



The Relationship between Meaningful Work and Cyberloafing: The Mediating Role of Boredom at Work

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the role that Meaningful Work plays in deterring Cyberloafing behaviors. Thus, this paper tested whether the relationship between the two variables is a negative one. The research also tested the mediating role of Boredom at Work on the relationship between Meaningful Work and Cyberloafing. The scientific literature supports the association between the absence of meaning at work and boredom at work. At the same time, studies show that employees facing Boredom at Work turn behaviorally to compensatory activities, which provide them with the stimulation they need. In this sense, Cyberloafing can be seen as a coping mechanism in relation to Boredom at Work. Data was collected on a sample of 218 participants via an online questionnaire. Hypotheses testing was done using the PROCESS add-on. Although the results revealed that there is no statistically significant direct relationship between Meaningful Work and Cyberloafing, an indirect, statistically significant, mediating relationship was identified, respectively Boredom at Work mediates the relationship between Meaningful Work and Cyberloafing.

Keywords: *meaningful work, boredom at work, cyberloafing*

1. INTRODUCTION

Work plays an important role in the lives of adults, representing the activity to which they allocate one of the most valuable resources they have, time, in exchange for the opportunity to follow their ambitions (Lysova et al., 2018). There are numerous changes taking place in all fields of activity due to globalization and the advancement of

technology (Bailey et al., 2018a), this dynamic context highlighting the relevance of the process of seeking and creating meaning in the workplace.

Generation Y's perspective on work has shifted, the meaning of work and the extent to which it contributes to society becoming much more important than other aspects

such as financial benefits (Lepisto & Pratt, 2016). Furthermore, organizations are recognizing the importance of meaningful work and its effects on employee engagement (Lysova et al., 2018), a tendency supported by the positive associations between meaningful work and commitment, job satisfaction, job security, well-being, positive self-concept, knowledge sharing and organizational citizenship behavior (Bailey et al., 2018b).

Technology and consequently, Internet usage has become an integral part of work and despite the advantages associated with them, such as increased productivity and improved communication, they could give rise to undesirable, even deviant behavioral outcomes, for instance, cyberloafing, which refers to the use of technology for personal purposes in the workplace (Sheikh et al., 2015).

The relationship between meaningful work and cyberloafing is underexplored, although studies have shown that the former may play a role in mitigating counterproductive work behaviors, such as withdrawal intentions, because employees who recognize the importance of their activities and aim at making a positive difference in the lives of others through their work will avoid behaviors which contradict their aspirations (Allan et al., 2018; Jia et al., 2013; Usman et al., 2019).

Boredom at work is a negative affective experience which informs the employee about the lack of meaning and challenge regarding his work tasks, motivating him or her to resolve this conflict by engaging in interesting or meaningful activities, such as cyberloafing, which occurs more frequently in comparison with other counterproductive work behaviors and can be regarded as a coping mechanism used by bored employees (Pindek et al., 2018; van Tilburg & Igou, 2012).

This study aims at investigating whether meaningful work can discourage cyberloafing. Moreover, it examines the mediating role of boredom at work in the relationship between meaningful work and cyberloafing.

Meaningful Work and Cyberloafing

Traditional control mechanisms, such as the application of sanctions, have proven to be inefficient when it comes to suppressing cyberloafing, as they lead to feelings of fear, which in turn give rise to increased deviant behaviors, explained by the irrationality associated with fear (Zoghbi Manrique de Lara, 2006). At the same time, monitoring the activities that employees carry out on the Internet becomes more and more difficult as technology advances, also being associated with negative affective responses and privacy issues (Ugrin & Michael Pearson, 2013). In addition, employees already use personal devices at work which enable them to surf the Internet without being detected by employers.

Some studies have shown that meaningful work is negatively related to cyberloafing, calling attention to the

importance of investigating the role of intrinsic motivational factors in discouraging cyberloafing, whose effectiveness may be higher than that of the control methods used so far in organizations, because they are associated with feeling positive emotions and with freedom of choice (Jia et al., 2013; Usman et al., 2019).

