

Telecommuting and cyberloafing in the Ghanaian context. The role of employees emotional exhaustion

Telecommuting
and
cyberloafing

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine the relationship between telecommuting and cyberloafing among Ghanaian workers. In addition, the study investigated the moderating role of emotional exhaustion on telecommuting and cyberloafing.

Design/methodology/approach – The study collected quantitative data from 945 employees in banks, telecommunication and insurance sectors of the Ghanaian economy. Data was entered using SPSS v.23 and analysed with Process Macro v3.5.

Findings – The results indicate that there is a significant positive relationship between telecommuting and cyberloafing. It also found out that emotional exhaustion has a significant negative relationship with cyberloafing. Furthermore, emotional exhaustion moderated the relationship between telecommuting and cyberloafing. Organisations are not necessarily required to be in a particular location to achieve their goals. Through practices such as telecommuting, organisations are able to unleash the creative and innovative abilities of employees and also improve their psychological well-being for greater gains.

Practical implications – The practice of telecommuting psychologically empowers the individual giving some decision-making latitudes to one and making one responsible and accountable for their actions and inactions. Also, individuals who are giving the chance to telecommute will only engage in cyberloafing behaviours when they are emotionally exhausted. Thus, it is important to create conditions that establishes equilibrium and creates harmony between the individual and the work, hence eliminating any feeling of emotional exhaustion and reaping the full benefits of telecommuting.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is the first to examine the role of emotional exhaustion in the relationship between telecommuting workers and their engagement in cyberloafing.

Keywords Emotional exhaustion, Cyberloaf, Job demand resource, Management by objectives, Telecommute

Paper type Research paper



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Introduction

In cities throughout the world, traffic congestion has been identified as a prevalent issue (Hamilton *et al.*, 2013) and the Ghanaian context is no exception. With the introduction of information technology, remote working has become another way of relieving traffic situations. Telecommuting as a way of working from home has become the new norm for millions of employees across the globe as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Brynjolfsson *et al.*, 2020). Telecommuting is a means of remote working that ensures flexible working arrangements in organisations by enabling employees to manage their work and family lives (Shockley & Allen, 2010). The phenomenon has become more compelling in this era of pandemic as many organisations seek to decongest their environments in compliance with the physical and social distance protocols in managing the virus (Chong *et al.*, 2020; Abdel Hadi *et al.*, 2021). According to Parker *et al.* (2020), more than half of the employees in the world began to telecommute amidst the pandemic.

Telecommuting (telework, remote work and virtual work) occurs when an employee uses technology to work away from the office space for a portion of their working hours (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). Telework allow employees the opportunity to be autonomous and mobile in their work activities (Weinert *et al.*, 2015). Teleworking has been found to improve work-life balance, improved productivity, reduced stress and fatigue and less withdrawal behaviours among employees (Allen *et al.*, 2015; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). It has also been observed that telecommuting involves physical and mental changes in how individuals carry out their jobs, and such adjustments may impact the energies of individuals (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Sardeshmukh *et al.*, 2012) and consequently lead to emotional exhaustion.

Wright & Cropanzano (1998, p. 486) posit that emotional exhaustion is “a chronic state of physical and emotional depletion that results from an excessive job, personal demands, and continuous stress”. Emotional exhaustion thus occurs when individuals recognise that they are deficient in the resources that are needed or feel overstretched (Mulki *et al.*, 2006; Abdel Hadi *et al.*, 2021). Excessive work that creates a sense of physical, emotional and psychological weariness and tiredness leads to emotional exhaustion (Zohar, 1999).

