The Impact of Work-Related Use of Information and Communication Technologies After Hours on Time Theft

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Abstract
Time theft is a prevalent, costly, and generally discreet employee activity in firms; nonetheless, very limited research is available on it. To explore why, how, and when employees exhibit time theft, we investigate the influence mechanism of work-related use of information and communication technologies after hours (W_ICTs) on time theft from the perspective of resource gain and loss. Our study found that W_ICTs significantly promotes employee time theft. Emotional exhaustion and moral disengagement play a mediating role in the relationship between W_ICTs and time theft, respectively, and these two variables have a chain-mediating role in the relationship above. Perceived organizational support moderates this chain mediation by moderating the positive effect of W_ICTs on emotional exhaustion. Overall, the findings have important theoretical and managerial implications for research on W_ICTs and time theft.

Keywords Work-related use of ICTs · Perceived organizational support · Emotional exhaustion · Moral disengagement · Time theft

Introduction

Technology is neither good nor bad-nor is it neutral.

—Kranzberg's First Law of Technology

“Time is money, efficiency is life.” Time is not only a resource that can help organizations gain competitive advantages, but also an important organizational asset (Beck & Schmidt, 2013; DeVoe & Pfeffer, 2011). With the increasing competition among enterprises, almost all enterprises beginning to pay more attention to time, which is a precious, limited, and non-renewable resource (Kuhnel et al., 2012; Sijbom et al., 2018). Although time is so precious, there are still many employees who waste their working time dealing with their personal affairs in the organizational daily management. For example, in the United States, according to the California State Auditor’s Office, an employee spent approximately 3 h/day sleeping or playing on his/her mobile phone, and two employees left the workplace without permission, costing the State more than $111,000 (California State Auditor, 2018; Harold et al., 2021). Moreover, according to a new survey by Rebootonline.com, the UK employees spend only 3.7 days out of every five on office work. This means that companies are paying out on average £8851.14 per employee for this time wasted annually (Bean, 2017). The situation is similar in the Eastern context. Chinese state media reports that government employees often spend their working days doing things unrelated to work, such as playing mah-jongg, playing computer games, sleeping, and shopping online (Wei, 2020; Zhu, 2017). Such behaviors are unethical because they do not conform to social or organizational moral rules, laws, and norms (Dang et al., 2017; Kaptein, 2011; Liu et al., 2020; Yao et al., 2021). For example, standards of China’s professional ethics require employees to love their jobs and uphold a high level of engagement in the organization. These unethical or counterproductive work behaviors of employees are called time theft by scholars.
Time theft denotes the behavior of an employee engaging in unauthorized non-work-related activities during working hours, and employees being paid for time not spent engaged in productive activities at work (Harold et al., 2021; Henle et al., 2010; Yan & Berry, 2013), e.g., employees checking social media such as Twitter during work hours, or sending personal emails during work hours. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, employees are encouraged to work from home, which may lead to more time theft (Zhong et al., 2022). This kind of behavior will bring huge losses to organizations. Some researches find that time theft can cause more than $177 billion of losses to American companies every year (McGee & Fillon, 1995; Yan & Berry, 2013). Because time is invisible, it is difficult for managers to notice employee time theft. As a result, it is important to study this covert, common, and costly employee behavior (Lorinkova & Perry, 2017; Yan & Berry, 2013).

The previous studies have mainly investigated the employee time theft from the perspective of the organization (Henle et al., 2010; Lorinkova & Perry, 2017; Yan & Berry, 2013). These studies believe that such behavior is not only an unethical behavior but also a serious violation of organizational rules and regulations (Harold et al., 2021; Yan & Berry, 2013). However, few scholars have analyzed the reasons for such behaviors from the perspective of employees (Peng et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2021), e.g., employees’ leisure time is taken up by the work (Steffensen et al., 2021). In fact, with the rapid development of the internet and electronic information technology, electronic communication has crossed the time and space limit, thus, making the boundary between work and non-work increasingly blurred (Schlachter et al., 2017). Many employees still need to spend a lot of time on unpaid overtime work after hours (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020; Steffensen et al., 2021). This method of using information and communication technologies such as smartphones and laptops to handle work during non-working hours is called work-related use of information and communication technologies after hours (W_ICTs, Lee et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2018). Although W_ICTs can effectively reduce the cost of internal communication in an organization, it also causes the boundary between employees’ work and life to become more blurred, which leads to some negative behaviors of employees (Rapp et al., 2021; Schlachter et al., 2017; Steffensen et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2018). We expect that W_ICTs will have an impact on employee time theft. The conservation of resource theory (COR) also points out that an individual’s behavior is likely to be caused by an event that affects the gain and loss of his or her resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989). Therefore, we try to explain the mechanism between W_ICTs and time theft by using COR.

According to COR, the more resources an individual has, the less vulnerable he/she will be when faced with resource loss, so individuals tend to get as many resources as possible from two sources (Buchwald & Hobfoll, 2004; Hobfoll, 1989). On the one hand, when a large number of individual resources are consumed, individuals will choose to save the remaining resources to avoid falling into the “loss spiral.” On the other hand, individuals are always actively investing resources to help themselves achieve the “gain spiral,” so as to obtain more resources to avoid the harm caused by resource consumption (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Jin et al., 2018). After W_ICTs consumes employees’ resources, employees tend to “steal” part of their time resources during working hours to replenish the previously consumed resources, to avoid falling into the “loss spiral” and, thus, are more likely to exhibit time theft.