So far the scientific literature has put emphasis on the sources and processes associated with meaningful work, neglecting its consequences, which have only recently begun to be investigated, this line of research highlighting its beneficial organizational outcomes, including the deterrence of withdrawal intentions (Allan et al., 2018; Steger et al., 2012), a category of counterproductive work behaviors that cyberloafing is a part of (Pindek et al., 2018).

Hypothesis 1: *Meaningful work is negatively associated with cyberloafing.*

The Mediating Role of Boredom at Work

A complex perspective which brings together the characteristics of work and the individual preferences of employees in relation to them should be embraced with regard to the occurrence of boredom at work, namely Fisher (1993) asserts that situations that are not perceived as meaningful, because they do not match people's interests and needs, are associated with boredom. Furthermore, the same author argues that people turn to different sources of stimulation when they feel bored, engaging in activities that may be dysfunctional, but that give them a sense of freedom of choice and of enthusiasm associated with the risk of being caught by their employers.

With this in view, it can be argued that exhibiting counterproductive work behaviors is a coping mechanism in relation to boredom (Loukidou et al., 2009; Spector & Fox, 2002, 2010).

Studies point up the existence of a relationship between boredom at work and counterproductive work behavior, which can be understood from the perspective of the emotion-centered model of voluntary work behavior proposed by Spector and Fox (2002), more precisely boring situations can be regarded as stressors associated with negative emotions, which cause employees to exhibit counterproductive work behaviors in an attempt to reduce their unpleasant emotional state (Bruursema et al., 2011; van Hooff & van Hooff, 2014). In addition, there is a call for research regarding the work characteristics that lead to boredom and subsequently to the display of counterproductive work behaviors such as cyberloafing, the lack of meaning being a relevant subject in relation to this area of research.

Moreover, there is a significant link between boredom and withdrawal, a distinct category of counterproductive work behavior that cyberloafing is a part of, referring to the attempt to avoid or get out of situations perceived as

unpleasant, such as those associated with stressors that induce negative emotions (Spector et al., 2006).

2. METHODOLOGY

Participants and procedure

Participants in this study were 218 adult employed in public or private organizations operating in Romania, with an average age of 36 years, among them 175 women (80%). More than half of the participants (68%) had a college education, while 29% had graduated high school.

The measures were disseminated online through social networks such as LinkedIn and Facebook, within professional groups. Respondents were informed of their rights as participants, including the confidentiality of the data collected and its use for scientific purposes only. No compensation was granted for participating in this study, but participants subsequently received additional information about the research topics investigated.

Instruments

Meaningful work was measured with the The Work and Meaning Inventory (Steger et al., 2012), comprised of ten

Hypothesis 2: *Boredom at work mediates the relationship between meaningful work and cyberloafing.*

items rated on a Likert scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). Some example items are: "I have a good sense of what makes my job meaningful." or "My work helps me make sense of the world around me".

Boredom at work was measured with The Dutch Boredom Scale (Reijseger et al., 2013), comprised of six items, rated on a Likert scale from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Some example items are: "It seems as if my working day never ends." or "I tend to do other things during my work".

Cyberloafing was measured with the Prevalence of cyberloafing scale (Lim & Teo, 2005), comprised of fourteen items, rated on a Likert scale from 0 (Never) to 6 (Constantly). Some example items are: "During office hours, how often do you use the Internet at work to access the following Websites for personal reasons: Visit non-job related Websites." or "Download non-work related information".

3. RESULTS

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows the mean, standard deviation, Cronbach Alpha coefficients and correlations between the variables included in the research model.

The data did not reveal a statistically significant correlation between Meaningful Work and Cyberloafing ($r = -.11, p = .09$). Consequently, it fails to support the first hypothesis formulated in the present research.

A significantly negative correlation was revealed between Meaningful Work and Boredom at Work ($r = -.44, p < 0.01$). At the same time, Boredom at Work correlated statistically significantly with Cyberloafing ($r = .31, p < 0.01$).

The gender and age of the participants were used in the study as control variables. However, the data did not reveal significant correlations between gender, age and cyberloafing. These results coincide with those obtained in the study on the relationship between meaningful work and cyberloafing carried out by Usman et al. (2019), authors who highlight the fact that the relationships between gender, age and cyberloafing can be influenced by other variables, such as personality traits or workplace norms..

