

**Reclaiming the Private Sphere:
A Trend for Healthy Work-Life Balance**

ABP-012

Abstract

Quiet quitting has become widely known and researched since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. The phenomenon implies that employees only do the “required minimum” at work, not more than the contractual agreement (Lee et al., 2023). This trend appears to challenge the traditional boundaries of work and life that have been increasingly blurred since the widespread accessibility of the internet (Voswinkel & Kocyba, 2005/2007).

Through twelve semi-structured interviews, this research investigates quiet quitting from the perspective of white-collar employees in low-level corporate jobs. Opposed to earlier studies (such as Lee et al., 2023; Johnson, 2023), it is argued that quiet quitting is not a negative outcome of failed management practices, rather it is the re-establishment of the once clear boundaries of work and private life. Furthermore, the theoretical possibility of a connection between quiet quitting and bullshit jobs (Graeber, 2018) is assessed. The objective of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives of employees and to shed light on the multifaceted and interconnected nature of quiet quitting.

Keywords: quiet quitting, work, bullshit jobs, neoliberal capitalism

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1. Introduction

Work plays a crucial role in society and in the lives of individuals. To borrow the title of former US President Barack Obama's tv-show, "working [is] what we do all day" (Guggenheim et al., 2023). Indeed, it is a central part of our lives, filling most of our waking hours, enhancing our identity formation (Gini, 1998), and providing a living wage. Engaging in meaningful work is an innate human need, as it contributes beyond the individual, enhances well-being, and has an impact on the world (van der Deijl, 2022).

Work, however, cannot be observed in a vacuum, without considering the framework, in which it is embedded. Over the course of history, work has followed the transitions of this framework and changed its meaning accordingly (Honneth & Ash, 1982). The current, post-modern era is characterised by neoliberal capitalism. This is the framework, which determines contemporary work-relations. Byung-Chul Han (2015) calls this "achievement society", referring to the pressure for individual achievements, which are the central cogs, making the system go around. Han (2015; 2017) theorises that neoliberalism is more capable of exploitation than earlier systems, as workers are engaged in self-exploitation, without even realising it, hence resistance is virtually impossible. The alarming dissolution of the clear division between work and private life underlines the problem (Voswinkel & Kocyba, 2005/2007). The question then arises: what can be done about the exploitative nature of neoliberal capitalism? One possible answer has emerged amidst the global Covid-19 pandemic.

Quiet quitting has become widely known and researched since the outbreak of Covid-19 in connection with white-collar corporate jobs. The phenomenon implies that employees only do the "required minimum" at work, i.e., they do not work more than the contractual hours and do not take on extra tasks (Lee et al., 2023). Opinions are divided about the phenomenon and how to address it. While some welcome it, and encourage quiet quitting (Lawless, 2023), others, including billionaire Elon Musk, see it as laziness and take a militant stand against it, even by firing people (Weber, 2022). The aim of this research is to investigate, how quiet quitting responds to the current reality of working conditions. This main research question is supported by three sub-questions: drawing on Graeber's (2018) theory, it is examined, if quiet quitting can be understood as a response to "bullshit jobs", utterly meaningless occupations; furthermore, the relationship between quiet quitting and wellbeing; and the role of work in participants' lives is observed.

The research employs semi-structured interviews with low-level corporate employees in white-collar service jobs. The outcomes represent the views and experiences of the 12 participants, and do not show a generalisable picture of the issue. The aim of this research is to bring the perspective of employees into the discussion, and to set a new direction to the research of quiet quitting, which has been dominated by a management-centred approach (Lee et al., 2023; Johnson, 2023; Mahand & Caldwell, 2023). I argue that, although, management plays a role in employee's willingness to quiet quit, the issue is not rooted in individual workplaces, but in the neoliberal system.

2. Theoretical overview

2.1. Neoliberal capitalism

The contemporary philosopher, Byung-Chul Han (2015), frequently deals with the problem of neoliberal capitalism in his writings. He proposes the name “achievement society” [Leistungsgesellschaft] for the current system. He argues that neoliberalism has exceeded the preceding form of capitalism, what Foucault (1977/1995) called “disciplinary society”. In a Foucauldian disciplinary society, the subject was under surveillance, hence, followed the rules, they were subjected to. This is what Foucault (1977/1995) illustrated with Bentham's panopticon; a circular-shaped prison, in which the centrally placed guard tower gives insight to all the cells that are open on their sides towards the tower. As the prisoners are not able to see inside the tower, they can never know if they are watched over or not. This makes them obey, to avoid the possibility of punishment. According to Foucault (1977/1995), this was a useful allegory to describe modern society. A key element of this theory is that the discipline of the subject is originated from the outside. People act the way they do, because they are or can be under constant surveillance (Foucault, 1977/1995). This is not the case anymore, according to Han (2015). The achievement society subject internalises the surveillance, and acts according to it, in a natural way.

“Achievement society, more and more, is in the process of discarding negativity. Increasing deregulation is abolishing it. Unlimited Can is the positive modal verb of achievement society. Its plural form – the affirmation, “Yes, we can” – epitomizes achievement society's positive orientation. Prohibitions, commandments, and the law are replaced by projects, initiatives, and motivation. Disciplinary society is still governed by no. Its negativity

produces madmen and criminals. In contrast, achievement society creates depressives and losers.” (Han, 2015, p. 8-9)

Individuals in Han’s (2015) achievement society are “entrepreneurs”, working on the project of their self. They are not bound anymore by bans and rules, because the neoliberal idea of freedom planted these regulations into their core. The recognition of these schemes is extremely hard, as those became essential parts of the self. This leads to a society, which is overwhelmed with psychological problems (Han, 2015; 2017).