Working-from-home requires the individual to put an equilibrium to both job demands and domestic demands. Instead of dedicating a number of hours to go into the office, those that work from home are more susceptible to dealing with issues at home during times they would normally be at the office which, therefore, decreases the amount of work being accomplished in a given day thus potentially increasing the perceived demands from work and life. This can be exhausting and can drive the individual to engage in counterproductive work behaviours (Becker *et al.*, 2022; Golden, 2012; Kniffin *et al.*, 2021) such as cyberloafing. This negative response increases when employees are forced to work from home (Becker *et al.*, 2022). This was typically experienced in Ghana amidst the Covid-19 pandemic where a lot of employees were forced to work from home to avoid the spread of the virus (Kwaah *et al.*, 2022). Cyberloafing is the use of the organisation’s internet connection and work devices, or other resources inappropriately and for personal benefits during working hours (Lim & Chen, 2012). Employees spend about four to six hours a day surfing the internet, and it is believed that over 30 million employees in the USA cyber slack yearly which cost the country billions of dollars (Lim & Chen, 2012).

The Job Demand-Resource model (JD-R Model) argue that the features of a job are categorised as job demands and job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). Job demands include the physical, social or emotional characteristics or requirements of the job and the work environment. These demands though not necessarily negative can become job stressors when one’s ability to deal with these demands are overwhelmed. Job resources

involve all the physical, social or organisational aspects of the job that can influence the demands of the job and their effects on the mental state of the individuals and how they are able to achieve their work goals, grow and develop (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Kim & Christensen, 2017).

The JD-R model provides a theoretical foundation in explaining the role of emotional exhaustion as a moderator in the consequences of telecommuting on cyberloafing. The resource element of the JD-R relative to telecommuting and its consequences holds that the use of personal technology in working from anywhere provides employees with resources to engage in other activities outside the scope of work. Thus, the technology provided for employees allows them to attend to other non-work affairs which can allow them to replenish their taxed resources during work and consequently allow them to function effectively (de Jonge *et al.*, 2012; Trougakos & Hideg, 2009). Furthermore, the technology provided to work from anywhere places enormous demands emanating from mental distraction and information overload on employees which in turn can lead to poor job performance, poor health and strain (i.e. depletion of energy) and consequently lead to cyberloafing as a result of the depletion of energy (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001). When a job has insurmountable demands, then it depletes resources. When a person's resources (emotional exhaustion) are depleted, it can lead to counterproductive behaviours (cyberloafing).

The consequence of cyberslacking calls for continuous research in examining the factors that occasion these behaviours among employees (Askew, 2012; Askew *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been the need to switch from the conservative work life where employees are expected to be in the office to a more virtual one with the use of computer-based technology in communicating (Kwaah *et al.*, 2022). Several studies have examined cyberloafing within the office setting (Lim, 2002; Blanchard & Henle, 2008; Moody & Siponen, 2013). Presently, only a few studies have examined the phenomena in the context of working-from-home (Picu & Dinu, 2016; Lyttelton *et al.*, 2020; Nayak & Pandit, 2021), hence the need for further studies. In addition, though not a new concept, working from home is generally a new flexible work schedule in Ghana due to the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic (Awotoye *et al.*, 2020); therefore, there is a need to examine its effect on employees from a Ghanaian perspective. The work schedule in Ghana prior to the pandemic was more traditional, where employees are expected to be present for a specific time period. However, after the pandemic most organisations switched to a more flexible one (telework) (Awotoye *et al.*, 2020). The present study thus addresses these gaps in the literature by examining telecommuting and its effect on employee's cyberloafing. It further determines the role of emotional exhaustion in this relationship (telework and cyberloafing).

Telecommuting and emotional exhaustion

Telework is the outcome of flexibility required by most employees to protect them from resource depletion experienced in the office space. The literature suggests that there is a reduced susceptibility of exhaustion when there is interpersonal distance amongst colleagues than when there is continuous contact (Vesala & Tuomivaara, 2015; Harr, 2013). Hwang *et al.* (2021) conducted a study on emotional exhaustion on employees before and after the emergence of the Covid-19 and observed that employees who were exposed to the Covid-19 experienced significant higher level of emotional exhaustion than those who were not. However, individuals who are overachievers tend to experience negative emotions than other workers when they have the freedom to do so (Bakker & Costa, 2014; Clark *et al.*, 2021). Spagnoli & Molinaro (2020) conducted a study on workaholics and emotional exhaustion during the Covid-19 lockdown in Italy and observed that there was a positive relationship

between workaholics and emotional exhaustion of employees during the Covid-19 and even worst during the lockdown. The present study therefore predicts that:

- H1.* There will be a negative significant relationship between telecommuting and emotional exhaustion.