Some scholars have found that before employees exhibit negative behaviors (e.g., knowledge hiding, unethical behavior, and counterproductive work behavior), they often experience emotional and cognitive changes (Chen et al., 2020; Fida et al., 2015; Sammani et al., 2014; Yao et al., 2020, 2021). W_ICTs will consume a large amount of employees’ emotional and cognitive resources. If these resources are not timely supplemented, individuals will experience emotional exhaustion and cognitive changes, and, thus, affect their time theft (Xie et al., 2018; Yao et al., 2020, 2021; Zhao et al., 2021). To better understand the reasons and ways in which W_ICTs influences employee time theft, we draw on the logical framework of cognitive-affective personality system theory (CAPS, Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Yao et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). CAPS believes that when an individual is exposed to an external stimulus or event, his or her affective and cognitive units are activated and ultimately affect the individual’s behavior. In this logic, emotional exhaustion reflects the number of emotional resources (affective unit) an individual has (Yao et al., 2020), and moral disengagement reflects the cognitive tendency (cognitive unit) of individuals to relieve the psychological burden caused by their unethical behaviors (Dang et al., 2017; Schaefer & Bouwmeester, 2020). After experiencing the consumption of emotional resources, individuals will form rational cognition, so emotional exhaustion will also have an impact on moral disengagement (Fida et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2019; Yao et al., 2021). Therefore, we also construct a chain-mediating pathway to more comprehensively explore the entire process of emotional and cognitive resource changes that an individual experiences after suffering from W_ICTs, which ultimately affects his/her behavior.
Furthermore, we try to deepen our understanding of employee time theft by exploring the boundary conditions between W_ICTs and emotional exhaustion. Scholars have found that perceived organizational support (POS), as a situational characteristic, can subtly influence employees’ behaviors beneficial to the organization (DeConinck, 2010; Lam et al., 2016). When POS level is high, employees can obtain more resources from the organization, which can relieve their consumption of emotional resources to a certain extent (Chen & Eyoun, 2021; Kao et al., 2020), and ultimately affect their cognitive units and behaviors (Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Yao et al., 2020). Thus, we propose that POS moderates the chain-mediating model linking W_ICTs to time theft via the chain-mediators of emotional exhaustion and moral disengagement. Our theoretical model is shown in Fig. 1.

Our research provides three major contributions. First, we examine the promoting effect of W_ICTs on time theft, enriching the antecedent research of time theft. Previous studies mainly focus on the impact of work–family conflict and leadership on time theft (Ding et al., 2018; Lorinkova & Perry, 2017; Peng et al., 2020), but ignore the importance of after-work time resources for employees. To our knowledge, we are the first to provide evidence of the positive impact of W_ICTs on time theft, which helps better understand why employees exhibit time theft. Second, by examining the indirect relationship between W_ICTs and time theft, this study further deepens our understanding of the mechanism by which W_ICTs affect time theft. Different from previous studies, we believe that employee time theft is not a completely selfish behavior, but a self-protection behavior. As an employee suffers from W_ICTs, he or she has to exhibit time theft to avoid further loss of resources after experiencing emotional (emotional exhaustion) and cognitive (moral disengagement) resources changes (Fida et al., 2015; Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Samnani et al., 2014; Yao et al., 2020, 2021). Not only does this help us understand why and how time theft occurs from an employee’s perspective, but also helps managers and scholars to curb this behavior from an emotional and cognitive perspective. Finally, we enrich the boundary conditions between W_ICTs and emotional exhaustion. We verify that the interaction between POS and W_ICTs can effectively affect individual cognitive–affective personality systems (Kell, 2018; Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Yao et al., 2020, 2021), which deepens the application of CAPS and answers when W_ICTs will increase employee time theft.

![Theoretical model](image)

**Theory and Hypotheses**

**W_ICTs and Time Theft**

As mentioned earlier, W_ICTs refers to the use of information and communication technology (e.g., smartphones or laptops) to handle work-related tasks before and after hours or during breaks (Lee et al., 2021; Piszczek, 2017; Xie et al., 2018). With the development of information and communication technology, W_ICTs becomes very common, so employees can handle work anytime and anywhere (Xie et al., 2018). W_ICTs enables employees to work more flexibly and improves their work efficiency (Stef fensen et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2018); however, the unpredictability of W_ICTs causes employees to consume a lot of time and energy to pay attention to work messages (e.g., e-mail). Therefore, W_ICTs will hinder the psychological detachment of employees, bring psychological pressure to employees, aggravate work–family conflict, and ultimately affect employees’ behaviors in the workplace (Andrade & Matias, 2021; Cavazotte et al., 2014; Jarvenpaa & Lang, 2005; Piszczek, 2017; Ter Hoeven et al., 2016).

