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UNPRODUCTIVE WORK HOURS AND RELATED FACTORS IN SOUTH KOREA: STATE OF IDLE TIME UNRELATED TO WORK

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Abstract

South Korea continues to display some of the longest annual working hours among OECD countries, yet its labor productivity remains substantially below the OECD average (OECD, 2021a; OECD, 2021b). Prior studies suggest that cultural norms surrounding overwork, presenteeism, and hierarchical relations exacerbate inefficiencies (Kim, McLean, & Park, 2018; Lee & McCann, 2011; Kim et al., 2018). This study investigates deliberate idle time—non–work-related activities undertaken during paid work hours—as a measurable component of unproductive work hours in Korean organizations. Using a stratified national survey (N = 1,200), the study examines demographic, organizational, and health-related antecedents of idle time. Results indicate that approximately 24% of working hours are spent in deliberate idle time. Age, job status, organizational size, sector, and health show statistically significant associations with idle-time share, whereas gender effects are modest. The findings highlight the embeddedness of idle time within South Korea's institutional, cultural, and managerial systems and point toward implications for HR practices, organizational culture, and public policy.

Keywords: *South Korean work culture, idle time, unproductive work hours, demographic and organizational factors.*

1. Introduction

Despite sustained economic development, South Korea has long been characterized by **extended working hours coupled with relatively low productivity**. South Korean employees work an average of 1,908 hours annually, substantially above the OECD average of 1,687 hours, while hourly productivity remains at roughly 65% of the OECD benchmark (OECD, 2021a; OECD, 2021b). Earlier research has shown that longer hours do not necessarily yield higher output and may instead diminish performance due to fatigue and work intensification (Lee & McCann, 2011; Kim et al., 2018).

One explanation for this paradox is the prevalence of **unproductive work hours**, driven by cultural norms that prioritize physical presence over performance. Practices such as **"nunchi," "presenteeism,"** and **pseudowork**—symbolic activities that simulate work without generating value—are entrenched in organizational routines (Kim et al., 2018; Nørmark & Jensen, 2021). This cultural configuration is reinforced by hierarchical norms and **"kkondae"** behavior, which discourage initiative and perpetuate inefficient, conformity-based practices (Lee, 2010; Oh & Park, 2015).

Idle time, defined as involuntary or deliberate downtime during which no in-role task can be performed (Brodsky & Amabile, 2018; Schubert, Zescheke, & Zacher, 2023), represents a measurable form of unproductive work. Previous studies have documented substantial productivity losses due to idle time—estimated at USD 100 billion annually in the United States (Brodsky & Amabile, 2018)—and its connection to both organizational inefficiencies and individual behavior. Yet empirical evidence on idle time in Korean workplaces remains scarce.

This study focuses on **deliberate idle time**, which is more isolatable from productive work than pseudowork in the Korean context. Given the relationship between working hours, well-being, and major societal issues such as low birth rates and work–life imbalance (Durand, 2018; Clarke, 2019; Scaffeta, 2019), understanding the patterns of idle time has become increasingly important. Drawing on social cognitive theory (Lu & Chou, 2017) and organizational cultural frameworks, this study aims to identify key antecedents of idle time, including demographic characteristics, organizational factors, and health conditions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Unproductive work hours, pseudowork and idle time

National surveys from the Philippines and Singapore document temporal patterns of decreased productivity during mid- to late-day periods (Balita, 2022). Nørmark and Jensen (2021) characterizes pseudowork as activities resembling legitimate work but lacking substantive contribution to organizational goals—often manifested through excessive reporting or formalistic meetings.

Idle time constitutes a more strictly defined form of unproductive work. Brodsky and Amabile (2018) describe it as "involuntary downtime during which in-role tasks cannot be done." Schubert et al. (2023) categorize idle time into breaks, interruptions, and deliberate disengagement. Though some idle time is necessary, chronic or systemic idle time signals inefficiencies in work allocation, managerial oversight, and organizational design.

2.2. Korean institutional and cultural context

South Korea's employment and cultural environment produces conditions conducive to idle time among certain groups, particularly senior employees.

Employment protection legislation (EPL) grants strong security to regular workers, making dismissal costly and prompting reliance on voluntary retirement rather than performance-based adjustment (Ko & Weaver, 2023; Tam & Xu, 2024). This creates structural space for **low-effort insiders** to remain in place.

Hierarchical and high power-distance relationships reinforce seniority-based authority, with limited accountability for senior staff and restricted voice for younger workers (Jang et al., 2025; OECD, 2019). Normative modeling suggests that visible under-engagement by high-status actors may demotivate subordinates.

The **post-IMF psychological contract shift** created generational distrust toward employers, leading younger workers to favor self-protective behavior and to limit discretionary effort (Kim & Finch, 2002; Moon & Kim, 2023). Equity theory and social learning processes explain how observed senior idle time may prompt "work-to-rule" responses among juniors (Koay et al., 2022; Subramanian et al., 2022).

2.3. Antecedents of idle time

Research identifies multiple correlates of idle time:

Personality traits, including conscientiousness and proactive personality, predict lower idle time (Hambrick & McCord, 2010; Bakker, Tims, & Derks, 2012).

