6	14.7 – 20.5
Respiratory rate at post-fatigue, N	28.2	2.9	20.3 – 36.1
Skin temperature at baseline, °C	32.8	.87	31.6 – 32.9
Skin temperature at post-fatigue, °C	34.8	.50	33.4 – 36.2
Electrodermal activity at baseline, µS/cm	2.83	.67	.19 – .55
Electrodermal activity at post-fatigue, µS/cm	5.1	1.9	-.16 – 10.4

Table 2. Test-retest reliability and responsiveness of Equivital Lifemonitor and photoplethysmography (PPG) based wristwatch in assessing heart rate (HR), heart rate variability (HRV), respiratory rate, skin temperature, and electrodermal activity

Equivital Lifemonitor				
	1 st Test	Re-test	ICC (95% CI)	SRM (95% CI)
HR	74.1 (5.9)	73.3 (6.7)	0.97 (0.92 – 0.98)	3.48 (2.72 to 4.90)
HRV	0.73 (0.02)	0.72 (0.01)	0.86 (0.66 – 0.94)	1.20 (0.90 to 1.5)
Skin temperature	32.8 (0.87)	32.9 (0.93)	0.76 (0.43 – 0.90)	1.80 (1.40 to 2.65)
Respiratory rate	15.1 (1.6)	14.9 (1.5)	0.77 (0.46 – 0.90)	1.40 (0.95 to 1.85)
PPG Wristwatch				
	1 st Test	Re-test	ICC (95% CI)	SRM (95% CI)
HR	72.3 (3.10)	73.7 (2.94)	0.71 (0.34 – 0.87)	3.21 (2.00 to 4.24)
HRV	0.83 (0.05)	0.82 (0.04)	0.73 (0.38 – 0.88)	1.10 (0.90 to 1.3)
Skin temperature	35.1 (0.02)	35.2 (0.01)	0.72 (0.37 – 0.87)	1.56 (0.96 to 2.37)
Electrodermal activity	2.83 (0.67)	1.91 (0.29)	0.80 (0.54 – 0.91)	1.25 (0.85 to 1.65)

SRM: standardized response mean; CI: confidence interval; Data are mean (standard deviation)

4. DISCUSSION

The current study investigated the test-retest reliability and responsiveness of Equivital Lifemonitor and photoplethysmography based wristwatch tools in assessing physiological parameters after the simulated fatigue task. Our results indicate good to excellent, and moderate to good test-retest reliability of the Equivital Lifemonitor and photoplethysmography based wristwatch in evaluating those parameters, respectively, to assess physiological measures. Additionally, the SRMs (>0.8) indicate that both tools could capture the changes in HR, HRV, respiratory rate, skin temperature, and electrodermal activity immediately after the 30-minute fatigue task.