COR points out that in the absence of resources, individuals can easily fall into a “loss spiral” if their resources continue to be consumed, thus, accelerating the loss of their resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989). Therefore, on the one hand, to prevent excessive consumption of resources, individuals tend to preserve resources; On the other hand, to ensure sufficient resources for resisting the damage caused by resource consumption, individuals will invest resources actively to obtain more resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hunter et al., 2017).

Since W_ICTs can consume a lot of employees’ resources, employees have to acquire resources in new ways to replace the resources previously consumed to avoid falling into the “loss spiral” (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989; Xie et al., 2018). More specifically, first, W_ICTs occupies the leisure time of employees, which may lead to insufficient time for employees to deal with their personal affairs, e.g., helping sick family members to find relevant hospitals and doctors, or helping children to check the enrollment information of education and training institutions (Butts et al., 2015; Derks et al., 2015, 2016). To prevent further consumption of personal resources, employees are likely to deal with these private affairs during the working hours of the next day.
Some studies have found that W_ICTs will exert a negative impact on the sleep quality of employees, and lack of sleep will increase the possibility of cyberloafing (Arlinghaus & Nachreiner, 2013; Wagner et al., 2012; Yan & Berry, 2013). Finally, W_ICTs can increase employees’ perception of unfairness. In general, W_ICTs will not be considered overtime, which prevents the employee from receiving overtime pay from the organization. In this situation, while employees consume a lot of resources, they do not receive corresponding rewards (e.g., financial rewards). Time theft can effectively alleviate such unfair perceptions and help employees replenish previously consumed resources (Martin et al., 2010). From the perspective of social exchange, W_ICTs is a type of organizational negative behavior which consumes employees’ resources. Likewise, employees will respond to the organization with some negative behaviors (e.g., time theft), which is a type of negative reciprocity. To sum up, we propose the following hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 1** W_ICTs is positively correlated with employee time theft.

### The Mediating Effect of Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion refers to the fatigue caused by excessive consumption of mental and emotional resources (McDowell et al., 2019; Yao et al., 2020). Some studies have found that W_ICTs will make employees consume their resources to deal with the work, which will exert a negative impact on their psychological detachment (Lee et al., 2021; Sonnen tag & Fritz, 2015). By physically and mentally “switching off” from work after hours, employees can restore their depleted resources from job stressors and maintain their health and well-being (Lee et al., 2021). Nevertheless, W_ICTs not only causes employees unable to recover their resources after working hours but also makes them more likely to fall into a state of resource depletion (i.e., emotional exhaustion) which might decrease employees’ well-being to some extent (Lee et al., 2021). W_ICTs has been found to increase employees’ emotional exhaustion significantly (Xie et al., 2018).

We believe that employee emotional exhaustion significantly positively correlates with time theft. Emotional exhaustion is a manifestation of the extreme lack of emotional resources. To have sufficient resources to deal with the damage caused by the loss of other resources, employees may adopt the following two ways (Hobfoll, 1989). On the one hand, employees in a state of emotional exhaustion will choose to save the remaining resources, e.g., employees may reduce their efforts (time or energy) at work or engage in counterproductive behaviors (Chen et al., 2020; Fida et al., 2015; Samnani et al., 2014; Zhao et al., 2021). On the other hand, employees will try their best to acquire new resources to supplement previously consumed resources, such as using their working time to deal with private matters (Ding et al., 2018; Jin et al., 2018). It has been supported that if employees can take appropriate rest during working hours (which is also a form of time theft), they may recover the resources consumed in the early stage as soon as possible, and thereby show better job performance (Ding et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2015). Therefore, employees in emotional exhaustion are more likely to commit time theft to replenish resources. In general, W_ICTs can be a drain on employees’ resources, thus, exacerbating emotional exhaustion. To avoid further loss of their resources, employees may take some form of time theft in response to W_ICTs, hypothesized as below.

**Hypothesis 2** Emotional exhaustion mediates the positive relationship between W_ICTs and time theft.

### The Mediating Effect of Moral Disengagement

Moral disengagement implies an individual’s cognition of whether his/her behaviors conform to moral norms, which can reduce his or her psychological torture when an individual violates moral norms (Bandura, 1999, 2002). There is a moral regulation mechanism among employees. When employees have sufficient resources, this mechanism can prevent them from exhibiting unethical behaviors. Because if employees behave against their moral standards, they will feel guilty and psychological torture (Bandura, 1999, 2002; Fida et al., 2015; Yao et al., 2021). When employees lack resources, moral disengagement can effectively relieve the guilt and psychological torture, thus, reducing the further consumption of individual resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989). Therefore, when employees lack resources, they are more likely to engage in unethical behaviors through moral disengagement to supplement the resources consumed (Bandura, 1999; Bonner et al., 2016; Dang et al., 2017; Schaefer & Bouwmeester, 2020; Yao et al., 2021). Time theft is regarded as an effective way to replenish resources. When employees lack resources, they may reduce their guilt through moral disengagement to avoid falling into the “loss spiral,” so that they are more likely to exhibit time theft (Bonner et al., 2016; Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989; Zhao et al., 2021).
As mentioned above, W_ICTs will consume a large number of individual resources, which is likely to cause insufficient resources for individuals to maintain their moral regulation mechanism, thus, affecting the level of individual moral disengagement (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2020; Yao et al., 2021). According to COR, in response to the consumption of resources caused by W_ICTs, individuals will actively seek new ways of obtaining resources to maintain the stability of their resources (Yao et al., 2021). Time theft, as a resource acquisition method not easily detected by organizations, is often favored by employees (Hobfoll, 1989; Zhao et al., 2021). In this case, to obtain as many resources as possible, employees are more likely to reduce the psychological torture caused by their moral regulation mechanism through moral disengagement, and thus, exhibit time theft (Chen et al., 2020; Fida et al., 2015; Jin et al., 2018; Samnani et al., 2014; Yao et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2021). In general, since W_ICTs will consume a large number of resources, individuals will increase their moral disengagement level to supplement the consumed resources and exhibit more time theft. Thus, we propose the hypothesis as below.