Demographic factors, including gender and age, may influence idle-time prevalence (Schubert et al., 2023).

Health conditions, including physical and cognitive strain, can contribute to disengagement (White, Dash, & Thomas, 1998).

From an organizational perspective:

Small organizations often lack HR systems and clear role definitions, increasing idle time (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Eurofound, 2020).

Higher managerial positions may face attention overload, contributing to cyberloafing and related behaviors (Mercado, Giordano, & Dilchert, 2017; Davenport & Beck, 2001).

Confucian-influenced hierarchies reinforce conformity and unnecessary routines, further institutionalizing idle behaviors (Lee, 2010; Oh & Park, 2015; Sun, 2020).

These considerations support the study's hypotheses (H1–H5) regarding demographic, organizational, and health predictors of idle time.

2.4. Hypotheses

H1. There is a significant gender difference in the proportion of idle time.
H2. There is a significant age-group difference in the proportion of idle time.
H3. There is a significant organizational status difference in the proportion of idle time.
H4. The size of organization is associated with the proportion of idle time.
H5. The number of hospital visits is associated with the proportion of idle time.

3. Methods

A structured online survey was administered using stratified quota sampling by gender and industry. The sample included **1,200 adults** employed at least 15 hours per week in one of six major

industries: Manufacturing, Wholesale and Retail Trade, Health and Social Welfare, Accommodation and Food Services, Construction, and Educational Services.

Respondents self-reported demographic characteristics, organizational variables (job rank, organization size, industry), work conditions (daily working hours, daily idle time), and health indicators (number of hospital visits). Idle time was operationalized as weekly idle hours divided by total weekly working hours.

Data were collected between September and October 2023; 602 men and 598 women participated. Analyses included descriptive statistics, one-way ANOVA, and hierarchical regression models testing the study's hypotheses.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive findings

Weekly idle time averaged **10.63 hours**, representing **24.2%** of total working hours. Approximately two-thirds (65.8%) reported ≥10 hours of weekly idle time. Idle time was slightly higher for women in absolute hours but marginally higher for men as a share of working hours.

By age, idle-time share was highest among workers in their 20s (27.3%) and lowest for those in their 50s (22.7%).

4.2. Hypotheses tests

The hierarchical regression models ($R^2 = .018 \rightarrow .032$) revealed several significant predictors:

H1 (Gender): Partial support. Men reported lower idle-time shares ($p < .05$ in Models 1–2; marginal in Model 3).

H2 (Age): Supported. Age negatively predicted idle time ($p = .001$). Post hoc tests showed workers in their 20s had significantly higher idle-time proportions than those in their 50s.

H3 (Organizational status): Supported. Public-sector employees ($p < .05$) and executives/owners ($p < .05$) had higher idle-time shares; managers did not differ from staff.

H4 (Organization size): Supported. Larger organizations were associated with lower idle-time proportions ($p < .05$).

H5 (Health): Supported. More hospital visits predicted higher idle-time shares ($p < .05$).

Overall, findings indicate that idle time accumulates disproportionately among younger workers, senior organizational actors, public-sector employees, and workers in smaller firms or experiencing more health issues.

5. Conclusions

This study provides the first large-scale empirical assessment of deliberate idle time in Korean workplaces. Measuring only intentional disengagement—not pseudowork or external interruptions—the study finds that **nearly one-quarter of paid working hours are spent on non-role activities**. This pattern aligns with research showing that longer working hours do not guarantee higher productivity (Lee & McCann, 2011; Kim et al., 2018) and resonates with analyses of Korean cultural norms—including nunchi, hierarchy, and presenteeism—that contribute to overwork without efficiency gains (Kim et al., 2018; Lee, 2010; Oh & Park, 2015).

The significant antecedents identified—gender, age, organizational status, organizational size, and health—demonstrate that idle time is not solely an individual behavioral issue but also a systemic and cultural one.

5.1. Implications for policy and practice

Target high-impact organizational loci. Public-sector organizations should streamline workflows and strengthen outcome-based performance systems. SMEs should invest in fundamental HR infrastructure—clear job descriptions, task allocation, and workload tracking—to reduce ambiguity (Eurofound, 2020).

Support younger workers. Younger cohorts displayed the highest idle-time proportions, likely reflecting cultural pressures, attention depletion, and unclear role expectations. Shorter feedback loops, structured onboarding, and early role clarification can mitigate these tendencies.

Integrate health into work design. Given the association between hospital visits and idle time, organizations should incorporate health supports such as fatigue management and flexible scheduling (White et al., 1998).

Shift from presenteeism to performance culture. Productivity should be assessed through outcomes, not time-at-desk, to disrupt cultural incentives that sustain inefficient work habits.

These reforms hold implications beyond productivity, potentially easing work–life imbalance and contributing to broader societal concerns such as low birth rates (Durand, 2018; Clarke, 2019).

5.2. Limitations and future research

This study examines only deliberate idle time and relies on self-report measures, limiting causal inference. Future research should incorporate objective behavioral data, longitudinal designs, and intervention studies. Cross-national comparative frameworks may help clarify how cultural legacies, institutional configurations, and labor-market structures shape idle time and productivity across different societies.

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