“People who fail in the neoliberal achievement-society see themselves as responsible for their lot and feel shame instead of questioning society or the system. Herein lies the particular intelligence defining the neoliberal regime: no resistance to the system can emerge in the first place. In contrast, when allo-exploitation prevails, the exploited are still able to show solidarity and unite against those who exploit them. Such is the logic on which Marx’s idea of a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ is based. However, this vision presupposes that relations of repression and domination hold. Now, under the neoliberal regime of auto-exploitation, people are turning their aggression against themselves. This auto-aggressivity means that the exploited are not inclined to revolution so much as depression.” (Han, 2017, p. 6-7)

A highly competitive system, which gives the impression that “everything is possible” and gives positive affirmation instead of negative punishment, implies a sense of freedom. Subjects have a feeling of control over their life. They can achieve their goals if they try hard enough. This layer of positivity hides the “true face” of the system. It sets the stage for self-exploitation. There is no need for external pressure, if the individual has an internal drive to achieve more, thus, exploit themselves. The neoliberal society is characterised by the loneliness and depression of the individuals, which is caused by this exploitive behaviour (Han, 2015; 2017).

The concept of achievement society is highly relevant in the realm of multinational corporations. Individuals strive for better positions and higher wages, to satisfy their achievement needs. Burnout is a frequent phenomenon in these milieus (Mazur, 2023). The self-exploiting employees blame themselves if their achievement projects fail and become depressed. Research and debates about the improvement of workplace culture live their heyday and suggest solutions for better conditions (Graham et al., 2022). These solutions are, however, mostly focus on creating an even more engaging corporate culture, which will help employees to contribute more to the company, and by doing so further exploit themselves. Debates about

the alleviation of workplace culture and strives against burnout do not address the core of the problem, rather try to find ways to get the individual into “working condition” as soon as possible with making as little adjustments as possible.

2.2. The blurring boundaries of work

In the current times wage labour has become a crucial part in social recognition and identity development. The work that one does for a living, largely determines how society views them. While premodern societies thought of work as something that just had to be done, present societies celebrate work and determine a person’s value based on their labour contribution (Voswinkel & Kocyba, 2005/2007).

According to Voswinkel and Kocyba (2005/2007), as work became increasingly important in society, its boundaries started to dissolve. They argue, that in the early modern Fordist production model work and life were clearly separated. Work had its distinct and well-defined time, space, and social setting. Those who worked in factories, had to be there in a given time, completing exact tasks, and following the behavioural norms which their position required. After working hours, they went home and had a personal and family life, distinct from work. Today, work is increasingly losing all these boundaries. Flexible arrangements allow the employee to choose their own working hours or tailor the given time according to their convenience. Spatial boundaries are also blurring as work is not bound to a specific location anymore. Voswinkel and Kocyba (2005/2007) wrote about the increasing popularity of working from home, however, in the time of their article, it was not as relevant as it later became, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Work from home and hybrid work arrangements are extremely popular in the service sector (Haan, 2023). This fact further emphasises the importance of Voswinkel and Kocyba’s theory. Apart from time and space, the boundaries are blurring in terms of responsibilities and hierarchies as well. Based on new types of working contracts, larger involvement in decision making, and bonuses based on the company’s key performance indicators (KPI), make it more difficult to distinct employee from employer. The success of the company became similarly important to every stakeholder, regardless of their position (Voswinkel & Kocyba, 2005/2007).

This freedom in work led to its blurring boundaries. The identity-creating role of work, and a workplace that involves employees in decision making, result in increased willingness for contribution and achievement. A workplace becomes more than just a necessary evil, it

fosters self-esteem. Thus, work follows the employee, taking hold in their home, personal connections, and free time. Indeed, flexibility is seen as a positive treat for an employee. Being able to manage multiple tasks and expand boundaries are regarded as efficient working moral (Voswinkel & Kocyba, 2005/2007).

2.3. Impression management at work

According to Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model (1959), individuals play roles to make the interpretation of everyday situations easier. One person, or "actor" might have multiple different roles, and they always play the one that matches the given situation. At work, actors are expected to play their role as employees. This traditionally means that they dress according to company standards, behave in a professional manner, and do their work – all these, taking place in an office setting. Playing the role of the worker, enables employees to successfully navigate work situations, decision making, and cooperation. A key element of this is that audiences are separated, meaning that colleagues (workplace audience) are not the same as friends, family members, or people who know the actor in a different role. Mixing audiences can result in a failed performance, as the actor must negotiate the different roles.

Audience segregation is necessary for the actor to be able to perform a role with consistency (Goffman, 1959). If the actor's different audiences intermingle, impression management becomes significantly more complex, as the actor must adjust to different expectations. This can be a prevalent issue in the online sphere, where audiences may be mixed (van den Berg & Leenes, 2011). In a social network site, one might have connections from work, school, or family as well. This poses a danger of incoherent performance, which can be especially harmful to the workplace role, as online impression management has become vital in work performance. The Covid-19 pandemic marked a significant increase in everyday online work interactions and highlighted the importance of online impression management (Al-Shatti & Ohana, 2021).

Impression management contributes to the establishment of a favourable picture of an individual. This plays an important role in the workplace, with a potentiality to determine career paths (DuBrin, 2010). Therefore, impression management is instrumental (DuBrin, 2010) and along with acting the workplace role (Goffman, 1959) serves as the key basis of workplace interactions. Workplace success is largely dependent on how well workplace roles are acted and impressions are managed. According to Klotz et al. (2018), it is true to such an

extent that tangible work achievements are largely neglected in the light of a well-built self-image, hence, promotions often depend on the success of acting, rather than on the completion of tasks.

Acting the workplace role requires considerable effort from the side of the employee. This requires preparation already at home, which Goffman (1959) calls the “backstage”. Here the employee gets dressed with a consideration of the role they play and the impression they attempt to make. Acting continues in the office, where interactions with colleagues and supervisors are directed by these roles and impressions. Only after arriving home can the employee stop being on the “frontstage” and change to their domestic role. Based on the importance of these acts (DuBrin, 2010; Klotz et al., 2018; Goffman, 1959) it can be argued that work starts already with the preparation for the role, as it is a necessity for success in a traditional office environment.