Hypothesis 3: Moral disengagement mediates the positive relationship between W_ICTs and time theft.

The Chain-Mediating Effect

CAPS points out that individual cognitive–affective units can interact with each other. If an individual is subjected to an event, his/her cognitive–affective unit is stimulated, resulting in corresponding changes in his/her emotions, cognition, and behaviors (Heslin et al., 2019; Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Yao et al., 2020). Meanwhile, events can also stimulate just one of these units, which can affect the individual’s behaviors as well. In this study, emotional exhaustion is a state in which employees consume too many emotional resources and those resources are not replenished in time; hence, it belongs to the affective unit (McDowell et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2018; Yao et al., 2020). Moral disengagement is a cognitive tendency of individuals to the acceptability of violating moral norms, which belongs to the cognitive unit (Bandura, 1999, 2002; Yao et al., 2021).

W_ICTs will consume a large amount of employees’ emotional resources. In this case, employees who lack resources tend to fall into a “loss spiral,” which will accelerate the consumption of their emotional resources (Lee et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2018). Excessive consumption of employees’ emotional resources will lead to a recognition of employees that they should try to obtain resources from other sources. As mentioned above, since employees’ resources are severely consumed by W_ICTs, employees are more willing to engage in moral disengagement to replenish the consumed resources after entering a state of emotional exhaustion (Huang et al., 2019; Striler et al., 2020). In this way, they will reduce the guilt and ultimately exhibit time theft. Therefore, W_ICTs (external stimulus or event) will activate the affective unit (emotional exhaustion) by consuming employees’ resources, then make employees form rational cognition (moral disengagement), and ultimately affect employees’ behavior (time theft). Therefore, we hypothesize that emotional exhaustion and moral disengagement play a chain-mediating role between W_ICTs and time theft.

Hypothesis 4: W_ICTs increases time theft through the chain-mediating role of emotional exhaustion and moral disengagement.

The Moderating Effect of POS

POS refers to an individual’s overall experience and view of the organization in attaching importance to members’ contribution and caring about members’ welfare (Baranik et al., 2010; Eisenberger et al., 1986; Lam et al., 2016). The organization provides support for employees in work and life, such as organizational justice and family welfare. When employees think that the actions of the organization express the care and attention, they will perceive organizational support (Kurtessis et al., 2017; Lam et al., 2016). POS helps individuals to adjust their emotions and replenish emotional resources, thereby preventing them from consuming too many emotional resources and falling into the “loss spiral” (Yao et al., 2020; Zacher et al., 2019). At a higher level of POS, individuals can obtain more resources, so they are less vulnerable to resource loss (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989). Although W_ICTs consumes a lot of individual resources, organizations provide much support to employees such as family support policies, training opportunities, and recognition for contributions (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Lam et al., 2016). Hence, through helping individuals replenish consumed emotional resources, POS weaks the positive effect of W_ICTs on emotional exhaustion to a certain extent (Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Yao et al., 2020).

According to CAPS, an individual’s cognitive–affective unit is not only influenced by external stimuli but also moderated by situational characteristics (Kell, 2018; Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Yao et al., 2020). We suggest that at a higher level of POS, employees’ cognitive–affective units will be stimulated, thus, affecting employees’ behaviors. In this case, even though employees still need to consume various resources to complete tasks after hours, the organization provides various forms of support for individuals to replenish their previously consumed resources (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Halbesleben et al., 2014; Lam et al., 2016), and thereby weakens the positive effect of W_ICTs
on emotional exhaustion to some extent. When resources can be supplemented in time, employees will not break their moral standards and exhibit time theft to obtain resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Yao et al., 2021). On the contrary, under a low level of POS, employees may consume too many emotional resources for work after hours while obtain insufficient resources in the organization to supplement the consumed emotional resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2018; Yao et al., 2021). In this case, to avoid falling into the “loss spiral,” individuals have to choose to supplement their lost emotional resources through time theft. Hence, they are more likely to break their moral standards to supplement the consumed resources and ultimately exhibit time theft (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Yao et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2021). In light of the above, POS moderates the chain-mediating effect of emotional exhaustion and moral disengagement in the positive relationship between W_ICTs and time theft by moderating the positive effect of W_ICTs on emotional exhaustion. Based on the above review, we propose the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 5 POS weakens the chain-mediating effect of emotional exhaustion and moral disengagement in the positive relationship between W_ICTs and time theft by moderating the positive effect of W_ICTs on emotional exhaustion.

