Unpacking the Lived Experience of Cyberloafing Among Generation Z: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Perceptions, Meanings, and Ethical Dilemmas

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Abstract

Cyberloafing has become a phenomenon of internet abuse in the workplace that has a detrimental impact if not taken seriously. Academics are trying to research various causes of this destructive behavior, such as cyberloafing, which is increasingly occurring. However, only a little literature reveals the perception, meaning, and ethical problems of cyberloafing in the workplace. This research explores the perception of cyberloafing among Generation Z in the public sector. The study investigates the fundamental reasons and their manifestations in the work setting, utilizing a qualitative methodology incorporating interpretative phenomenological analysis. The Straus Corbin qualitative research approach was used to understand, examine, analyze, and interpret respondents' views. We conducted nine semi-structured interviews; all respondents had more than 3 years of work experience and an average age of 25. The findings indicate that employees engage in cyberloafing due to work system, perceived cyberloafing, and work-related stress. Generation Z, who grew up on the internet as long as they lived, might have different perceptions about cyberloafing, whether it is ethical or unethical. The current study contributes to literature by focusing on the perception of cyberloafing among Generation Z.

Keyword: cyberloafing, work deviance, Generation Z, public sector

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Introduction

Companies around the world gradually increased their investment in Internet resources in the early 2000s, and as technology became more pervasive in business enterprises, so did the potential for abuse. Then this problem attracted the attention of academics (Wu, 2020). Cyberloafing refers to the behavior of employees using the internet for personal purposes during work hours, such as browsing social media, shopping, or engaging in other non-work-related online activities (Wu, 2020). In a time when digital technology and work are increasingly integrated in the workplace, cyberloafing is becoming more common, as employees often have easy access to the internet through personal computers and mobile devices. Based on research by (Jandaghi et al., 2015), apart from the loss of productivity, extensive use of social media by employees also results in increased loss of confidential information, defamation and misinformation.

Generation Z grew up in a technology-friendly and tech-savvy environment (Park & Chun, 2020). This new generation comprises more than a third of the world's population and outnumbers Millennials (https://www.bloomberg.com). Generation Z is considered a digital generation because they are active and use digital content as native speakers (Wiedmer, 2015).

Based on the background, the questions arise, how do members of Generation Z perceive and make sense of their experiences with cyberloafing, including the ethical dilemmas they encounter in the workplace?

Literature Review

Cyberloafing in the Workplace

Lim and Teo (2024) initially conceptualized cyberloafing as employees' voluntary use of their organization's internet access for non-work purposes during work hours. Another definition of cyberloafing is the personal use of some information and communication technology during work hours that are not related to a task (Pindek et al., 2018). Cyberloafing behavior is generally considered a detrimental deviation because it has nothing to do with work (Khansa, 2017). Cyberloafing is not just an act of wasting time at work by doing light "things" but also considered as technology misuse at the workplace.

The mechanism or behavior of cyberloafing is shown in various forms, such as for example for minor cyberloafing behavior employees who have access to computers also present the temptation to engage in deviant behavior at work, including browsing the internet, connecting with others through social media, or watching videos (Hu et al., 2023). Lighter forms e.g. checking email or reading news (Varol & Yıldırım, 2019), online shopping (Chavan et al., 2022). In the heavier or major form of cyberloafing, examples can be given for example aggressive behavior of co-workers, property irregularities: behavior that harms company assets such as stealing, sabotaging, and accepting bribes (Robinson & Bennett, 1995).

Generation Z and Technology

Generation Z grew up in a technology-friendly and tech-savvy environment (Park & Chun, 2020). This new generation covers more than a third of the world's population and exceeds the number of Millennials (Miller & Lu, 2018). Generation Z has different characteristics

compared to the previous generation. One of the distinguishing characteristics of Generation Z from other generations is that Generation Z prefers non-face-to-face interactions, so the impact of excessive exposure to technology can make them anti-social or unstable and cause mental health disorders due to their weak concentration ability (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018) and are more individualistic (Dangmei & Singh, 2016). In terms of mobile devices, Generation Z has similarities with Generation Y/Millennials who are always connected to the internet and social media, but Generation Z is more multi-tasking.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative method with the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, which emphasizes inductive methods that are able to explore the views and experiences of participants (Erzberger, 2001). The reason for choosing a qualitative method is also based on the fact that qualitative research allows researchers to obtain rich data on complex human experiences. This study aims to explore the experience of employees related to cyberloafing, so that to answer this goal, a phenomenological approach is used, because phenomenological research seeks to understand the participants' life experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Data Collection

This study used purposive sampling to select participants and continue the participant interviews until data saturation occurred. Purposive sampling involves deliberate sampling of participants who meet the criteria set by the researcher (Koning & Waistell, 2012). Wawancara merupakan elemen penting dari metode pengumpulan data yang digunakan dalam penyelidikan kualitatif dan lebih umum dalam ilmu-ilmu sosial (Patton, 2002). The focus of phenomenological interviews is centered on the participants' experiences and the meanings that are perceived to come from those experiences (Liberman et al., 2011).

Data Analysis

Data analysis in science is generally inductive, namely from the bottom up, with code generated from raw data (MacLeod, A. 2019). The main objective of the analysis is to provide a full appreciation of each participant's experience, in accordance with the ideographic commitment of the IPA (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the raw data processing process goes through an interpretative process, meaning that raw data/transcripts will be interpreted directly by the researcher. Analysis in science is the process of interpreting personal experience by running epochē (Kahija, YF La, 2017). Table 1 shows the profile of the research respondents.