Emotional exhaustion and cyberloafing

Emotional exhaustion is a persistent state of physical and emotional depletion that develops from an excessive job, personal obligations and continual stress (Lim *et al.*, 2020). This can be as a result of excessive toil which leads to psychological and emotional exhaustion in emotionally exhausted personnels (Zohar, 1999). When employees become emotionally exhausted and engage in surfing the internet, they are able to escape from negative feelings or pressures (Oravec, 2018). Aghaz & Sheikh (2016) conducted a study on cyberloafing and job burnout in the Iranian knowledge intensive sector and observed that there was a positive significant relationship between job burnout and cyberloafing. Koay (2018) in a study that examined workplace ostracism and cyberloafing observed that employees who became emotionally tired because of being ignored spent most of their time loafing the internet. Workplace stress has also been found to associate positively with cyberloafing (Andreassen *et al.*, 2014; Koay *et al.*, 2017). Despite most studies indicating that emotional exhaustion has a significant positive relationship on cyberloafing, Lim *et al.* (2020) stipulate that there is no significant relationship between these variables. The present study therefore predicts that:

- H2.* There will be a positive significant relationship between emotional exhaustion and cyberloafing.

Telecommuting and cyberloafing

Cyberloafing is one of the socially accepted deviant behaviours and a counterproductive behaviour (Askew *et al.*, 2014). When employees cyberloaf, it is considered as a way of managing their well-being; however, it affects the effectiveness of an organisation negatively (Lim, 2002; Kim *et al.*, 2016). Mustajab *et al.* (2020) conducted a study on how working from home impacts employee productivity and found out that major areas of work could not be carried out from home but if encouraged can lead to a decline in employee productivity. Cyberloaf is more of a virtual deviance than an in person one. That is, employees engage in these behaviours when connected to the internet (Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara, 2012). According to Holland *et al.* (2016) employees who telework frequently engage more in telework-specific counterproductive behaviours. O'Neill *et al.* (2014) conducted a study on employees cyberslacking when working away from home and observed that there was a negative relationship between cyber slacking and job satisfaction whilst working distantly. Employees who are not satisfied at the workplace become emotionally exhausted and hence engage cyberloafing (Lim *et al.*, 2020). Exhaustion at the workplace serves as an intervention between telework and turnover intentions. Thus, when employees who telework become emotionally exhausted, they begin to have intentions of leaving their organisation (Golden, 2006). The present study therefore predicts that:

- H3.* There will be a positive significant relationship between telecommuting and cyberloafing.
- H4.* Emotional exhaustion is likely to serve as a moderator between telecommuting and cyberloafing.

Methodology

Research design and sample

The study used the cross-sectional survey design to conveniently collect information from 945 respondents proportionally selected from the banking, telecommunication and insurance sectors of the Ghanaian economy.

Convenient sampling because, amidst the covid-19 pandemic, it was difficult to get people who were willing to embark on a research due to the transmitting rate of the virus. The sample size of 945 was selected using the formula proposed by [Miller & Brewer \(2003\)](#) which is given us:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(\alpha^2)}$$

where n = sample size, N = Target population and α = error term. This was used to ensure a fair representation of the various organisation: banks (2,450), telecommunication (1,500) and insurance (1,000).

Participants and procedure

A pilot study (50) was conducted on a small scale with the goal of helping the researcher to know how well to go about the study on a larger scale. In this study, the main reason for conducting the trial was to determine how dependable and appropriate the measurement scale was in the Ghanaian context. The researcher used 50 employees from random banks. These partakers were omitted from the main survey. In collecting the data, respondents were asked to answer the questions printed on sheets of paper. These workers were contacted during lunch hours in their various organisations. The researcher observed all the necessary social distance and all organisational protocols. [Table 1](#) reports the demographic characteristics of the respondent.