2.4. Bullshit jobs

Given a neoliberal achievement society, where the boundaries of work and life are blurred; personal success and self-esteem are defined by work achievements, and non-compliance to the norms seen as individual failure. At the same time the job market is shrinking thanks to technological advancement. This is when bullshit jobs take the scene, according to David Graeber (2018). He theorised that there are certain jobs which have absolutely no social value, and according to his judgement, should not even exist.

Graeber (2018) distinguished five types of bullshit jobs, referring to their distinct patterns. The “*flunkies*”, whose purpose is to make their superiors seem important (e.g., receptionists, door attendants). The “*goons*”, whose job is not only useless, but actually harms society (e.g., lobbyists, corporate lawyers). The “*duct tapers*”, who work on providing temporal fix to problems, which could be solved permanently (e.g., helpdesk, or most low-level IT). “*Box tickers*”, who enable their company to claim that they engage in a certain behaviour, which in fact they do not (e.g., compliance officers, marketing report writers). “*Taskmasters*”, whose job is only to assign tasks to others (e.g., middle management). According to Graeber (2018), these are present in many workplaces.

The key criteria that Graeber (2018) set to define bullshit jobs, is social uselessness. He declared that:

“[Bullshit job is] a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case.”
(Graeber, 2018, p. 9-10)

This provides a somewhat vague, but nevertheless usable definition to this kind of employment. His perspective turns attention to work from the point of view of the society, and not from the perspective of the individual or the company. In the meanwhile, the causes of holding these kinds of jobs, can result in psychological harm to the individual. Although he does not mention Marx’s concept of alienation, his statements about the problem with denying agency, suggest something similar. Graeber (2018) argues that humans need to feel that their actions make conceivable change in the world and that their work contributes to something. The lack of this feeling leads to discomfort and suffering.

Graeber (2018) states that bullshit jobs can be determined from an outside perspective, but those who work in these jobs can tell best to what extent these can be regarded as bullshit. Based on a YouGov survey, he stated that 37% of the UK-based respondents said their job did not *“make a meaningful contribution to the world”*. Thus, can be regarded as bullshit. A Dutch poll, also cited by Graeber (2018) had even higher rates, as they found that 40% of the respondents did not see their job as meaningful. This evidence suggests that bullshit jobs are a widespread phenomenon.

Graeber’s arguments were, in the meanwhile, not accepted without criticism in the scientific community. His theory was tested multiple times through quantitative surveys (Dur & van Lent, 2018; Soffia et al., 2022; Walo, 2023). None of the criticisms doubted the existence of bullshit jobs, however, evidence suggests, that those are not as widespread as Graeber (2018) had stated. Dur and van Lent (2018) used the data of four different waves of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). Their results indicated that only 8% of the respondents described their job as socially useless. An additional 17% was in doubt about their job’s usefulness. Even if we combine these two categories, the result will be significantly lower than Graeber’s claim (2018). On the other hand, they found that the ratio of socially useless jobs differs between the public and private sector. Only 3% of public employees saw their job as useless, while in the business sector 11% said the same. The useless jobs within the business sector indicated correlation with those, suggested by Graeber (2018), thus, monotonic jobs, with routine tasks, as well as finance, marketing and sales related occupations seemed to have

little social value according to this evidence as well (Dur & van Lent, 2018). A different study (Soffia et al., 2022) found even less evidence in support of the bullshit jobs theory. Here, the researchers used representative survey data from the EU, based on which they rejected the hypothesis that bullshit jobs are highly prevalent, concentrated in certain occupations, their number is increasing, and fresh graduates with student loan debts are more likely to take them, all of which were stated by Graeber (2018). Nevertheless, they found that certain professions, mentioned by Graeber (2018) still indicated the presence of bullshit jobs above average. These were within the field of finance, sales, and personal/customer assistance. However, contradicting the theory, Soffia et al. (2022) found that the least meaningful jobs were physical professions, such as cleaning or mining. The point of agreement between Soffia et al. (2022) and Graeber (2018) was the fact that meaningless jobs cause psychological harm. The wellbeing of those, doing a bullshit job, was proven to be much worse than those, who had different work. Soffia et al. (2022) remind, however, that employees with poor mental health, might be more likely to see their job in a negative light, hence, the causality of this finding cannot be determined. While they reject the theory of bullshit jobs, they point out the importance of the phenomenon it highlights, namely, the significance of meaningful work. To explain why people feel their job meaningless, Soffia et al. (2022) draw on the Marxian concept of alienation. In their view, it gives a more accurate description of the reasons of meaningless work, while, inspired from this, they also suggest the examination of individual workplaces to get rid of toxic corporate culture.

The theory of bullshit jobs is, indeed, contradictory and has its shortcomings. There is, however, a study that confirms most of its statements, based on representative survey data from the US. Walo (2023) found that over 19% of the respondents had a socially useless job, and complementary to Graeber's (2018) theory, these were concentrated in specific occupations. These are the field of administrative support, finance, sales, and related business professions. These results largely differ from those of Dur and van Lent (2018) and Soffia et al. (2022). It is important therefore to point out that the methodology, the geographical location, and the examined questions were slightly different too. Whether or not these variables can explain the different outcomes, Walo (2023) suggests the upholding of the theory, with a small modification:

“Work perceived as socially useless is [...] a complex phenomenon and should be treated accordingly. By giving up the assumption that people are usually right in their assessment, however, all other aspects of Graeber's theory can be upheld. Thus, some jobs may in fact

be useless to society, even if this is only one reason among others why people perceive them as such.” (Walo, 2023, p. 1142)

In this research, I follow Walo’s (2023) suggestion. Although, I agree with the criticism of the bullshit jobs theory and have my own doubts about Graeber’s (2018) methodology; as the main pillars of his theory are built on stories he received from his Twitter (currently X) followers; I still believe that the phenomenon he pointed out is valid, and even if to a smaller extent than he suggested, it is present. Therefore, the further research about bullshit jobs is relevant and important.