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics, correlations and Cronbach Alpha coefficients*

Variables	M	SD	α	3	4	5
1. Gender	1.20	.39	-	.03	.00	.12
2. Age	35.73	12.40	-	-.05	-.18**	-.12
3. Meaningful Work	37.34	9.88	.93	-		
4. Boredom at Work	11.17	4.20	.72	-.44**	-	
5. Cyberloafing	22.56	14.66	.89	-.11	.31**	-

Note. N = 218; ** $p < .01$; Gender: 1 = Female, 2 = Male.

Hypotheses Testing

Figure 1 shows the results of the mediation analysis run in PROCESS.

Control variables were included in the mediation analysis, but the data did not reveal statistically significant relationships. Therefore, the results regarding them will not be reported.

After testing the mediating role of Boredom at Work on the relationship between Meaningful Work and Cyberloafing, it was found that Meaningful Work alone is not a significant predictor of Cyberloafing, respectively the total effect is not statistically significant, $b = -.18$, $t(214) = -1.82$, $p = .06$. At the same time, the direct effect is not statistically significant, thus Meaningful Work is not a significant predictor of Cyberloafing when Boredom at Work is controlled, $b = .02$,

$t(213) = .24$, $p = .80$. Consequently, Hypothesis 1 was not supported empirically.

The results of the analysis showed that Meaningful Work is a significant predictor of Boredom at Work, $b = -.19$, $t(214) = -7.57$, $p < .001$. At the same time, Boredom at Work is a significant predictor of Cyberloafing, $b = 1.07$, $t(213) = 4.18$, $p < .001$.

The indirect effect equals $-.20$, 95% CI $[-.31, -.11]$, the absence of zero within the confidence interval indicating the existence of the mediation relationship.

At the same time, the Sobel test was applied, which revealed, in turn, the existence of a mediation relationship ($z = 3.65$, $p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 2.

