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Hustle Culture Glorification Contradicts Cyberloafing Behavior Among Gen Z on Social Media

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Abstract
Indonesia's Generation Z, the largest cohort in the country's demographic bonus, navigates digital spaces shaped by both hustle culture and cyberloafing. Existing scholarship treats the two as separate or opposing constructs. This study examines how Gen Z constructs and performs success under hustle culture, the forms and motives of cyberloafing, and how the two shape each other. Using a netnographic design, we analyzed 98 posts and 18 comments from 40 accounts on Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X, published in 2023–2025 and collected between February and May 2025 through hashtag searches. Content was included if publicly accessible, Indonesian-language, and explicitly about work or study productivity or disengagement. Data were coded in two cycles using summative content analysis and interpreted through performative labor theory, digital capitalism, and symbolic interactionism. Hustle culture appeared as romanticized overwork, aestheticized productivity, and community validation; cyberloafing appeared as stress relief, micro-resistance, and identity negotiation. The study's contribution is to show that the two form a continuum rather than opposites: the visibility pressures of hustle culture generate the need for disengagement, which is then reintegrated into the attention economy. By recasting cyberloafing as a performative practice rather than workplace deviance, it extends digital labor scholarship with Indonesian platform evidence.

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Introduction

Indonesia is entering a demographic bonus period, a stage that is projected to contribute significantly to the nation's "Indonesia Emas 2045" vision. According to the Indonesia Gen Z Report (IDN Research Institute, 2024), 70.72% of the national population falls within the productive age range (15–64 years), with Generation Z (born 1997–2012) comprising the largest single cohort, 27.94% of the population, or approximately 74.9 million individuals. Nearly half of this generation is already participating in the labor market, while the rest will join in the coming years. As digital natives raised in the post-reformasi era, Gen Z demonstrates distinct behavioral, ethical, and communicative patterns compared to previous generations (Berger, 2017; Chou, 2012). Understanding their work-related values and digital practices is crucial for mapping labor and cultural trajectories toward Indonesia's 2045 development goals.

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Over the past decades, youth aspirations and perceptions of success in Indonesia have often been shaped by relational success, defined by cultural norms, religious values, educational attainment, and occupational prestige within a broader economic context (Suryani et al., 2013; Triandis, 2018). However, rapid advances in information technology and the pervasive integration of social media have transformed the cultural landscape, providing Gen Z with opportunities to engage in networks that extend far beyond their immediate surroundings (boyd, 2020; Nasrullah;, 2017). Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X have become powerful arenas where ideas, lifestyles, and labor practices are performed, contested, and reproduced (Helsper, 2014). These platforms play a decisive role in shaping perceptions of everyday routines, work ethics, and the standards by which "success" is defined and displayed. Studies of university students in Malang likewise show intensive engagement with these platforms, including routine interaction with Instagram content (Pradipta & Lincoln, 2024) and heavy Twitter/X use that students themselves link to changes in their everyday social behavior (Nabila et al., 2024).

One of the most prominent digital-era ideologies is hustle culture: a work-centered lifestyle that glorifies relentless productivity, personal branding, and the pursuit of self-made success (Sandoval, 2018; Yuningsih & Prasetya, 2022). Emerging in tandem with neoliberal labor logics, hustle culture frames flexibility, side gigs, and continuous online presence as markers of ambition and adaptability (Neilson & Rossiter, 2005). In the Indonesian context, hashtags such as #kerjakerasbagaikuda and #budakkorporat are not only humorous hyperboles but also serve as symbolic badges of dedication within professional and peer communities. While hustle culture offers aspirational narratives, it also reinforces pressures of performative labor, where productivity becomes both a material output and a performative act of identity construction in the attention economy (Butler, 2011; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Gill & Pratt, 2008).