2.5. Quiet quitting

Similarly to bullshit jobs, quiet quitting was also connected to mental wellbeing and the lack of meaningful stimulus for the employee (Hiltunen, 2023; Mahand & Caldwell, 2023; Makridis, 2023; Parekh & Shah, 2023). Research explicitly on this phenomenon emerged in the last one-two years, however, quiet quitting has more or less always been present at the workplaces (Johnson, 2023). This is simply a form of workplace disengagement according to Johnson (2023). Based on a 2013 Gallup survey, he reported that 52% of US-American workers were disengaged, in 2017, 51% showed the same. In his categorisation, that is tailored to Gallup’s survey questions, he defined “engaged” employees as *“committed to the objectives and missions of their organizations”* (Johnson, 2023, p. 3); “disengaged”, who *“are tuned out and come to work for their paychecks”* (Johnson, 2023, p. 4); and “actively disengaged”, who *“go out of their way to do the least they can get by with and sometimes even perform acts of sabotage”* (Johnson, 2023, p. 4). He placed quiet quitters to the second category, implying that they are simply passive workers, who are neither positively nor negatively engaged in their job.

Quiet quitting is also associated with an increased valuation of work-life balance. According to Lee et al. (2023), the Covid-19 pandemic encouraged people to revise their priorities, resulting in a shifting focus from work. This could explain the sudden renaissance of work-life balance and the trend of setting boundaries by quiet quitting. However, in a neoliberal capitalist society, where work is a key identity-creating aspect of life (Han, 2015; 2017; Voswinkel & Kocyba, 2005/2007), such a sudden turn is difficult to imagine, without considering other factors.

As both quiet quitting and bullshit jobs are linked to mental health (Dur & van Lent, 2018; Graeber, 2018; Hiltunen, 2023; Mahand & Caldwell, 2023; Makridis, 2023; Parekh &

Shah, 2023; Soffia et al., 2022; Walo, 2023) the connection of the two phenomena opens the opportunity of theorising quiet quitting from a different perspective. Not as a result of individual workplace cultures, but as a response to meaningless work and the pushing toxicity of neoliberalism.

So far, evidence suggests a difference in the number of bullshit jobs (Dur & van Lent, 2018; Soffia et al., 2022; Walo, 2023) and the number of quiet quitters (Johnson, 2023). This might be on the one hand based on the different methodologies that were used in the observation of the two phenomena; or might simply mean that, although, the meaning of work and effects on mental health are crucial to both cases, there is no link between those. To my knowledge, there is no current research that explores in detail the relationship of the neoliberal achievement society (Han, 2015) and quiet quitting, and provides a sufficient explanation to the structural understanding of this phenomenon. This is an undertaking, that my current study cannot promise either, however, a qualitative assessment of the issue is attempted.

3. Research questions

The main aim of this research is to understand how quiet quitting responds to the current reality of working conditions. To investigate this issue, the concept of bullshit jobs (Graeber, 2018) will be drawn on, bringing in the sub-question, about how the relationship between quiet quitting and bullshit jobs can be described. Furthermore, the relationship between quiet quitting and workplace wellbeing will be investigated. To put the questions into perspective, the role of work in the life of the interviewees will also be considered as a key question. These questions are investigated within the framework of Han's achievement society (2015), accepting its description of the current neoliberal conditions.

Q1: How quiet quitting responds to the current reality of working conditions?

Q2: How can the relationship between bullshit jobs and quiet quitting be described?

Q3: What is the relationship between quiet quitting and wellbeing?

Q4: What role does work play in the life of the sampled population?

4. Methodology

4.1. Interviews

The research employed semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants who *worked for a private corporate (criterion #1), in the service sector (criterion #2), in a white-collar office job (criterion #3), and were below management-level (criterion #4)*. The interview questions were composed based on the existing literature. The interview guide was followed in all interviews; however, individual adjustments were made, and the natural flow of conversation was more important than the strict adherence to the pre-defined questions. Covering the topics of work-life balance, wellbeing, and the perception of work was crucial in every case, as these topics made interpretation meaningful to the research. The complete interview guide can be found in [Appendix 1](#).

Most earlier studies about quiet quitting, work-life balance, and bullshit jobs were rather quantitative, hence, showed a generalised picture about the issue. The aim of this research was to highlight the experience of employees and provide a deeper insight into the mechanisms of quiet quitting. Semi-structured interviewing proved to be a useful tool for this, as it allowed freedom for the interviewees to express their feelings, but also gave me the possibility to focus on relevant topics, and gather nuanced data, being able to observe not only textual, but emotional and non-verbal responses as well.

The interviews took place according to the interviewees' convenience. Some cases in person, other cases online through the Microsoft Teams platform. The in-person interviews took place in the office building of the interviewee, with one exception, where it was arranged in a teahouse. Five interviewees chose a time within their working hours for the conversation, while three immediately after finishing work. Only one interviewee chose weekend. This might also point towards a tendency to separate private life and work. The average length of the interviews was around an hour.

4.2. Participants

In total 12 interviews were conducted for the research. The largest part of the interviewees (7) was recruited through a survey that was distributed on LinkedIn. This social network works on a way, that a given content is shown to the connections of the originator of the content, and if these connections react to the content, it will also be shown to their connections, and so it

continues. Ultimately, this means that the content can relatively quickly reach far away from its originator, making LinkedIn a useful tool for finding a sample outside of one's own connections. Furthermore, this is a professional site, meaning that people do not necessarily know their connections personally, because they tend to connect based on shared professional interests. As most corporate jobs are also advertised on LinkedIn, and it is an important space for networking in the sampled sector, it was useful for recruiting interviewees for this research.

Another group of interviewees (5) were recruited from my workplace, a Western-European multinational corporation. The aim of this was to find participants, who fit all criteria and do a job that I also have experience with, hence, have deeper insights into its nature.

The interviews were coded and analysed with NVivo 14 qualitative analysis software. The coding was done in a deductive way, reflecting the insights of the reviewed literature, and relating those to the data. The employed codes can be found in [Appendix 2](#).

All interviewees were given a pseudonym to protect their identity. The pseudonyms were chosen randomly with criteria to reflect their gender, nationality, and only contain letters of the English alphabet.