Methods

Samples and Procedures

The samples were from a large Internet company in Shenzhen, China (established for more than 10 years and with more than 1000 employees). We contacted the company’s senior management by phone and briefed him on our research objectives, procedures, potential value, and confidentiality. After obtaining his and all the participants’ consent, we went to the enterprise to conduct a questionnaire survey (all the participants were full-time employees and did not include managers). To avoid the serious common method variation, we completed the questionnaire collection procedure at three time points (each interval is 1 month). At Time 1, the participants filled out their basic information, W_ICTs, and POS scales; At Time 2, they filled out scales of emotional exhaustion and moral disengagement; At Time 3, they filled out the time theft scale. To enable participants to fill in carefully, we took the following measures: first, we promised the participants that the data we collected would only be used for academic research, and we would not report it back to their supervisors or companies. Second, the introduction of our questionnaire introduces some information, including our name, institutions, contact information, the purpose, methods, the content of our research, the source of funds, and the possible risks for participants. Furthermore, we stressed that the survey is entirely voluntary and they can stop answering at any time. Third, we promised to pay a gift voucher worth 66 yuan (about $10) at the end of the last survey upon filling the questionnaire carefully. Finally, after participants filled in the questionnaire, we checked the questionnaire to avoid missing values. In addition, we immediately recycled, sealed, and coded the questionnaires.

A total of 400 questionnaires were sent out in this survey, including 362 valid questionnaires collected in Time 1, 336 at Time 2, and 312 at Time 3 (regular answers, failure to match before and after the survey, and obvious unqualified answers will be removed as invalid questionnaires). The overall questionnaire recovery efficiency is 78.00%. Among the final sample, males accounted for 56.09%, females accounted for 43.91%. The average age was 26.433 (SD 4.228). In terms of educational background, 62.82% were bachelor’s degree holders or below, and 37.18% were bachelor above. The average tenure was 3.292 (SD 4.706); unmarried accounted for 68.91%, married accounted for 31.09%. Those with no children were 55.13%, those with one child 32.37%, those with two children 12.18%, and those with three children 0.32%.

Measures

All items were measured on a Likert-5 scale (excluding control variables), ranging from 1 (strongly disagreeable) to 5 (strongly agree). All scales were translated strictly from English to Chinese following the back-translation procedures by Brislin (1970) to ensure accuracy and internal validity.

W_ICTs

We used the scale developed by Ma et al. (2016) to measure W_ICTs. The sample item was “After work, work-related people communicated with me through information communication technologies.” There were three items in total, and the Cronbach’s α was 0.895. The scale was mainly developed for Chinese employees and is widely used by many Chinese scholars (Lee et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2018).

POS

We used the eight-item version of the scale developed by Eisenberger et al. (1986), which has been translated into Chinese and shown to have good psychometric properties (Farh et al., 2007). The sample item was “My organization values my efforts and contributions very much”, and the Cronbach’s α was 0.913.
Emotional Exhaustion

Four items were adopted from Maslach et al. (2001). The sample item was “I feel like I’m at the end of my rope”, and the Cronbach’s α was 0.892. This scale has been used by Chinese scholars (Yao et al., 2020, 2021).

Moral Disengagement

We measured moral disengagement with the eight-item scale developed by Moore et al. (2012). A sample item was “Taking personal credit for ideas that were not your own is no big deal.” The reliability α coefficient was 0.860. This scale has also been used by Chinese scholars (Zhao et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2019).

Time Theft

We measured time theft with the three-item scale developed by Bennett and Robinson (2000). A sample item was “I spent too much time fantasizing or daydreaming on the job,” and the scale showed high reliability (Cronbach’s α = 0.871). This scale has also been used by Chinese scholars (Zhao et al., 2021).

Control Variables

Based on previous studies, we control for employee gender (1 = male, 0 = female), age, educational background (1 = bachelor’s degree or below, 0 = bachelor’s degree above), and tenure, all of which have potential effects on time theft (Harold et al., 2021; Henle et al., 2010; Lorinkova & Perry, 2017; Zhao et al., 2021). In fact, in the Chinese context, the employee is required to be responsible for his or her family, and using work time to deal with some family matters is considered consistent with the basic values of human society (Harold et al., 2021; Schwartz et al., 2012; Yao et al., 2021), so we also used marital status (1 = unmarried, 0 = married) and the number of children as control variables in this study.

Results

Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Table 1 shows the mean, standard deviation, and correlation coefficients for each variable. According to Table 1, the control variables were not related to the core variables in this study, which indicates that these control variables included in our study have no substantial impact on the results. Therefore, we will not report them in the subsequent results reports (Becker, 2005).