Paradoxically, within the same digital spaces, Gen Z also engages in cyberloafing: the use of workplace or study time for non-work-related online activities such as scrolling through social media, gaming, or personal browsing (Askew et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2016; Lim, 2002). Traditionally regarded as counterproductive, cyberloafing is reinterpreted in this study through the lens of symbolic interactionism as a communicative act laden with meanings of resistance, self-care, or subtle negotiation of identity. In the algorithmic environment of digital capitalism (Fuchs, 2014; Scholz, 2012), where online visibility is commodified, such disengagement practices can be understood as micro-resistances against the demands of constant productivity.

This study addresses the empirical gap in scholarship that has largely treated hustle culture and cyberloafing as separate, even opposing, constructs, the former linked to overcommitment, the latter to disengagement. Drawing on netnography (R. V. Kozinets, 2015), it examines how both phenomena coexist and interact within the same digital subjects. Social media is conceptualized here as a field site for observing how Gen Z performs success while simultaneously crafting spaces for intentional disengagement.

This study is among the first to conceptualize hustle culture and cyberloafing not as opposing phenomena, but as interdependent practices embedded within a single continuum of performative negotiation. By integrating performative labor theory, digital capitalism, and symbolic interactionism, the research offers a nuanced analytical lens to examine how Indonesian Gen Z constructs, performs, and resists productivity narratives in platform-mediated environments. Situated within the unique socio-demographic momentum of Indonesia's demographic bonus, this work not only expands global

discussions on digital labor and youth culture, but also addresses a critical gap in Southeast Asian scholarship, where local cultural values, algorithmic visibility, and generational identity converge in shaping the ethics and aesthetics of work in the post-digital era.

The research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How does Generation Z in Indonesia construct and perform the meaning of success under the influence of hustle culture?
2. What forms and motives of cyberloafing emerge within the same demographic?
3. How do these two practices intersect and shape each other in digital spaces?

The significance of this research lies in its interdisciplinary theoretical synthesis of performative labor theory, digital capitalism, and symbolic interactionism to reconceptualize productivity and disengagement not as binary opposites, but as a continuum of performative negotiation. By situating Indonesian Gen Z within global debates on digital labor, the study contributes both to academic discourse and to practical considerations for designing humane, inclusive, and psychologically sustainable work and educational environments in the post-digital era.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design with a netnographic strategy (R. V. . Kozinets, 2010, 2020; R. V. Kozinets, 2015), aimed at analyzing digitally mediated discourses on hustle culture and cyberloafing among Generation Z on social media platforms. Netnography was selected because it allows researchers to immerse themselves in online communities and capture naturally occurring interactions in their cultural contexts (Abidin, 2020; Leaver et al., 2020).

The research was conducted in four stages: (1) identifying digital field sites, (2) collecting digital traces, (3) organizing and coding content, and (4) analyzing findings through critical interpretation (Kozinets, 2015). Fieldwork took place from February to May 2025 on Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X, and covered content published between January 2023 and May 2025. The window begins in January 2023 because 2023 was a year of transition toward endemicity: the Indonesian government ended its emergency community-activity restrictions (PPKM) at the end of 2022, the World Health Organization lifted the COVID-19 global health emergency in May 2023, and the Indonesian government declared the shift to an endemic phase in June 2023. Across this period, work, study, and social life gradually shifted back toward hybrid and in-person arrangements, making it a suitable window for observing how hustle and disengagement narratives were renegotiated as pandemic-era conditions receded. The window ends in May 2025 because it coincides with the end of data collection. This study does not claim an urban sample: location information was neither collected nor analyzed, so the findings are not attributed to any particular geographic or residential setting. The Gen Z status of account holders was determined by self-identification in posts or profiles (e.g., #genz, stated age, or student/early-career status).

Research Procedure

The research procedure followed netnographic protocols with the following steps:

1. Digital Site Selection

   Platforms were chosen based on their popularity among Gen Z users and

affordances for performative self-presentation (TikTok for video, Instagram for curated visuals, and Twitter for discursive expression). Each platform was treated as a distinct field site.

