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Impact of Work-Family Conflicts on Work Performance: A Moderated-Mediation Approach

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Summary: This study proposes to examine employees' cyberloafing behavior (i.e., using organizational internet services for personal activities) in the backdrop of work arrangements that have evolved since the COVID-19 pandemic, including work-from-home (WFH) and hybrid work setups. Blurring of borders across work and non-work domains triggers work-family conflicts (WFCs), leading to emotional exhaustion (EE). Depletion of personal resources thus pushes an employee to cyberloafing, thereby affecting his/her work performance adversely. Drawing on the Affective Events Theory and the Conservation of Resources theory, this research aims to investigate how WFCs influence work performance through sequential mediation by EE and cyberloafing, respectively. We also posit perceived organizational support as a moderator, alleviating the adverse effect of EE on cyberloafing behavior. Our proposed research model would be empirically validated through a survey with a structured questionnaire on employees in WFH or hybrid work arrangements in India.

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1. Introduction

Around four years have passed since the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, but many organizations are continuing with work-from-home (WFH) and hybrid work arrangements. Even those with 'back to work' policies have framed rules flexible enough to permit an employee to work remotely for a specific duration. There are several challenges thrown open in such work arrangements. One such challenge is using the internet through networks and devices, even during working hours, for reasons other than the organization's intended purposes, like shopping, managing finance, and entertainment. Lim (2002) coined the term 'cyberloafing' to describe this behavior. A large body of past literature has labeled cyberloafing as a counterproductive work behavior (CWB) and a production deviance (Blau et al., 2006).

Cyberloafing is undergoing transitions in new work arrangements in which organizations may be unable to exercise as much monitoring because their employees logging in remotely have greater access to the internet. Hence, we have chosen a mix of factors that gained pertinence due to pandemic-induced organizational changes to assess whether they influence cyberloafing and affect employees' work performance. These factors are work-family conflicts (WFCs) and emotional exhaustion (EE), operating at the individual level, and perceived organizational support (POS) at the organizational level.

Working from home often requires an employee to balance job and domestic demands. Existing studies report that changes in work arrangements during and after the pandemic have seriously disrupted the familiar routines of employees, bringing about work-family conflicts and negatively affecting their psychological, behavioral, and work performances (Han et al., 2023). Roles and expectations related to work and family domains may not match, causing work-family conflicts. Such mismatch could lead to negative outcomes for both domains, like emotional exhaustion (EE), which refers to the depletion of a person's resources, driving him/her to cyberloafing as a CWB (Amponsah-Tawiah et al., 2023).

POS reflects an individual's belief that the organization gives value to his/her contributions and is concerned about his/her well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). We start with the premise that work-family conflicts would trigger emotional exhaustion in an employee, inducing him/her towards cyberloafing, and that this mediating pathway would negatively affect the employee's work performance. Since cyberloafing is counterproductive, we perceive the need for an intervention that may contain its negative impact on work performance. Hence, we propose POS as a moderator between emotional exhaustion and cyberloafing. This research is believed to be the first empirical work exploring the causal pathway (with sequential mediation by emotional exhaustion and cyberloafing) and a boundary condition (moderation by POS) between work-family conflicts and work performance. We have used the Affective Events Theory (AET) and the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory as the overarching framework, which is another unique contribution to the literature.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cyberloafing

Cyberloafing happens when an employee misuses the organization's internet facility by indulging in personal uses like playing online games and accessing social media during working hours (Bhattacharjee and Sarkar, 2023). As a form of digital addiction (Saxena and

Srivastava, 2023), it is a concern for organizations due to several reasons. For instance, cyberloafing depletes both time and energy (Lim and Teo, 2005) and reduces employee productivity (Blanchard and Henle, 2007), as the time thus spent is equivalent to the theft of time as a resource. Past authors have primarily focused on individual and/or organization-related drivers of cyberloafing. Examples include unfavorable outcomes (e.g., unfair rewards and lack of control over the work environment) (Henle, 2008) and workplace stressors, like role conflicts and role ambiguity (Henle and Blanchard, 2008). The COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018) is the predominant perspective in explaining cyberloafing.