Measures

Telecommuting. This was measured using the e-work life scale by [Grant et al. \(2018\)](#) comprising 28 items measured on a five-point Likert scale (from 1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree). The scale has a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of ($\alpha = 0.78$) with items such as *I know what it takes to be an effective e-worker; I am happy with my work life balance when e-working remotely; I can manage my time well when e-working.*

Demographic variables	Descriptive statistics
Gender	Male: 498 (52.7%) Female: 447 (47.3%)
Age	40 years and below: 816 (83.6%) 41 years and above: 129 (13.6)
Job tenure	Less than a year: 148 (15.7%) 1–3 years: 378 (40%) 4–7 years: 264 (27.9%) 8–10 years: 79 (8.4%) 11–13 years: 35 (3.7%) 14 years and above: 41 (4.3%)

Source: Field Data (2021)

Table 1.
Characteristics of the
respondents

Emotional exhaustion. This was measured using the Maslach Burnout inventory (MBI). The scale has a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of ($\alpha = 0.89$). It has eight items which is measured on a five-point Likert scale. Examples of items include *I feel emotionally drained by my work; I feel frustrated by my job.*

Cyberloafing. This was measured using 23 items from Blanchard & Henle's (2008) Cyberloafing scale. Items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = never to 5 = a great deal. The 23 items had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of ($\alpha = 0.84$). Examples of items include *I check non-related email; shopped online for personal goods; visited gambling sites; viewed adult oriented websites.*

Results

This study used IBM Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) version 26.0 to analyse the data. The data analysis was in two parts. The first part was the preliminary analysis which involved the reliability analysis and bivariate correlation. The second part involved the testing of hypotheses.

Preliminary analysis

This study considered the reliability and normality of the variables used in the study (telecommuting, emotional exhaustion and cyberloafing). Factor analysis was done on each variable to check the factor loadings and also determine the quality of the scales used to collect data. The information from Table 2 indicates the skewness and kurtosis values derived from the various covert constructs, and it was observed that most of the constructs fell between the rule of thumb of -2 and +2. This points out that the data set was normally distributed. The beginning two hypotheses were analysed using standard regression analysis. The third was tested using the PROCESS macro version 4.0 created by Igartua and Hayes (2021). Assumptions of linearity, normality, multicollinearity and singularity were checked before analysis:

- *H1:* There will be a positive significant relationship between telecommuting and cyberloafing.
- *H2:* There will be a positive significant relationship between emotional exhaustion and cyberloafing.

The results in Table 3 showed that there was a significant positive relationship between telecommuting and cyberloafing ($\beta = 0.04, p = 0.00$). This confirmed *H1*, which stated that there will be a positive significant relationship between telecommuting and cyberloafing. This implies that the higher an employee telecommutes, the more likely they are to cyberloaf. Also, a positive significant relationship was established between emotional exhaustion and cyberloafing. This means that the higher emotionally exhausted an employee is the more likely one will cyberloaf ($\beta = 0.28, p = 0.00$). This model explained 81% of the variance in employee cyberloaf behaviours:

Variables	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3
Telecommuting	-1.01	1.24	-		
Emotional exhaustion	0.49	0.67	0.03	-	
Cyberloafing	1.02	0.92	-0.11**	0.21**	-

Table 2. Skewness and kurtosis and bivariate correlations (N = 945)

Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)
Source: Table by authors

H5. Emotional exhaustion will moderate the relationship between telecommuting and cyberloaf.