2. Keyword and Hashtag Search
   Relevant keywords and hashtags such as #hustle, #workgrind, #overwork, #selfcare, and #malasproduktif were used to locate conversations. Platform-specific search engines and scraping tools were employed to gather posts.
3. Data Acquisition
   Text, images, and videos were archived manually and categorized based on theme, tone, and media format. Metadata such as post dates, engagement metrics, and user descriptors were also collected. Only publicly accessible content was used to ensure ethical compliance.
4. Summative Content Coding
   Summative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was employed because it combines quantitative counts of keyword frequency with qualitative interpretation, enabling the identification of recurring thematic frames while also unpacking their cultural meanings. Keywords and discursive frames were quantified to determine prevalence, followed by interpretive reading to examine contradictions and symbolic nuances in the representation of hustle culture and cyberloafing.

Analytical Framework and Testing

The analysis triangulated netnographic insights with summative content findings and theoretical reflections from performative labor theory (Butler, 2011; Gill & Pratt, 2008), digital capitalism (Fuchs, 2014; Munsch, 2021; Scholz, 2012), and symbolic interactionism. Platform intertextuality was examined to understand how hustle narratives and cyberloafing cues shifted or maintained coherence across platforms.

We followed the criteria of credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Coding was conducted by 2 coders: two student researchers who collected the data. In the first cycle, each coder independently coded all posts using a shared codebook of keywords and discursive frames derived from the research questions. In the second cycle, codes were refined into themes and re-applied to the full dataset. Disagreements were resolved by discussion until consensus. Peer debriefing consisted of 3 sessions held between January and May 2025 with two senior researchers and a lecturer in communication studies, who reviewed the codebook, sample coded posts, and emerging themes. Reflexive memos were written throughout data collection and coding to document analytic decisions and the researchers' own reactions to the content, and the researchers' positionality (see above) was taken into account when interpreting irony and platform-specific vernacular.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the netnographic observation and summative content analysis conducted on Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X between February and May 2025, focusing on posts from 2023–2025. The results are organized according to the three research questions and interpreted through the interdisciplinary lens of performative labor theory, digital capitalism, and symbolic interactionism.

Constructing and Performing Success under Hustle Culture

The analysis revealed that Generation Z in Indonesia constructs the meaning of success in digital spaces primarily through the performative display of productivity.

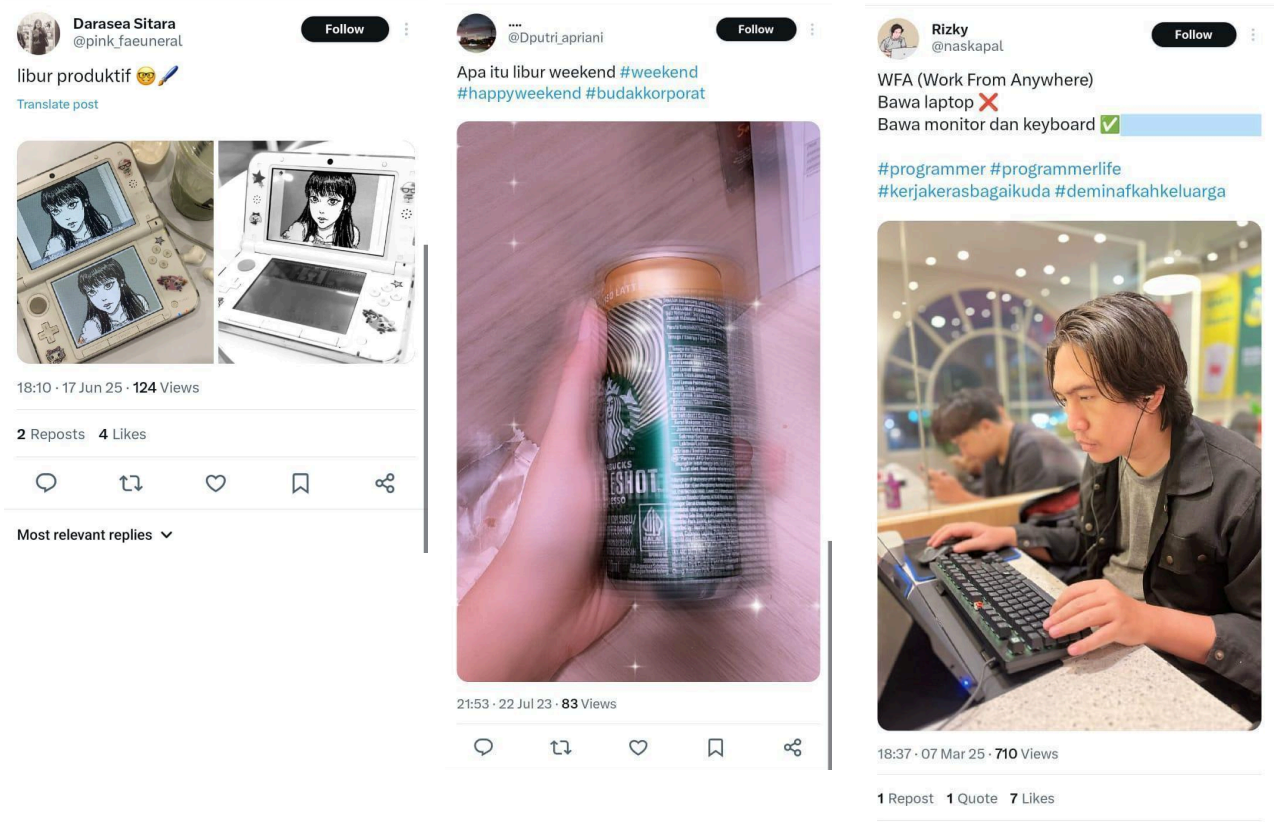
Consistent with performative labor theory, productivity is not merely framed as a material achievement but as an ongoing performance of self-worth, identity, and social capital.