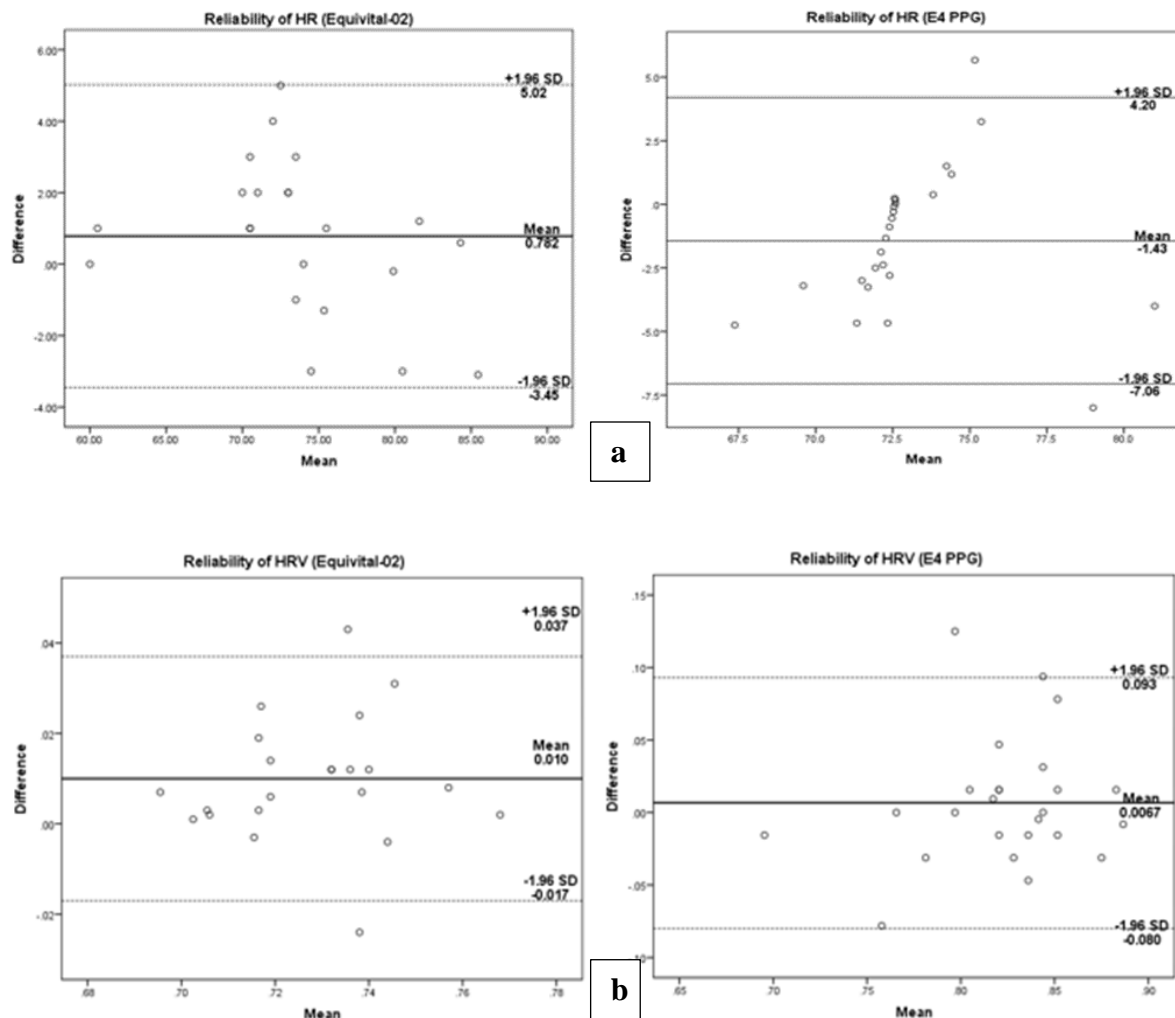


Figure 2. Test-retest reliability of Equival Lifemonitor and photoplethysmography (PPG) based wristwatch in assessing (a) heart rate (HR) and (b) heart rate variability (HRV)

Our results supplement previous findings that indicate an excellent test-retest reliability of the Equival Lifemonitor in assessing cardiorespiratory ($ICC > 0.95$) and thermoregulatory measures ($ICC, 0.97$) [21]. A previous study also indicated that the Equival Lifemonitor could reliably assess HR and HRV. The Equival Lifemonitor is easy to wear, while the wireless textile embedded sensors give comfort and make it suitable for real-time monitoring for a prolonged duration [34]. However, textile-based electrodes are vulnerable to movement artifacts because these electrodes do not have clips or adhesives [7,17].

Similar to the current findings, a previous study indicated an adequate test-retest accuracy of PPG based wristwatch in monitoring HR at construction sites [24]. They used mean-average-percentage-error and correlation coefficient to determine the accuracy of PPG-based HR monitoring. However, the current study used ICC to evaluate the test-retest reliability. Previous studies have considered ICC as a measure of repeatability over time because a reduced values of coefficients could easily indicates systematic errors in trials [35,36]. In use of this technique to determine test-retest reliability, the PPG-based wristwatch showed moderate to good ICCs for monitoring HR, HRV, skin temperature, and electrodermal activity.

This is the first study to use SRM to investigate the responsiveness of the Equival Lifemonitor and PPG based wristwatch to monitor changes in physiological parameters after a simulated fatigue task. The SRM was calculated by dividing the score difference (posttest – baseline data) by the standard deviation of the group's score differences [37,38]. Both devices showed a large SRM (> 0.8) which indicates their ability to capture the fatigue response by monitoring physiological parameters after a simulated fatigue task. Although the findings substantiate the use of these devices for fatigue monitoring, future studies are warranted to further validate these results.

The current study acknowledged some limitations. First, this study had a small sample size including only 10 participants, however, the large effect sizes for measuring physiological parameters after the simulated fatigue task suggests that both devices are useful in monitoring physiological parameters during construction tasks. Future field studies are required to investigate the reliability and responsiveness of these devices on a large sample of construction workers during actual tasks. Second, the current study did not report the validity of the two devices in measuring physiological parameters related to self-reported physical fatigue after construction task. Therefore, future studies should use gold standard measures of physical fatigue (e.g., blood lactate levels) to evaluate the correlations between the measured physiological parameters from these devices and the actual fatigue levels during construction tasks. Third, the current study only used one simulated construction task. Future research should use different tasks and different physical loadings to determine if these devices can reliably estimate physical fatigue during various construction tasks.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study evaluated the test-retest reliability and responsiveness of Equivital Lifemonitor and PPG based wristwatch devices in assessing physiological parameters after a simulated fatigue task. Participants carried a wooden box of 15 kg for a given distance until they perceived physical exertion. The physiological parameters were measured with the Equivital Lifemonitor system and a PPG based wristwatch. These parameters were measured twice over 10 minutes of rest to determine the test-retest reliability and a third measurement was taken after the fatigue task to evaluate the responsiveness of two devices in assessing physical fatigue. The Equivital Lifemonitor and photoplethysmography based wristwatch devices are reliable in measuring physiological parameters after a fatigue task. Additionally, both devices can capture the fatigue response after a simulated fatigue task. Future field studies in a larger sample should investigate the sensitivity and validity of these tools in measuring physiological parameters for fatigue assessments at the construction sites.

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