A moderation analysis was used using Model 1 of the PROCESS macro version 4.0 by Igartua and Hayes (2021) with a confidence interval of 95% and bootstraps set at 5,000. This was used to test the hypothesis that emotional exhaustion will moderate the relationship between telecommuting and cyberloafing. Cyberloafing is noted to be the consequent variable with telecommuting as the predictive variable and employee emotional exhaustion as the moderating variable. The variables accounted for a significant amount of variance in cyberloafing, $R^2 = 0.09$, $F(2, 944) = 32$, $p < 0.00$. According to Table 4, the interaction variable which is emotional exhaustion negatively influences the already existing relationship between telecommuting and cyberloafing. This means that when employees who telecommute are emotionally exhausted, the less likely they are to cyberloaf.

The condition effect of the focal predictor at values of the moderator indicates that emotional exhaustion was negative and statistically significant in the existing relationship between telecommuting and cyberloafing. According to Table 5, the results showed that at low moderation or at the least emotional exhaustion, the relationship between telecommuting and cyberloafing was insignificant and negative ($b = -0.06$, $SE = 0.04$,

Model	B	Std. error	Beta	t	Sig
(Constant)	32.25	3.57		8.71	0.00
Telecommute	0.05	0.03	0.04	1.29	0.00
Emotional exhaustion	0.65	0.07	0.28	8.99	0.00

Notes: $R^2 = 0.081$; ($p < 0.05$); $**p < 0.00$; Dependent variable = Cyberloafing
Source: Table by authors

Table 3. Summary of standard regression

Model	B	SE	t	p
Constant	63.43	9.49	6.68	0.00
Telecommute	-0.26	0.09	-2.82	0.00
Emotional exhaustion	-0.76	0.40	-1.88	0.05
Int_1	0.01	0.00	3.52	0.00

Notes: B = coefficient/slope of the intercept; SE = standard error; p = significant level; Int_1 = interaction
Source: Table by authors

Table 4. Summary of the results of the moderation effect

Emotional exhaustion	Effect	SE	T	p	LLCI	ULCI
14.03	-0.06	0.04	-1.44	0.14	0.16	0.02
21.59	0.04	0.03	1.17	0.23	0.02	0.11
29.16	0.14	0.04	3.25	0.00	0.06	0.23

Notes: SE = Standard error; p = significance level; LLCI = Lower-level confidence interval; ULCI = Upper-level confidence interval
Source: Table by authors

Table 5. Interaction/condition effect of the focal predictor at values of the moderator

$p > 0.00$). At mid moderation, the relation was also insignificant ($b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.03$, $p > 0.00$). However, there was significant impact of emotional exhaustion on the existing relationship between telecommuting and cyberloafing when exhaustion is high.

Discussion

The global Covid-19 pandemic has heightened the use of remote working among many organisations, particularly in the African region where the practice has not been a common feature.

Telecommuting had a significant negative predictive effect on the emotional exhaustion of employees such that employees who engaged more in telecommuting experienced less emotional exhaustion. This finding is not surprising as all the participants in the study lived and worked in the capital of the country (Accra) where travel time to-and-from work is both emotionally and physically draining due to unbearable traffic situations and reckless driving on the roads. Thus, telecommuting, specifically remote working with the potential of eliminating the emotional and physical drain that characterise the commuting to-and-from work surely would reduce the emotional exhaustion of employees who practice it. Again, with the heavy traffic situation in the capital, most employees leave home very early in the morning while their kids are still asleep and return home when they are gone to bed. The challenge in balancing work and family life particularly among dual-career couples could be emotionally exhausting. Telecommuting with its associated flexibilities allows employees to balance work and family life thereby reducing the emotional exhaustion that characterise the work-family imbalance.

Emotional exhaustion positively and significantly predicted employees cyberloafing behaviour. Thus, the more emotionally exhausted an employee is, the more likely he will surf the internet for personal gains. This is usually so because engaging in cyberloafing helps individuals to elude pressure of negative feelings being experienced (Oravec, 2018). The concept of division of labour and specialisation has led to the creation of specialised roles in most organisations, which tend to be monotonous and routine in nature. This has been found to breed boredom (a state of emotional exhaustion) among employees, which could be managed through variety. Thus, employees are likely to switch from their routine jobs to seek variety from other internet sites to manage the stress that comes with the exhaustion. This finding is consistent with that of other studies (Oravec, 2018; Aghaz & Sheikh, 2016; Koay, 2018) which also found a positive relationship between burnout and cyberloafing.