Two dominant representational patterns emerged:

1) Romanticizing Exhaustion and Extreme Productivity

Of the 43 posts coded as hustle culture content (out of 98 posts in total), 18 (41.9%) appeared on TikTok, 14 (32.6%) on Twitter/X, and 11 (25.6%) on Instagram. Across these, 30 posts (69.8%) glorified working long hours without rest as a marker of dedication and achievement. Posts from accounts such as @pink_faeuneral (Figure 1) framed working on holidays as a virtue. The hashtags #kerjakerasbagaikuda and #budakkorporat appeared in 12 posts, where they were used ironically yet proudly, signaling immersion in the grind. These practices demonstrate the symbolic value attached to overwork, aligning with digital capitalism's emphasis on the commodification of time and labor visibility.

Figure 1. Hustle Culture Content.



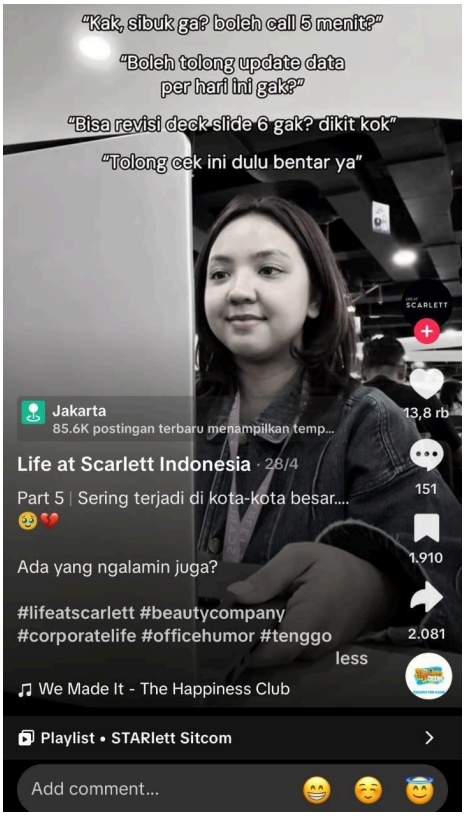
Source: X account @pink_faeuneral, @Dputri_apriani, @naskapal.