Code	Pseudonym	Nationality	Employment type	Gender	Age	Job level
Int01	Isabel	Brazilian	Full time	Female	29	Employee
Int02	Simon	Hungarian	Full time	Male	25	Senior employee
Int03	Argjend	Albanian	Full time	Male	30	Employee
Int04	Endre	Hungarian	Full time	Male	42	Team lead
Int05	Bogi	Hungarian	Part time	Female	21	Intern
Int06	Elira	Albanian	Part time	Female	22	Employee
Int07	Alessandro	Italian	Full time	Male	36	Employee
Int08	Lilla	Hungarian	Full time	Female	43	Employee
Int09	Szilvia	Hungarian	Full time	Female	53	Employee
Int10	Claire	Rwandan	Part time	Female	24	Employee
Int11	Bence	Hungarian	Full time	Male	30	Senior employee
Int12	Hanga	Hungarian	Full time	Female	29	Employee

Table 1. Demography of the interviewees.

The recruitment method cannot be considered random, which might result in biases, and the limited sample size does not allow this research to draw any generalisable conclusions. These limitations are the result of temporal and financial constraints, and the outcomes should be viewed with the acknowledgement of these (see: [Limitations of the research](#)).

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Creating boundaries by quiet quitting

The analysis of the interviews showed that a large proportion of the sample (67%) engaged in quiet quitting. This does not mean that they consciously followed the trend, yet their behaviour reflected adherence to it. Free time (i.e., not doing wage labour) was an important aspect of their life. The separation of work and private life appeared frequently:

“The working time is from 8AM till 5PM, with an hour of lunch break. I never switch on my computer before 8, and I switch it off at 5:00PM. Also, the lunch break is sacred, so, I never work in the lunch break [...]. What I like in this job, is that, well, without conscious effort the border creation between work and private sphere goes very well. Because of the type of the work there are no overwhelming mental tasks, which stay with you at the end of the workday, and you bring them to your private life. There are very well-defined tasks, which you have to complete, and if you don’t finish, you can continue the next workday.” Endre, 42, team lead.

Endre started to work for a multinational corporation two and a half years ago, after a career as high school and university teacher. Throughout the interview, he often compared his current job to his earlier occupation. Free time was certainly one of the most important aspects he emphasised on, which was clearly better in his current job. As opposed to teaching, here he was able to draw clear lines between worktime and free time. His main reason for the strict boundaries was the fact that he wanted to spend as much time with his family as possible. Having a family, was, however, not a necessity for one to appreciate free time:

“It’s especially important for me that [work] doesn’t take time from my free life. So that the rest of the week, that remains apart from the 40 hours, that I can enjoy myself, the way I want. Then I wouldn’t want to think about what’s going on at work.” Hanga, 29, employee.

Interviewees who did not have a family, usually spent their free time doing sports, hobbies, or hanging out with friends. Travelling was also a topic that came up in multiple interviews as an important activity for the participants.

It was a popular opinion that work must fit within eight hours a day, and if it does not, then it is problematic: *“In my opinion, if there are recurring overtime tasks, that means that the process is wrong.”* (Lilla, 43, employee). *“I think these intellectual jobs have like a maximal potential output, you work x hours a day, and then usefulness declines.”* (Bence, 30, senior employee). Adherence to the contractual working hours was also supported by employers:

“In Brazil [...] when we are working, sometimes we have even to leave the work after your work time. But here it’s quite different. We start at 8:00 and we finish at 5:00, so we don’t have to worry about... We don’t have to stay more than five 5:00 PM. So, I think this was really good for me because I have time to do whatever I want after that.” Isabel, 29, employee.

Isabel came from Brazil and studied in Hungary before she got a job at a multinational corporation. Her experience about the possibility of setting clear boundaries to work, also points towards global inequalities in work-life balance.

Quiet quitting appeared not only in temporal terms. Relationship to colleagues was also kept professional, without interest to build closer connections:

“I can think of my colleagues as positive people, but I like to keep my friends separately. There are colleagues I like, but they are not on the level of friends [...]. That we experience the same things is not enough for me to let them so close to myself.” Simon, 25, senior employee.

“My colleagues, they’re not necessarily my friends. So, I feel like I’m just less responsible about some situations, about some dynamics that can happen during work time, if you’re going to the workplace. So, I feel like here, everyone has their life. I don’t know much about them. It’s just my colleague. I’m their colleague. That’s pretty much it.” Elira, 22, employee.

Both Simon and Elira emphasised the distinguishment of friends and colleagues. They did not want to mix their work relationships into their private life. Claire went even further with creating personal boundaries:

“I’ve made it, like, intentionally made it a point that at work, you know, I will try to socialise, but I will not try to connect after work. You know on social media, add them on Facebook... No, I don’t do that anymore. So, it’s really good, but not really deep or intimate or close in a way. And also, I don’t talk about personal stuff with my colleagues. So, it’s just like I tried to put a line on that, you know, maybe when they ask something, you know, reply them with kind of like abstracts of general information and then move on and make sure to not ask them anything personal.” Claire, 24, employee.

Distance towards colleagues is, however, not always built intentionally. It was a recurring topic by non-Hungarian interviewees, that they do not feel included by their Hungarian colleagues:

“I am the only non-Hungarian in the team which you know, it’s not a big deal, people are cool, but somehow sometimes you feel a bit of an outsider because you know, you don’t speak the language. You have lunch and everybody speaking Hungarian most of the time. I mean, it’s something that I’m super used to after all these years here, I don’t mind, it’s about, you know, sometimes I wouldn’t even say it’s uncomfortable. It’s just like. Yeah, it’s a bit maybe harder to build any kind of relationships.” Alessandro, 36, employee.

“I think most Hungarians prefer to talk with Hungarians, so this could be a first thing that is problematic.” Isabel, 29, employee.