2.2 Work-family Conflicts

An employee as an individual has to perform several roles: as a member of his/her organization, as a member of his/her family, and many more. Several of these may bring contradictory demands and could be a source of conflict when choosing an existing role is challenging. Work-family conflict is a psychological phenomenon and a “form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respects” (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985, p. 77). WFC can lead to negative outcomes like interpersonal aggression (Liu et al., 2015), job stress (Liu et al., 2021), anxiety, burnout, and frustration.

As per the boundary theory, work-family conflict results from boundary violations when work and family intersect in daily events (Ashforth et al., 2000). The Affective Events Theory by Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) projects that any such violation could either hinder or facilitate concurrent goals employees have. In this study, we have resorted to AET to suggest that a boundary violation can increase work-family conflicts, leading to cognitive and affective reactions (Hunter et al., 2019).

2.3 Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is “a chronic state of physical and emotional depletion that results from an excessive job, personal demands, and continuous stress” (Wright and Cropanzano, 1998, p. 486). Such exhaustion occurs when excessive work generates a sense of psychological, emotional, and physical fatigue (Amponsah-Tawiah et al., 2023). EE is a cause of concern for organizations as it leads to negative work-related outcomes like lowered job satisfaction and greater turnover intention (Hang-yue et al., 2005).

2.4 Relationship of Work-family Conflicts with Emotional Exhaustion and Cyberloafing

Hunter et al. (2019) used AET to propose that when an individual encounters a boundary violation at work, this results in a negative affective experience, though the same boundary violation might have a positive affective reaction if it facilitates family goals. Derks et al. (2014) proved that boundary violations at home lead to consequences like work-related exhaustion.

Stressful conditions at work may trigger feelings of exhaustion in an employee. Stressors related to role (e.g., role overload) and work-family conflicts also predict EE (Hang-yue et al., 2005). Work-family conflicts increase emotional exhaustion among salespeople (Boles et al., 1997) and retail banking employees (Karatepe and Tekinkus, 2006). Dodanwala and Shrestha (2021) studied construction workers to conclude that a higher degree of WFC directly contributes to higher emotional exhaustion. Yao et al. (2023) observe that employees facing conflicting demands in their work and family roles experience a strain on their personal

and psychological resources; this could lead to emotional exhaustion. Reviewing the existing academic citations, we hypothesize that:

H1: Work-family conflicts lead to emotional exhaustion in employees.

Yao et al. (2023) argue that in their struggle to balance competing demands with inadequate support, individuals are likely to confront work-non-work conflicts, which they counter through procrastination, say, by cyberloafing (or cyberslacking). Elrehail et al. (2021) recommend examining WFC as a predictor of cyberloafing behavior. These authors refer to the Border Theory (Clark, 2000) to propose that if employees cross the border between their work and non-work domains, their organization can suffer due to their cyberloafing behavior. Based on such academic instances, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Work-family conflicts lead to cyberloafing behavior in employees.

Several authors have empirically proved the mediational impact of emotional exhaustion between various stressors and work- or individual-related outcomes. For instance, Dodanwala and Shrestha (2021) concluded that EE mediates work-family conflicts and job satisfaction. Emotionally exhausted employees are more prone to distractions like cyberloafing (Liu and Zhang, 2023), through which they can avoid negative feelings (Oravec, 2022); this may help them perform better in subsequent job-related tasks (Koay et al., 2017). Reviewing extant studies, we hypothesize that:

H3: Emotional exhaustion mediates the influence of work-family conflicts on cyberloafing behavior in employees.