Measurement Model

We tested the discriminant validity of all variables by confirmatory factor analysis. The confirmatory factor analysis results supported a five-factor structure of W_ICTs, POS, emotional exhaustion, moral disengagement, and time theft ($\chi^2$/df = 477.428/289 = 1.652, $p < 0.001$, GFI = 0.903, IFI = 0.930, TLI = 0.906, CFI = 0.929, RMSEA = 0.043), indicating that the five-factor model showed a good model fit. We also compared it with other alternative models and found that the five-factor model was significantly better.
than others, indicating the good discriminant validity of our variables. The confirmatory factor analysis indicated poor fit for the single-factor model ($\chi^2$/df = 2891.928/299 = 9.672, $p < 0.001$, GFI = 0.625, IFI = 0.643, TLI = 0.587, CFI = 0.640, and RMSEA = 0.127). Meanwhile, we adopted the Harman single-factor method to test, and the results showed that the total variation explanation amount of factors with characteristic roots greater than 1 was 75.244%, and the first principal component was 29.697%, which did not exceed the critical value of 50% and did not exceed half of the total variation explanation amount. Based on the above analysis, we believe that common method variation did not exert a serious influence on this study.

Hypotheses Testing

Main effect and mediating effect. We used the structural equation model and Bootstrap mediation test in Mplus 7.0 software to test our research hypotheses 1 to 4. Figure 2 and Table 2 present the results obtained after including control variables.1

As shown in Fig. 2, the path coefficient of W_ICTs on time theft was 0.349 ($p < 0.001$), indicating a positive correlation between W_ICTs and time theft. Hence, Hypothesis 1 is supported. The path coefficient of W_ICTs on emotional exhaustion was 0.383 ($p < 0.001$), suggesting that W_ICTs exerts a significant positive impact on emotional exhaustion; the path coefficient of emotional exhaustion on time theft was 0.553 ($p < 0.001$), indicating a significant positive relationship between emotional exhaustion and time theft. Together with Hypothesis 1, the findings indicates that emotional exhaustion exerts a significant mediating effect between W_ICTs and time theft ($b = 0.175, p < 0.01$) under the high level of POS (Mean + 1 SD). Meanwhile, W_ICTs exerts a significant positive effect on emotional exhaustion ($b = 0.279, p < 0.05$) under the low level of POS (Mean − 1 SD). This indicates that W_ICTs has a stronger promoting effect on emotional exhaustion under the low level of POS compared with the high level of POS. Hypothesis 5 is partially supported, and the moderating effect is shown in Fig. 3.

Table 2 Bootstrapping mediation effect test

| Path | Indirect effect estimation | Confidence interval of Bias Corrected 95% |
|------|---------------------------|------------------------------------------|
|      |                           | Lower          | Upper          |
| Total indirect effect | 0.414                     | 0.295          | 0.539          |
| Specific indirect effect decomposition |                          |               |                |
| W_ICTs → EE → time theft | 0.200                     | 0.141          | 0.273          |
| W_ICTs → MD → time theft | 0.191                     | 0.102          | 0.291          |
| W_ICTs → EE → MD → time theft | 0.023                     | 0.004          | 0.049          |

$n = 312$, bootstrapping randomly sampled 20,000 times

W_ICTs work-related use of information and communication technologies after hours, EE emotional exhaustion, MD moral disengagement

1 Readers are welcome to contact the authors for item-path loadings.
Moderated Mediating Effect

We use Latent moderate structural equations and a moderated chain mediation model algorithm to test Hypothesis 5 (Edwards & Lambert, 2007; Hayes, 2013, 2018; Maslowsky et al., 2015; Stride et al., 2015; Yao et al., 2021). At the high level of POS (1 SD above the mean), the mediating effect of W_ICTs on time theft through emotional exhaustion and moral disengagement was 0.058 ([0.012, 0.128]). On the contrary, under the low level of POS (1 SD below the mean), the effect was 0.104 ([0.028, 0.174]). Moreover, there is a significant difference in the indirect effect values of chain-mediating path between the high and low levels of POS ($b = -0.046$, $[-0.090, -0.016]$). This indicates that at the low level of POS, emotional exhaustion and moral disengagement have a stronger chain-mediating effect between W_ICTs and time theft. That is, POS moderates the chain-mediating effect between emotional exhaustion and moral disengagement by weakening the positive effect of W_ICTs on emotional exhaustion, thereby supporting Hypothesis 5.

General Discussion

Time theft is a covert unethical behavior. How to restrain such an employee behavior has drawn the attention of a growing number of scholars due to the significant harm it causes to the firm (Harold et al., 2021; Henle et al., 2010; Zhao et al., 2021). Based on CAPS and COR, this study reveals what, why, how, and when employees engage in time theft. Our study found that W_ICTs significantly promotes employee time theft. Emotional exhaustion and moral disengagement play a mediating role in the relationship between W_ICTs and time theft, respectively, and these two variables have a chain-mediating role in the relationship above. POS moderates this chain mediation by moderating the positive effect of W_ICTs on emotional exhaustion.