2) Aestheticizing Productivity

On Instagram, success is also performed through curated visual aesthetics: neatly arranged workspaces, filled to-do lists, and multitasking moments captured in aspirational tones. Accounts like @lifeatscarlett transform work routines into instagrammable lifestyle symbols, reinforcing the idea that productivity is not only an economic activity but also a cultural performance and a status marker. Through tagging, mentions, and shared

challenges, a sense of community emerges, validating shared values around discipline, ambition, and networking (see figure 2).

Figure 2. Aestheticizing Productivity.



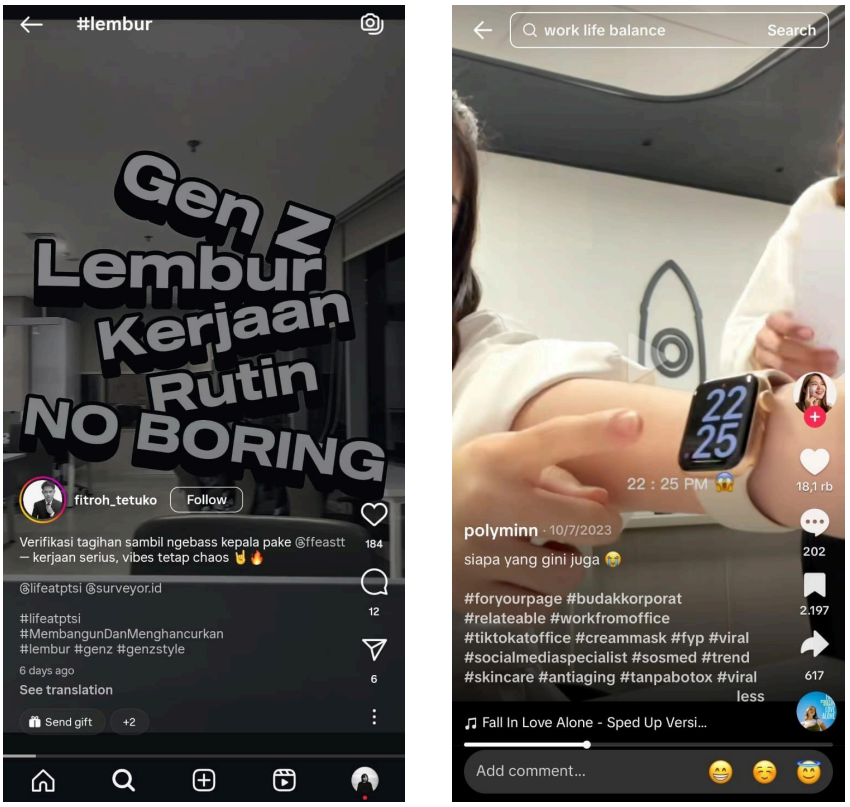
Source: TikTok Account @lifeatscarlett.

Narrative Contradictions: Between Pride and Fatigue

Although the hustling narrative appears dominant, it is not always portrayed in utopian terms. Many posts convey a sense of ambivalence, in which pride in productivity is accompanied by visible expressions of exhaustion and frustration. For instance, @fitroh_tetuko (Figure 3) on Instagram uses hashtags such as #membangundanmenghancurkan, #lembur, and #genz, signaling a critical awareness of the fine line between motivation and self-exploitation.

These contradictions are also evident in TikTok comment sections, such as on content posted by @polyminn, where viewers respond with sardonic remarks like, "udah, cari yang lain aja kak life balance" ("just find something else, sis, life balance") or "kalau tiap hari ada uang lembur pun tetap hancur badan" ("even with daily overtime pay, the body still breaks down"). While these comments are often framed humorously, they reflect deeper tensions between the productive image that users wish to project and the actual psychological toll of sustaining such performance.

Figure 3. Between Pride and Fatigue.



Source: Reels Instagram Content @fitroh_tetuko & TikTok Content @polyminn

Forms and Motives of Cyberloafing

In parallel, the same demographic also engages in behaviors that disrupt the hustle narrative, manifesting as cyberloafing. While conventionally seen as a form of disengagement (Lim, 2002), this study interprets cyberloafing through symbolic interactionism as a communicative act laden with meaning.