2.5 Relationship of Work-family Conflicts, Emotional Exhaustion, and Cyberloafing with Work Performance

Assuming cyberloafing is a deviant behavior, we expect it to have a negative relationship with other organizational pro-social behaviors and negatively correlate with factors resulting from such behaviors. Elrehail et al. (2021) posit that cyberloafing negatively affects job performance. Koay et al. (2017) have extended COR theory to explain how employees are transported to the virtual world while cyberloafing; this prevents resource depletion but lowers their performance. Contrarily, Lim and Chen (2012) opine that employees who engage in cyberloafing can have a break from work, which might positively impact their work performance. To comprehend the cyberloafing-performance link in a clearer manner, we hypothesize that:

H4: Cyberloafing significantly and negatively influences employees' work performance.

Availability of limited cognitive resources (Hobfoll, 1989) means an employee can spend his/her time focusing either only on work or on family, but not on both. Further, time spent on one domain would obviously reduce the time spent on the other (Hunter et al., 2019). Resource constraints across the different roles an individual has to play imply that demands in one role may create strain in the other; for example, fulfilling family demands as a strain can hamper work performance (Han et al., 2023). Also, authors like Smit et al. (2016) posit that workplace boundary violations negatively affect job performance. WFC lowers job performance "because the process of juggling work and family demands leads to a scarcity of resources (e.g., time and energy) that prevents optimal job performance" (Chiu et al., 2021, p. 144). We combine the Affective Events Theory and COR theory to hypothesize that:

H5: Work-family conflicts negatively influence employees' work performance through sequential mediation by emotional exhaustion and cyberloafing behavior in employees.

2.6 Perceived Organizational Support

POS reflects the degree to which employees perceive that their organization is committed to them (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Past research has shown that POS leads to positive outcomes like better job performance (e.g., Karatepe and Aga, 2016) and reduced turnover intentions. According to COR theory, employees strive to attain and maintain resources that help them achieve their goals. POS is a job resource that provides emotional support to employees (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

There is a lack of consistency in the findings reported by various authors in the context of the influence of POS on WFC. For instance, Gurbuz et al. (2013) established POS as a predictor of work-to-family conflict through role overload as a mediator. However, Liu et al. (2015) have proved the moderating role of perceived managerial family support between family-to-work conflicts and emotional exhaustion. Foley et al. (2005) reported that POS moderated the impact of work role stressors among Hong Kong Chinese employees on their WFC.

Grant-Vallone and Ensher (2001) argue that social support provides employees with better resources that enable them to cope with problems mainly because it “interacts with stressors such that a stressful situation has less of a negative impact for those who receive high levels of support.” Based on this, we contend that POS would play a buffering role between EE and cyberloafing. This, in turn, would offset the negative impact of emotional exhaustion-induced cyberloafing on work performance. Hence, we hypothesize that:

H6: Perceived organizational support negatively moderates the impact of emotional exhaustion on the cyberloafing behavior in employees.

Figure 1 presents our proposed research model.