Theoretical Implications

First, we explore why employees exhibit time theft. Previous studies have explained it from the perspectives of illegitimate tasks, organizational injustice, cynicism, and leadership (Ding et al., 2018; Lorinkova & Perry, 2017; Yan & Berry, 2013; Zhao et al., 2021). However, the leisure time of employees can supplement the resources consumed during working hours. After the leisure time is occupied by work, whether employees will produce time theft deserves our concern (Lee et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2021). In this study, we extend our understanding of why employees exhibit time theft by examining W_ICTs. Our research finds that W_ICTs makes employees more likely to exhibit time theft, which complements the antecedent research on time theft. Moreover, this study also helps us to realize that the use of information and communication technologies during different periods may bring negative effects on employees and organizations. In addition, from the perspective of resource gain and loss, we find that time theft is a self-protection behavior that employees exhibit in order to save resources and avoid being hurt when their resources are lost (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989; Hunter et al., 2017). In this paper, W_ICTs is taken as the research perspective and COR is used to discover a new antecedent of time theft, which not only complements the research results of the above scholars (Ding et al., 2018; Lorinkova & Perry, 2017; Yan & Berry, 2013; Zhao et al., 2021), but also helps scholars to explore various inducing mechanisms of employee time theft from different perspectives. Thus, it can help to elucidate the reasons why employees exhibit time theft.

Second, we answer the question of how employees exhibit time theft. In previous studies, many scholars simply believed that a certain factor (e.g., illegitimate tasks) would eventually influence employees’ behavior by directly influencing employees’ cognition, e.g., moral disengagement (Ding et al., 2018; Fida et al., 2015; Henle et al., 2010; Lorinkova & Perry, 2017; Yao et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2021). According to CAPS, after being exposed to certain stimuli, the individual’s affective unit tends to be affected before the cognitive unit is affected (Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Yao et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the process of individual’s change from the affective unit to the cognitive unit has been ignored by many scholars. Based on CAPS and COR, we analyze the entire resource gain and loss process between W_ICTs and employee time theft, and thereby reveal the influence mechanism of W_ICTs on employee time theft more comprehensively. We not only find that emotional exhaustion (affective unit) and moral disengagement (cognitive unit) separately mediated the relationship between W_ICTs and time theft, but also verify their chain-mediated
effects in the above relationship. This not only helps us to complement the mediation mechanism between W_ICTs and time theft but also extends the application of CAPS and COR in the field of time theft (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989; Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Yao et al., 2021). In addition, this study can strengthen scholars’ attention and understanding of the internal mechanism between W_ICTs and time theft.

Finally, we answer when employees exhibit time theft. Existing studies have found that psychological entitlement, equity sensitivity, and leader–leader exchange can be used as boundary conditions of time theft. However, individuals break their moral bottom line is usually due to the interaction between events and situational characteristics (Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Yao et al., 2021). Based on the above considerations, we choose to include POS, a special situational characteristic, into the boundary conditions of time theft. Our results show that the interaction between W_ICTs and POS can effectively relieve employees’ emotional exhaustion and ultimately reduce the possibility of time theft by affecting moral disengagement. Therefore, the results of our study help us better understand the influence mechanism of the interaction effect of the event and situational characteristics on time theft, which enriches the research of CAPS and time theft (Fatima et al., 2021; Yao et al., 2020, 2021).

**Practical Implications**

First, since W_ICTs exerts a significant positive impact on employee time theft, organizations should minimize the possibility of W_ICTs occurring. Currently, the external environment of Chinese enterprises is very competitive, so organizations may not be able to prevent customers from actively contacting employees after work (Lee et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2018). Nevertheless, organizations can make some rules and regulations to restrain internal employees, for instance, unless it is an emergency, employees are not allowed to continue to discuss work-related content after hours. As China enters the “5G” era and the home-based working caused by COVID-19, almost all enterprises are undergoing digital transformation, and organizational members inevitably need to complete tasks through information and communication technology after hours (Chen & Tian, 2022; Liu et al., 2021; Zhong et al., 2022). Therefore, organizations should formulate relevant policies as soon as possible to reduce the negative effects of W_ICTs on organizations.

Second, the organization should replenish the emotional and cognitive resources consumed by employees promptly. Our findings elucidate why it is important to mitigate employee emotional exhaustion and reduce moral disengagement. For alleviating the emotional exhaustion of employees, e.g., providing timely comfort once perceived an employee’s low mood (Xu et al., 2018; Yao et al., 2021), which helps employees replenish emotional resources promptly. Moreover, the organization should provide places for employees to vent their emotions, which can help them vent emotions in time and prevent them from falling into a state of emotional exhaustion. Moreover, the organization should improve the moral quality of its members. Organizations can conduct moral disengagement tests in the recruitment process and select candidates with low levels of moral disengagement (He et al., 2019; Yao et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2021). Meanwhile, organizations should pay attention to the construction of moral standards and carry out moral training for employees regularly to prevent employees from moral disengagement (Yao et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2019).

Finally, the organization should improve the POS level. At present, as the external competition of Chinese enterprises is very fierce, organizations have to reduce costs by reducing their support to employees. For example, while organizations implement the 996 work schedule (i.e., work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., 6 days a week), employees may unable to get double overtime wages as stipulated by Chinese labor law (Zhang et al., 2021). According to our research results, although organizations can improve corporate performance to some extent by occupying employees’ leisure time, time theft will bring greater losses to organizations (Harold et al., 2021). Fortunately, the higher level of POS can effectively alleviate the negative effects of W_ICTs on the organization. Therefore, we suggest that the organization should improve the POS level, e.g., provides employees with family support (the organization can understand and support employees to handle family chores when they face difficulties), job autonomy (when employees are completing a task, they largely make their own decisions), time resources (instead of squeezing people as much as possible, organizations apply appropriate time pressure), material rewards (e.g., some financial reward) and so on. When employees perceive that the resources given by the organization can effectively supplement the resources consumed at work, they are more likely to exhibit behaviors beneficial to the organization (Yao et al., 2020, 2021). Furthermore, the organization needs to encourage its members to support each other. For example, the organization can provide a sum of funds to the department or the team, and the department or the team can give certain rewards to employees when they support or help colleagues. In addition, since organizational members can form a small group through informal relationships which can help employees supplement emotional resources, the organization should encourage mutual support and help among this group.
Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study provides useful insights into why, how, and when time theft occurs, it still has some limitations.