Table 1
Respondents Profile

Empirical Material respondent Number (EMI)	Gender	Experience	Designation
EMI1	Female	3 years	accountant
EMI2	Female	4 years	Staff
EMI3	Female	3 years	Staff
EMI4	Male	3 years	Staff
EMI5	Male	3 years	Staff
EMI6	Female	3 years	Staff
EMI7	Female	4 years	Staff
EMI8	Male	4 years	Staff
EMI9	Female	3 years	accountant

Results and Discussion

The research findings from the interview show that the antecedents of cyberloafing behavior are work stress, perception and work system. The first theme is the work system derived from work from office, work from home, and tools for work. Generation Z, who works as civil servants that often come home late, may experience cyberloafing while working in the office, especially if they spend more time on non-productive digital activities. The use of laptops as a tool for work shows that Generation Z has a need to move from place to work while staying connected to important data and information. This shows a work approach that focuses on equality and efficiency, where employees use their own devices to overcome the limitations of office infrastructure.

Work System

In the context of a work system where there is a work-from-home dimension and work-from-office, tools can provide access to cyberloafing behavior. The phenomenon can be explained as follows. Generation Z civil servants who often come home late when working from the office may experience *cyberloafing* while working, especially if they spend more time on non-productive digital activities. In addition, the discipline of ASN in terms of arrival to the office also shows a varied pattern.

Generation Z uses gadgets for work because they are always connected to the internet and up to date with information in online news, as conveyed by the following participant.

> Mobile phones, laptop, computer. If the computer stays, if the laptop is usually to move around in this room because there is no computer, I use a personal laptop and then the data will be transferred to that computer. (EMI7)

> Computers, desktops, for example, there are also laptops, wifi. (EMI5)

> Work is often taken home. For example, I have a deadline that allows me to take work home for 3 days a week; if I don't finish my tasks during the day, I must complete them at home. (EMI9)

> Suppose the deadline must be a maximum of midnight at 00.00; it will be overtime until night. But if the deadline is still 2-3 days away, there is also no overtime, so if it is too late, that day must be completed as well; it must be done overtime. (EMI8)

Employees who work from home have higher job satisfaction, and work-life balance. Generation Z civil servants who often come home late when working from the office may experience *cyberloafing* while working in the office, especially if they spend more time on non-productive digital activities. In addition, the discipline of ASN in terms of arrival to the office also shows a varied pattern.

Perceptions of Cyberloafing

For Generation Z who are very dependent on technology and gadgets, the internet provides convenience but also like two opposite sides when used while working for personal convenience. However, there are two views related to this perception, the first is as natural or legitimate and the second is unnatural and as ethical or unethical behavior (Alharthi et al., 2021; Anandarajan, 2002). For Generation Z who have a free and more individualistic character, the perception of cyberloafing shows that this behavior is acceptable when it is not ethically violating organizational rules.

> Sometimes during work hours, we open social media on the computer, because if we open it on our cellphone during break time, we have to just adjust the time. (EMI1)

> If others like checking WhatsApp from family or just listening to music from YouTube, it's still ok. (EMI2)

> If it is considered normal, it is just like looking for information. (EMI9)

Based on the quote, employees gave opinions regarding their experience of cyberloafing, which was still at an ethical level, meaning that it was still within reasonable limits so as not to interfere with their work. The behavior pattern that emerges is a feeling of indifference towards colleagues who *cyberloaf*, because they behave the same way when they do *cyberloafing.* This mutual understanding creates a sense of camaraderie among employees, as they acknowledge that everyone occasionally engages in such behavior.

In addition to ethical perception, cyberloafing is also considered unethical when there is detrimental or interfering with personal and group performance.

> In my opinion, in the end, it is unnatural to play games because it means leaving work, not something that is just refreshing. Playing games is like how long it takes to be fixated. Maybe if the mobile legend must match with his friends, it can't be simply abandoned. That's what I think is at the limit of unnatural, right? If others may be*, like,* checking WhatsApp from family or just listening to music from YouTube, it's still natural to still be. (EMI8)

> Inattention may be like there is a pile of work, but for example, like watching or opening things that are not important, keep when asked which work has not been completed, not yet. Meanwhile, if our work must be related to other people. The longer we work, the more other people will be delayed. (EMI3)

> In our office, the internet used to be blocked because it was often used for You tube, or playing games, in my opinion this is unethical so that the internet is not used for unnatural things. (EMI4)

Generation Z, who are more connected to the internet daily, considers playing games at work unnatural because it can distract from work. They distinguish between activities that are simply refreshing and those that really disrupt work focus. They realize that cyberloafing can cause delays in completing work, which impacts other coworkers. It shows an awareness of team responsibility. This sense of accountability reflects their understanding of workplace dynamics and the importance of maintaining productivity. As a result, Generation Z often seeks a balance between enjoying moments of leisure and fulfilling their professional obligations effectively.

Conclusion

Generation Z engages in more cyberloafing while working from the office because they participate in personal learning activities, such as learning about investments online during work hours. In addition, cyberloafing behavior is shown by employees in the form of discovering activities such as opening social media, watching streaming videos, listening to digital music, browsing on the internet, playing online games, replying to messages on instant messaging apps, listening to podcasts, and opening e-commerce. Cyberloafing will continue to exist in every generation because they are always connected to the internet, even at work. Organizations should consider the positive impacts *of cyberloafing* in addition to the negative impacts.

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