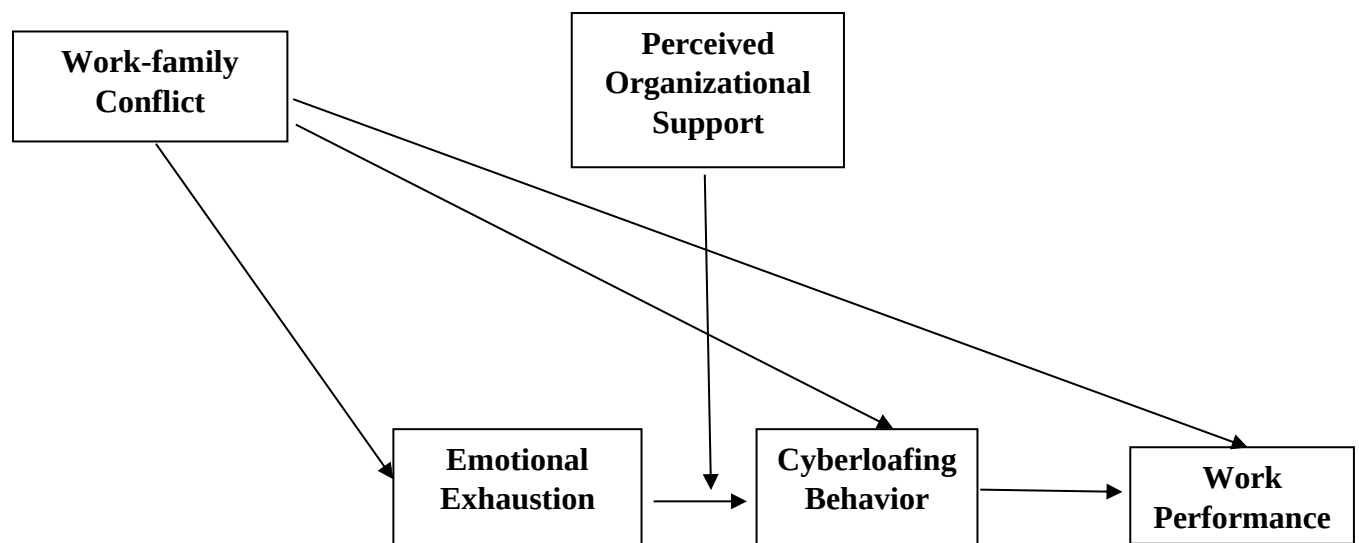


Figure 1: Proposed Research Model

3. Proposed Research Plan

Going ahead, we plan to test our research model empirically through a survey, with a structured questionnaire administered to employees in diverse organizations using random sampling. The qualifying condition is to be a full-time employee in any organization that allowed WFH during the pandemic and is presently offering a hybrid arrangement. The survey will have two distinct phases, separated by a gap of four weeks. The first phase will amass WFC, EE, and POS responses, while cyberloafing activities and performance will be assessed in the second phase. Items in the questionnaire (refer to Table 1) on WFC, EE, and POS will be measured on a five-point Likert-type scale with anchors “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” while the anchors of the cyberloafing scale are 1 (never) and 5 (constantly). Participants would self-report their performance appraisal rating change for the last two years.

Table 1: Construct-wise Survey Items

S. No.	Construct	Source	Number of Items
1	Work-family Conflict	Netemeyer et al. (1996)	5
2	Emotional Exhaustion	Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach and Jackson, 1981)	8
3	Perceived Organizational Support	Shanock and Eisenberger (2006)	6
4	Cyberloafing Behavior	Lim (2002)	11
5	Change in Performance	Self-reported	1
		Total	31

We plan to initiate the survey upon incorporating feedback from the British Academy of Management Conference, 2024. Subsequently, we will analyze the responses using SPSS v20, controlling for demographic variables like age, gender, organizational tenure, and daily frequency of internet usage (in hours).

4. Expected Practical Implications

Our findings would render significant implications for flexible work arrangements in the Indian corporate sector, especially for those working from home or in a hybrid work model with fixed days of online working. If our hypotheses are supported, we can highlight the significance of organizational support to employees in dealing with the loss of resources due to work-family conflicts.

Remote work and transition to a wholly offline or hybrid mode might continue to create contradictory demands for an employee and require a balancing act. Support from the organization can be through training sessions or workshops to create awareness about the impact of cyberloafing on productivity and the organization’s goals. The outcome should convey the importance of focusing on work tasks during working hours. Organizations may redesign jobs requiring continuous availability on call or an online presence during remote working. Regular counseling sessions can help employees deal with stress at work.

Short surveys checking performance indicators can help monitor cyberloafing behavior. Organizations must clearly outline acceptable internet usage during work hours in their IT policies and ensure employees understand the expectations regarding personal internet usage and the consequences of violating these policies. The IT team can introduce software to filter or block websites that are not work-related. However, it is essential to balance monitoring and trust; support should not be at the cost of mistrust.

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