First, to avoid severe common method variation, we collected data at three time points in the survey process. Although our research findings were not considerably impacted by the presence of common method variation, it did not eradicate common method variation (Malhotra et al., 2006; Spector, 2006; Yao et al., 2020). Therefore, in future researches, we will adopt the data collection method of multi-subject assessment (self-assessment and other assessment) and repeatedly survey participants (such as experience sampling method, etc.) to make the sample data closer to the real value. In addition, control variables need to be further supplemented, for example, occupational or organizational level, wage calculation method (i.e., whether employees are paid by salary or by the hour), whether employees are paid overtime, family obligations (e.g., whether they need to care for parents), and so on. Moreover, we should examine whether these control variables will affect the reliability of our research conclusions in future studies.\(^2\)

Second, this study was conducted in China and the sample size was small, which may limit the generality of our conclusions. Compared with Western countries, the protection policies of laborers’ rights and interests in China’s labor law cannot be effectively implemented in enterprises (e.g., 996 policies of laborers’ rights and interests in China’s labor law), making many Chinese enterprises pay little attention to laborers’ rights and interests. Moreover, China is a country with high power distance, and information and communication technology has been widely applied to Chinese employees’ work and life. Employees are required to respond to their leaders’ messages promptly, which makes them unable to achieve a high level of psychological disengagement (Lee et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2018). Therefore, it is appropriate to test time theft in the context of China (Zhao et al., 2021). Nonetheless, challenges exist in generalizing the findings to other countries. We call for future research to test the model in other countries.

Third, this study mainly explored the influence mechanism between W_ICTs and time theft from the individual level and verified the mediating role of two important resources (affective–cognitive resources). However, it is a very complex process for an individual to experience emotion and cognition and eventually perform the behavior (Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Yao et al., 2021). Affective and cognitive resources contain many variables (e.g., affective commitment and organizational identity), which need to be further verified in future studies (Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018; Yao et al., 2021; Yao et al., 2021). Other variables not been paid attention to in this study can be examined from the team level and the organization level. Furthermore, employees’ perceptions of behaviors might affect our research conclusions. For example, based on the psychological contract theory, employees might form different perceptions of mutual obligations between employees and employers (Zhao et al., 2007); thus, employees have different perceptions of W_ICTs and time theft. According to the social exchange theory, employees may consider W_ICTs the occupation of their time resources by the organization, which is a type of organizational negative behaviors. From the social exchange perspective, we can better understand the correlation between W_ICTs and time theft. Moreover, the perception of employment relationships also affects employees’ behaviors toward the organization. To elucidate the positive or negative behaviors of employees, we must consider the impact of both positive and negative employment relationships on employees’ behaviors. Future studies can verify the reliability of our conclusions from multiple perspectives (e.g., psychological contract, social exchange, and positive or negative employment relationship) to enrich relevant studies on time theft.

Finally, some boundary conditions need to be explored in future studies. As mentioned above, we believe that the differences between eastern and western contexts may affect the generality of our findings. Therefore, different cultural backgrounds or organizational cultures may be boundary conditions between W_ICTs and employee emotion–cognition or behaviors (Kell, 2018; Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Yao et al., 2020). For example, W_ICTs may be regarded as a popular behavior or self-sacrifice for family interests by Chinese people, but in the context of Western culture, W_ICTs may be regarded as a violation of one’s rights (Lee et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2018; Yao et al., 2021). The effect of time theft is also worthy of our attention, for example, while time theft damages the organizational interests, it may also improve the production efficiency and job performance of employees (Ding et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2018; Taylor, 2011; Wilson et al., 2015). We can also pay more attention to the positive and negative effects of time theft in future studies. In addition, leaders have higher power and freedom, so they may show time theft more recklessly. However, they may also pay more attention to the organizational interests and avoid behaviors detrimental to the organization (Liu et al., 2020; Yao et al., 2021). This can be further explored in the future.

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Conclusions

This study finds that W_ICTs ultimately promotes employee time theft by affecting emotional exhaustion and moral disengagement, and POS moderates the chain mediation effect. Our study explores why, how, and when individuals exhibit time theft from the perspective of resource gain and loss, which helps to strengthen our attention and understanding of the internal mechanism between W_ICTs and time theft, and provides some suggestions for organizations or managers to reduce time theft.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no potential conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval This paper and all authors compliance with ethical standards of the Institutional and/or National Research Committee.

Informed Consent The authors declare that they informed all participants of the potential risks and obtained their consent.

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