Observed forms include:

a. Browsing non-work-related content during work or study hours.
b. Playing online games, such as Mobile Legends, during breaks or even work time (e.g., posts from @angelina_joel tagged with #stressrelief) (see figure 4).
c. Creating and sharing humorous content about unrealistic workloads and corporate life.

Motivations for these practices are multifaceted. Cyberloafing serves both as a coping mechanism, a form of digital self-care to counterbalance hyper-productivity, and as subtle resistance against the internalized demands of digital capitalism. Publicly sharing such disengagement practices signals to peers a refusal to wholly comply with the grind, offering an alternative discourse to the dominant hustle narrative.

Figure 4. Cyberloafing Content



Source: X @angeline_joel & Instagram Reels @techno_infinity

Intersection between Hustle Culture and Cyberloafing

The most striking finding is the coexistence of hustle culture and cyberloafing within the same online personas. Rather than existing as mutually exclusive behaviors, these practices form a dialectical relationship. The same individuals who post motivational content about overwork also share memes about burnout or joke about avoiding tasks.

This duality reflects what performative labor theory describes as the paradox of self-presentation in digital capitalism: the need to appear endlessly productive while simultaneously seeking ways to reclaim autonomy. Symbolic interactionism helps explain how this negotiation unfolds in public digital spaces, where self-presentation is constantly co-constructed through audience feedback.

For example, Instagram posts tagged with #lembur or #genz often contain self-aware humor about exhaustion, while TikTok comment threads frequently feature playful challenges to the notion of constant work. These exchanges show how Gen Z blends aspiration with dissent, remaining visible within hustle culture while subtly contesting its demands.

Synthesis of Findings

Addressing the first research question, this study shows that Gen Z constructs and performs success through both the romanticization of overwork and the aestheticization of productivity, framed as a desirable lifestyle and social identity. Regarding the second question, cyberloafing manifests in diverse forms, from passive scrolling to active content creation, with motives grounded in stress relief, identity negotiation, and cultural resistance.

Most importantly, answering the third question, the findings reveal that hustle culture and cyberloafing are not opposites but intertwined practices. In the algorithmic environment of social media, the visibility of hustle culture fuels pressures that, paradoxically, generate the need for cyberloafing. The latter, in turn, becomes part of the performative repertoire, often shared publicly and thereby reintegrated into the cultural economy of attention.

This suggests that for Indonesian Gen Z, digital labor culture operates as a continuum: hyper-productivity and intentional disengagement co-produce each other in ways that shape both individual well-being and collective identity. Netnography proves crucial in capturing these subtle, everyday negotiations, offering a methodological advantage in studying cultures that are simultaneously performed, contested, and archived in real time.

Table 1 below synthesizes these findings by mapping how key themes manifest in both hustle culture and cyberloafing, interpreting these intersections through the integrated lenses of performative labor theory, digital capitalism, and symbolic interactionism. This thematic mapping highlights the complex, and often paradoxical, ways in which hyper-productivity and intentional disengagement are co-constructed in digital environments.

Table 1. Thematic Intersection of Hustle Culture and Cyberloafing among Indonesian Gen Z

Theme	Manifestation in Hustle Culture	Manifestation in Cyberloafing	Interpretation (Theoretical Lens)
Romanticization of Overwork	Glorifying long work hours, working on holidays; hashtags like *#kerjakerasbagaikuda*, *#budakkorporat*.	Sharing memes or jokes about burnout and exhaustion during work/study hours.	*Performative Labor Theory*: Overwork as public performance of value; *Symbolic Interactionism*: Humor as a face-saving strategy.
Aestheticized Productivity	Curated Instagram posts of neat workspaces, full to-do lists, and multitasking moments in aspirational tones.	Posting ironic counter-content alongside curated posts; browsing peers' content during work/study time.	*Digital Capitalism*: Productivity as commodity; *Symbolic Interactionism*: Coexistence of aspirational and dissenting self-presentations.