Language barrier was present in those cases where the participant had relatively few or no other non-Hungarian colleagues. Even though the official work language of the companies was English, coffee break chats went on in Hungarian, even in the presence of people who did not understand the language. It created a separation that might be contributing to an urge to disengage from the workplace environment. The fact that the issue’s significance was downplayed by some interviewees (such as Alessandro: “it’s not a big deal”), might be because I am Hungarian, and it is possible that they did not feel appropriate to elaborate on this topic to me. In the meanwhile, it is an important point that can significantly weaken workplace wellbeing.

Voswinkel and Kocyba (2005/2007) argued that in the post-modern era, the once strict boundaries of work and private life increasingly dissolve as a result of the developing information technology. Their research studies the issue from multiple perspectives, including the blurring temporal frames, flexibility of spatial arrangements, and changing hierarchies. According to the authors, these blurring boundaries result in a compulsion that employees must *manage* their life and think of everything in terms of time and effort management. As the

compensation of workers is increasingly tied to the success of the company, workers are willing to contribute their personal network and creative resources to the employer's benefit. This creates a situation where the boundaries between different spheres of life are indetectable, as time, space, and personal connections overflow from one sphere to another.

This research argues, that since the publication of Voswinkel and Kocyba's article in 2005, a new trend emerged, which can be regarded as a response to the reality of working conditions, described by the authors. Quiet quitting, the new trend about only doing what is required at work, without putting in extra time and effort, seems to be an instrument that emerged against the blurring boundaries of work. Employees who quiet quit, make sure to adhere to their contractual working hours, and do not work overtime (Johnson, 2023). As it was emphasised by multiple interviewees, when the working day ends, they switch off their laptops, even if not all tasks are completed. This means that a temporal separation of work and private life is created by the employee. These boundaries were in most cases also respected, or even encouraged by the employer.

Quiet quitting also proved to be useful in creating boundaries on the front of personal connections. Employees who quiet quit, made sure to separate their audiences (Goffman, 1959). In terms of Goffmanian interaction (1959), their workplace self and its connections, the colleagues, were not involved in private matters. This happened the other way around as well; some participants sealed off their work matters, by not talking about anything that went on at work when they were not working. Relationships were kept on a professional level in the case of those who engaged in quiet quitting. Audience segregation was prevalent in both the physical and online sphere. As online impression management can be crucial in workplace evaluation (Al-Shatti & Ohana, 2021), interviewees tended to keep their online audiences apart, and did not connect with colleagues on the same sites they did with friends.

Multiple respondents expressed discomfort about their workplace role and attempted to perform that as rarely as possible. Working from home was a useful tool for that. This enabled participants to wear home clothing, and be in a familiar setting, while performing work tasks. This can be explained by little willingness to identify themselves with their jobs, which is most importantly seen as an instrument to earn money. By avoiding dressing according to workplace norms and being physically present in the office, participants were able to create a personal boundary as well, and distance themselves from work. Online audience segregation further

contributed to this separation, as they did not see their colleagues on social media, thus had no “reminders” about their workplace role in their free time.

5.2. Spatial connection for temporal separation

In terms of spatial boundaries, the findings reinforced Voswinkel and Kocyba’s theory, in fact, an acceleration of working from home and hybrid work arrangements has been visible since the Covid-19 pandemic (Haan, 2023). Work has taken hold in private homes to a large extent. In the meanwhile, this does not seem to bother participants of this study. Working from home is, namely, contributing to enhanced temporal and personal separation. If one is not required to physically enter the workplace, that comes with the benefits of only spending the absolutely necessary amount of time with work-related tasks, while also being able to complete household chores, spend time with family, or do sports. All these in empty hours, which otherwise would be spent with pretending to work. Even if one spends their entire working day with actual work, doing it from home is still a popular option, as the tiresome commuting can be eliminated. Commuting is seen as part of the work, yet it is unpaid. In jobs, which are, as this research shown, entirely done to earn money, such an unpaid effort is understandably unpopular.

Working from home and hybrid working solutions were preferred by 11 of the 12 interviewees. Their reasons were diverse, however, there were recurring themes, which help resolve the contradiction:

“I have to wake up in the morning at, let's say 7:30 and I just open my eyes, wash my face, brush my teeth, come back to my bed and, you know, my laptop is there and like I'm doing work. So, that's one of the greatest advantages, this flexibility, logistical flexibility, not having to travel, not having to go, not having to put effort into my looks. Because I feel like a person should more or less look presentable when they go to their workplace and in order to do that it sometimes requires time and energy, and I feel like I don't have to waste that. I can spend that time, that part of my energy and time into that which I really like.” Elira, 22, employee.

Elira did not enjoy her work and made sure to keep it within strict boundaries. Working from home, paradoxically, helped her in the creation of these boundaries. Even though home and workplace were not spatially separated, the effort needed for work was limited to a minimum level by sparing the commute time and preparation. The same reasons were mentioned by others as well: *“I hate commuting.”* (Simon, 25, senior employee). *“The time that I would*

spend going to the office, I can sleep more also [...] I don't have to change clothes.” (Isabel, 29, employee).

Working from home also provided the possibility to do household tasks within working hours, hence combining invisible work with paid work:

“The number one benefit of working from home is that there are these things that don’t take away time from my working hours, but I can still get them done when I work from home. I remember well, that when I used to work 40-50-60 hours at [name of a coffeehouse chain] in a week, I didn’t have time to wash clothes. Now, I start a washing before a meeting, then when I’m done with the meeting, I only have to hang up the clothes. Takes five minutes. So, this multitasking with household stuff, it’s a huge advantage.” Simon, 25, senior employee.

“When my kid is at home, and now for three years she was at home. So, then I just stand up from the computer and paint with her or play Lego for a bit.” Endre, 42, team lead.

“I can do the things that I wouldn't have time for if I'm in the office. For example, doing laundry, cleaning, or cooking and then I can do those during working hours, and I don't have to spend my free time with it. Or sometimes it's simply just more comfortable.” Bogi, 21, intern.

Contractual working hours tended to differ from actual worked hours. This resulted in a diverse range of free time within the official working hours. Working from home enabled participants to use these interludes to other activities as well:

“It was very quiet period, and I was like, okay, I can finish at three for example and study Japanese for an hour, an hour and a half. There were situations where I even went running for example. Once I went to the swimming pool for like an hour, an hour and a half, you know, because really it wasn't that busy.” Alessandro, 36, employee.