The relationship between telecommuting and cyberloafing was positive and significant. This means engaging in cyberloafing is occasioned by working-from-home or telecommuting. The sense of self determination that characterise telecommuting invariably gets individuals who telecommute very irresponsible and thus would like to engage in activities that detracts from the goals of the organisation. Similarly, individuals who telecommute are effectively managed using the Management by Objective (MBO) principle. Thus, they have agreed objectives to deliver on and cannot afford to fail. Hence, cyberloafing becoming farfetched although they have liberties. This finding is in line with previous findings which indicate that employees are more likely to directly engage in cyberloafing activities when telecommuting (Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara, 2012; Holland *et al.*, 2016; O'Neill *et al.*, 2014).

The present study also found that employees who telecommuted engaged in cyberloafing when they were emotionally exhausted. This finding is consistent with the job demand resource model which posit that individuals use various resources in completing a work task (telecommute), but when these resources are not enough to complete the task, individuals become exhausted (emotional exhaustion) and hence engage in some counterproductive behaviours (cyberloaf). This is also in line with Golden's (2006) findings which observed that teleworkers who were emotionally exhausted began to have intentions of leaving their organisations.

Managerial implications

Findings of the study provides empirical information to back the practice of flexi-system of work particularly telecommuting among African organisations many of who remain conservative and ardamant to the practice. Evidence from the study points to the fact that telecommuting has a way of improving the psychological well-being of employees as it reduces emotional exhaustion thereby increasing their ability to be more productive. Organisations have a lot to benefit from telecommuting and should be seen to be structuring their operations to take advantage of the benefits of telecommuting.

The myth surrounding telecommuting and cyberloafing, which scared away captains of industry particularly in the African region from practicing telecommuting has been broken by the findings of this study as it showed no significant relationship except when emotionally exhausted. Indeed, the practice of telecommuting psychologically empowers the individual giving some decision-making latitudes to one and making one responsible and accountable for their actions and inactions. Thus, the management philosophy that best fit this approach is the MBO. As a matter of principle, organisations that wish to adopt telecommuting as a practice should appreciate that it thrives on the MBO philosophy where Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound (SMART) objectives are set with employees and given the needed resources to deliver on same. This act of self-determination has been found to kick in that sense of responsibility and accountability, thus making it difficult for employees to engage in cyberloafing activities when they have not completed their agreed task.

Bringing clarity to the telecommuting-cyberloafing mantra, which has been trumpeted by many is the role of emotional exhaustion. Individuals who are giving the chance to telecommute will only engage in cyberloafing behaviours when they are emotionally exhausted. Thus, it is important to create conditions that establishes equilibrium and creates harmony between the individual and the work, hence eliminating any feeling of emotional exhaustion and reaping the full benefits of telecommuting. For instance, conditions for true empowerment, which includes recognition, support, training and setting realistic targets could make telecommuting enjoyable other than being endurable.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

Despite the encouraging findings of the study, the mechanism underlying the various effects could not be identified. Therefore, future studies can establish the underlying mechanisms of these effects by using qualitative studies or the mixed-method. Also, employees sampled were hybrid workers that is, they telecommute some days and visit the office other times. Future studies should focus on full time teleworkers to get detailed information. Future studies can also explore other mediators such as psychological capital and emotional intelligence in mitigating the negative effects of telework.

Conclusion

In today's world of work with improved technology, the notion of the organisation not being an architectural edifice but the assemblage of two or more persons to pursue a common goal has become more meaningful than ever. Organisations are not necessarily required to be in a particular location to achieve their goals. Through practices as telecommuting, organisations are able to unleash the creative and innovative abilities of employees and also improve their psychological well-being for greater gains. However, it must be stated that just as not all employees can be empowered not all employees can telecommute.

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