Community Validation	Tagging/mentioning peers in productivity challenges; forming online communities around grind ethics.	Sharing inside jokes, memes, or gaming sessions as acts of digital solidarity.	*Symbolic Interactionism*: Peer interaction as co-construction of identity; *Performative Labor Theory*: Audience engagement reinforces the performance.
Emotional Drivers	Expressing ambition, fear of failure, and desire for recognition.	Using cyberloafing for stress relief, self-care, or subtle protest.	*Performative Labor Theory*: Emotional labor as part of self-branding; *Digital Capitalism*: Emotional engagement commodified.
Visibility in Algorithmic Culture	Frequent posting to maintain relevance and perceived productivity.	Publicly sharing cyberloafing activities that still attract engagement.	*Digital Capitalism*: Both productivity and disengagement monetized; paradox of visibility.

Source: author's analysis, 2026.

In sum, the findings illustrate that Indonesian Gen Z navigates a paradoxical digital work culture in which hustle culture and cyberloafing coexist as intertwined practices. Hustle culture shapes an aspirational performance of success, rooted in aesthetics, productivity rituals, and self-branding, while cyberloafing operates as a discreet yet meaningful counter-practice that provides psychological relief, resists toxic productivity, and renegotiates personal agency in algorithmic environments. The intertextual flow across Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X reveals how these practices are not mutually exclusive but rather co-construct each other, forming a cyclical pattern of overcommitment and withdrawal. This dialectic underscore the significance of viewing digital labor among youth not through binary frames of diligence versus distraction, but as a continuum of performative negotiation shaped by socio-cultural pressures and platform logics.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that hustle culture among Indonesian urban Gen Z operates both as a performance of productivity and as a negotiated practice within the broader structures of digital capitalism. Through netnographic analysis of Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (X) content, the findings reveal five interrelated dimensions: the romanticization of exhaustion, the aestheticization of productivity, narrative contradictions between pride and fatigue, the emergence of cyberloafing as a psychosocial response, and the emotional-social mechanisms driving narrative diffusion.

Grounded in performative labor theory, the research shows that Gen Z workers consciously stage their professional identities as part of their self-concept, framing

productivity not merely as an economic necessity but as a visible performance for social validation. From the perspective of digital capitalism, platform algorithms are found to amplify and commodify hustle culture narratives, embedding them in broader market logics that reward visibility and constant engagement. Symbolic interactionism offers a lens to reinterpret cyberloafing not simply as disengagement, but as a socially negotiated form of micro-resistance, capturing the tension between the desire for self-actualization and the need for psychological relief from performance pressures.

The originality of this research lies in integrating these three theoretical perspectives to provide a nuanced account of how hustle culture is simultaneously internalized, performed, commodified, and contested in digital environments. By capturing both the aspirational and resistant dimensions of Gen Z's work-related online practices, the study reframes productivity ethics not as a binary between diligence and distraction, but as a continuum of performative negotiation. Practically, these insights can inform the design of workplace policies, educational strategies, and mental health interventions that recognize both the ambition for productivity and the necessity of restorative disengagement. Social media platforms, in particular, could contribute to healthier digital labor cultures by diversifying the narratives promoted by algorithms and reducing the valorization of unhealthy overwork.

Nonetheless, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the netnographic method relied solely on publicly available content, potentially omitting more private or nuanced expressions of hustle culture and cyberloafing found in closed networks or offline spaces. Second, the analysis focused exclusively on Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (X), leaving unexplored the dynamics of other platforms with distinct subcultural or professional contexts such as LinkedIn or Discord. Third, the time-bound nature of the dataset (2023–2025) provides only a snapshot of a dynamic cultural phenomenon, potentially overlooking long-term shifts in digital labor narratives. These limitations suggest caution in generalizing the findings and signal important opportunities for further inquiry.

Future research could extend this study through longitudinal designs that track narrative changes over time, or by conducting cross-cultural analyses to compare how local socio-economic conditions shape global discourses of hustle culture and its counter-practices. By critically engaging with the paradox of hyper-productivity and intentional disengagement, scholars and practitioners alike can move toward reimagining digital labor cultures that prioritize not only measurable outputs but also the well-being and agency of the human beings behind the screen.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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