“I wrote my thesis in November, I finished it in a month in these empty hours, which are there in every job. You can use these hours to do your other tasks.” Simon, 25, senior employee.

Working from home contributed to an enhanced temporal separation of work and private life, by a spatial connection of home and workplace. This spatial connection did not seem to bother the participants, although, Endre mentioned that he created a somewhat separated work environment in his home, by putting his desk to the furthest corner of the house,

where he only went to work. Others did not mention spatial separations in their homes. Therefore, this does not seem to be an important aspect.

Apart from temporal boundaries, working from home was also popular for practical reasons. One interviewee mentioned that her health problems make it difficult for her to work from an office, while another interviewee said that he was unable to focus in an open office area, because of all the other people around.

A feeling of being under surveillance in the office was also a recurring unpleasant experience. Participants felt that their supervisors or colleagues monitor their activities during office hours, yet, when asked for elaboration, in most cases it turned out that these feelings mostly came from the participant and were never indicated by their environment. This might originate from a traditional capitalist socialisation, which implies that the employer “owns the employee’s time”, hence, if they do something else within working hours, that means the violation of the contract. This internalised feeling was much weaker when the participants worked from home. Still, when they were asked about how much they *actually* worked or what *else* they did in working hours, many interviewees felt clearly at unease. These were the questions before which many respondents asked to make sure whether the interview will be anonymous, even though they were ensured about anonymity before the start of the conversation. One participant, even avoided to answer the question about her actual working hours after some thinking, by stating that she “did not know how much she worked”. There was one identifiable pattern in the characteristics of the participants who did not mind talking about their actual working hours and non-work activities during those. In this small sample, it seems that those who are less attached to their jobs, and have the least identification with it, are the most likely to openly talk about these topics.

5.3. The ambiguity of social usefulness

The key characteristics of Graeber’s bullshit jobs (2018) is that these jobs do not make meaningful contributions to society. Graeber’s theory (2018) can and should be criticised on many points. His methods were questionable, his sample was rather a convenience sample than a rigorously defined population, and his definitions are often ambiguous. Yet, the existence of the phenomena he highlighted seems to be largely accepted. This led to that other researchers attempted to find stronger evidence for the theory.

To my current knowledge, these research projects used quantitative tools and focused primarily on the social usefulness aspect of bullshit jobs. Despite the similar methods, the results became different, which according to Walo (2023) can be a result of different geographical locations and a different wording of the questions. Walo (2023) asked respondents whether in their job they are making *“a positive impact on [their] community and society”* (Walo, 2023, p. 1141). While the YouGov survey, cited by Graeber (2018) asked if respondents’ jobs made a *“meaningful contribution to the world”*. Soffia et al. (2022) investigated if they *“have the feeling of doing useful work”* (Soffia et al., 2022, p. 824). To justify this survey question, Soffia et al. (2022) argue that while they do not *“have any data to specifically test the validity or reliability of this survey item, it has face validity in that it is difficult to think what else it might be measuring apart from Graeber’s notion of a BS [bullshit] job”* (Soffia et al., 2022, p. 824). As the question was not tested in qualitative research before, this study took Soffia et al.’s justification with some criticism, and I used a slightly modified version of the earlier used questions to ask about bullshit jobs. Here, participants were asked whether *“the tasks they complete at work have a positive impact on society”*. As it was an interview and not a survey question, interviewees had the possibility to elaborate on their answers, and, while a few of them had clear answers, others expressed confusion. One pattern was, however, common: the given answers were not able to tell whether the participant’s job was bullshit or not.

“I mean, we are a B2B [business-to-business], so I'm not sure. I'm not sure if they have a positive impact like on people who walk down the road, but for our customers, yeah, definitely.” Argjend, 30, employee.

“There is no societal aspect of my work whatsoever. Nothing.” Simon, 25, senior employee.

“We are supporting an internal system, so not customers. So, I feel like this job has no effect on society.” Lilla, 43, employee.

Clearly, the sample of this current research is too small to be able to draw wide conclusions, and it can be debated, whether the modified question indeed had enough similarity to the ones used by Soffia et al. (2022), Walo (2023), and YouGov; still, the multiple possible interpretations of the question highlighted that bullshit jobs are a more complex phenomenon which should not be determined by one single question.

Based on this result, I propose the usage of composite variables for future quantitative research, to measure other aspects of bullshit jobs as well. Creating questions about the effect,

outcome, and goal of a job might be helpful to gain a more holistic perspective. Further qualitative research specifically on bullshit jobs would also be useful, to acquire a deeper understanding of the experience of bullshit job holders, who might not be familiar with the notion.

The participants' understanding of social usefulness was not challenged. There was no problem with the interpretations, which were both creative and diverse. These, however, did not bring useful insights to the current research, apart from uncovering the question's ambiguity. To what extent the participants held a bullshit job, had to be explored through a range of other, more complex questions. It turned out that 67% of the participants had in fact a bullshit job. This number is coincidentally the same as the number of those who quiet quit. Yet, the two groups only partly overlap. There were participants who, despite holding a bullshit job, did not quiet quit, and there were others who quiet quit, despite their job was not bullshit. The indicator, that predicted bullshit jobs and quiet quitting with 100% certainty in the sample, was workplace wellbeing. Those who felt bad at their workplace were employees in bullshit jobs, who engaged in quiet quitting. Most probably, the starting point for them was the bullshit job, which led to deteriorated wellbeing, which in turn ended up in quiet quitting. This is, however, a suggestion that this research can neither prove nor disprove, based on the limited evidence.