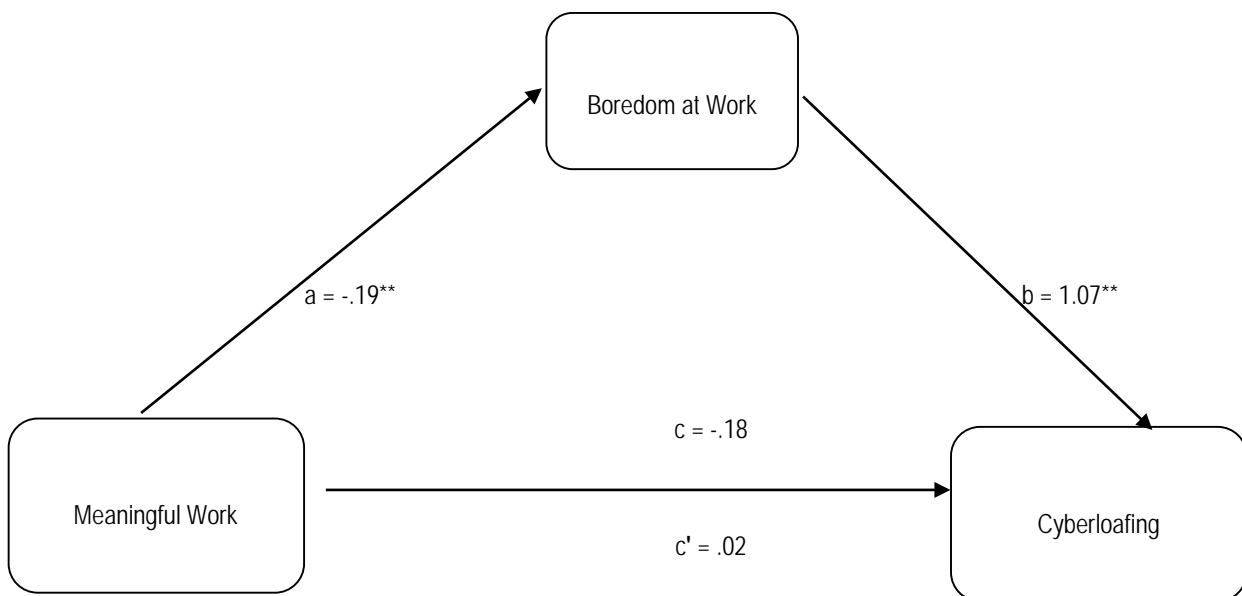


Figure 1. Representation of mediation model

4. DISCUSSION

This research aimed to test the potentially negative relationship between Meaningful Work and Cyberloafing, taking into consideration the fact that there is not enough empirical evidence regarding the association between these variables in the scientific literature. Meaningful Work has been seen as a potential deterrent to cyberloafing behaviors, taking into account its positive valence, the fact that it determines desirable consequences in terms of employees' behavior, such as engagement or organizational citizenship behavior (Bailey et al., 2018b), but also the negative relationships between this variable and other counterproductive behaviors at work, including withdrawal intentions (Allan et al., 2018; Steger et al., 2012). At the

same time, the investigation of the relationship between these variables is also based on the need to use intrinsic motivational factors to control cyberloafing (Usman et al., 2019), because traditional control methods, such as monitoring employees' online activities or punishments are associated with unfavorable consequences, an example being the feeling of negative emotions (Ugrin & Pearson, 2013; Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara, 2006). Identifying meaning at work motivates employees to achieve their aspirations, fact which is in contradiction with wasting time at work and carrying out activities that prevent the achievement of performance.

However, the data failed to support the existence of a direct negative relationship between Meaningful Work and Cyberloafing, contrary to the results reported by Usman et al. (2019) and by Jia et al. (2013), imposing the need to carry out more research to investigate the relationship between these variables.

At the same time, the mediating role of Boredom at Work on the relationship between Meaningful Work and Cyberloafing was tested, which was supported by the results of the mediation analysis, according to which boredom fully mediates the relationship between the other two variables. On the one hand, the negative relationship between Meaningful Work and Boredom at Work supports the importance of adopting a complex perspective in explaining the emergence of boredom, encompassing multiple aspects of professional activities. Investigating the role of task characteristics, such as monotony, is not enough to understand this phenomenon, but the relevance of studying factors such as the relationship between employees and the environment in which they work is highlighted. In this sense, people do not feel challenged by professional contexts in which they cannot identify certain meanings, facing boredom, which causes specific behavioral responses. On the other hand, the positive relationship between Boredom at Work and Cyberloafing supports the idea that employees' responses to boredom are not passive, but rather active, of an orientation towards compensatory activities that provide them with the stimulation they need. Consequently, cyberloafing can be seen as a coping mechanism used by bored employees.

Limitations

Firstly, the use of a cross-sectional research design does not allow the formulation of causal conclusions.

Secondly, the nature of the studied variables requires the use of "self-report" evaluation tools, because the respondents are the only ones who can evaluate how meaningful their work is, to what extent they face boredom at work, but and if they exhibit cyberloafing behaviors that

employers have difficulty spotting. However, the administration of such assessment tools favors the provision of desirable responses, especially regarding cyberloafing. Regarding the characteristics of the sample investigated in the research, the fact that the number of female respondents is considerably higher than that of male respondents does not allow the formulation of representative conclusions for both genders.

In addition, the administration of assessment tools in the online environment makes it impossible to verify the identity of the respondents, who have the freedom to complete them more than once or to give random answers.

Future directions of research

Regarding future research, it would be appropriate to implement a longitudinal study, which would make it possible to identify causal relationships between the variables.

Also, alternative means of administering the assessment tools, but also of measuring the study variables, can be used to compensate for the risks regarding "self-report" assessment tools.

In addition, moderator variables of the relationships between Meaningful Work and Boredom at Work and between Boredom at Work and Cyberloafing could be included in the research model. In this sense, the moderating role of personality traits could be tested, considering the relationships between the traits included in the Big Five model and Boredom at Work, but also the relationships between them and Cyberloafing, highlighted in the literature (Jia et al., 2013; van Hooff & van Hooff, 2016). It would be useful to assess the extent to which individuals characterized by high levels of extraversion are more likely to experience boredom and engage in cyberloafing activities. At the same time, the extent to which employees characterized by high levels of conscientiousness avoid counterproductive behaviors such as cyberloafing could be investigated..

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