5.4. Bullshit jobs for future goals

Bullshit jobs were investigated through questions about tasks, monotony, effect, and the aim of the job. The four participants, whose jobs could not be classified as bullshit, had in common that they were required to do diverse tasks, which often changed, and they had to use their creativity for the solutions. Furthermore, they had to learn new skills to be able to effectively do their job. In contrast, those who held a bullshit job, were often required to complete routine tasks. Learning new skills was possible in some cases, but it was never an absolute necessity. Bullshit jobs had also in common that in most cases, they did not fill the contractual working hours: *"In the time of about a year, I didn't work 40 hours in total."* (Lilla, 43, employee). Lilla represents an extreme example, but it was common that bullshit job holders had at least two-three free hours every day.

The participants had mostly bullshit jobs of the "duct taper" type (Graeber, 2018). They completed tasks which could be automated, or which are only necessary because something

does not work well, and instead of fixing the problem, a temporal solution is applied permanently. Lilla's job, however, was an extreme example of a different type of bullshit job:

"It's been about one-one and a half year, that we don't have much to do. The numbers of the incidents declined a lot. Our manager knows about it, it's not a secret, my team lead doesn't need to forge the numbers. And our manager doesn't mind that my team lead fills up the team always when there is a vacancy, because it's much more difficult to kick through an FTE [full time employee] request if she doesn't keep the people. So, she keeps the places then. And then we will see." Lilla, 43, employee.

Lilla was unhappy in her job, as she did not feel that she did anything useful. The job was practically a "placeholder", for the case that in the unforeseeable future they might need more people, hence, it had to be filled. During the interview, she often attempted to change the topic, and talked about her earlier job, that she left because of the huge workload. Now, she talked about that job as *"the best time of [her] life"*. She chose her current position, because she thought she would be able to use more of her skills, and in the meantime have a more relaxed pace of work. The second wish certainly became reality, but to an extent she did not wish for. Lilla was disappointed, because there were not even enough tasks, to show her skills in practice, and she spent her days waiting for incidents, which sometimes did not come for weeks. She did not blame the management explicitly for her situation, yet she was clearly dissatisfied with it.

A common pattern among bullshit job holders was that they were not particularly proud of their job. This was especially true in the case of those who had a bullshit job and also quiet quit. Each participant was asked how they introduce themselves to a new person they meet, and what narrative they present about their job:

"I don't like to talk about it. I talk about things that had a positive effect on me. Like, my IT desk experience, because that four, almost five years were a fantastic period of my life, even though that we died from the many calls and emails... I don't talk about this current one. There's nothing to be proud of about it." Lilla, 43, employee.

"I actually try to avoid [talking about his current job]. I mean, I'm in peace with myself, you know, but it's not something I'm proud, I'm like flagging around and bragging about. Definitely, if it ends up like, what do you do? I usually, honestly, I think I try even to hide. I'm just saying, you know, I work for an American company. I'm an [job title] trying to avoid the details or anything just because I don't like the idea of talking too much about my job."

Because it's something that I don't care about. You know, there are many, many more interesting things we could talk about than my job. It's just, you know, the least interesting thing about myself. That's maybe also why I tend to identify with it very little." Alessandro, 36, employee.

"I'm not really like proud to be working there. Usually I'm like, yeah, I work at [name of company] and that's it." Claire, 24, employee.

These narratives clearly represent that these participants were not happy in their current job. Participants in bullshit jobs also mentioned that their current job is only a temporary solution, until they find something they really enjoy. For the participants, who were at university, this future goal was related to their current studies, but others had also diverse perspectives:

"So now it's like for seven years, and I think I was fine for the first two because, you know, it was new. So, let's say I've been struggling a bit for the last five years. I cannot tell you, there's no deadline, but I'm just sure I'm not going to do it for the rest of my life. Like I just know that one point I'll be, fed up and maybe I have enough savings and I would just change to do something else. But again, life, it is what it is, you meet someone, job opportunity that happens to be in another country or another sector... But you know I'm kind of open to everything. I just know that this won't last forever [...]. That's what I think in the sense that I just take it as a job. It's not the end of the world. I can, as I told you before, postpone the decision in the sense that the day that I will figure it out what I really want to do I'll go for it and I'm ready to work hard and everything and I'll have all the money I need because I've been saving for, you know, 10 years, 15 years, and I can open a bar. It's not even going to be a big issue in the sense that, you know, if it goes wrong, I waste €20,000, okay, not the end of the world. Because I have saved enough that, I can try out these kinds of things." Alessandro, 36, employee.

Alessandro had many other ideas as well about what he would rather do than his current job, however, his salary was so high that he remained in his position, despite that at times he had felt anger and aversion about his job. Money was an important factor in keeping participants in bullshit jobs in other cases as well:

"Sometimes I think it would be good to do something else. Well, maybe something where I can work with languages for example. Or something in the social work... Just, you know, it scares me that I probably wouldn't earn this much as now." Szilvia, 53, employee.

“I know that what I’m doing now is not the career path of my life. So, from my side it’s about that I do these tasks to be able to provide for myself and my environment.” Simon, 25, senior employee.

Generally, most participants did not see themselves doing their current job for longer than two more years.

In line with Graeber’s theory (2018), this research found that bullshit jobs exist, and in certain cases those can have negative effects on wellbeing. This study cannot and did not aim to investigate how widespread these jobs are, and the results do not give footing for any kind of generalisable assumptions. What can be stated is that interviewees described tasks and workplace environments which resembled Graeber’s (2018) description of bullshit jobs. These participants were in low level office jobs (below management level) at multinational corporations and viewed their situation as temporary. They often engaged in quiet quitting, to avoid the negative mental health consequences of bullshit jobs, which were also mentioned by Graeber (2018).

In Graeber’s original research (2018), participants were recruited mainly through the author’s Twitter page, which implied that they were familiar with the notion of bullshit jobs. He argued that those who work in such occupations, are inevitable aware of the uselessness of their work. As Graeber (2018) largely built his evidence on emails and messages he received from his followers, it is not surprising that those confirmed his theory, as they were individuals, who were aware of their job’s uselessness to such an extent that they actively sought out for related content and found Graeber’s articles. This was clearly not the case in this research. Participants were unaware of the notion of bullshit jobs (except one case), therefore, their narratives used different terminology, and the features of their jobs were communicated much more implicitly than in Graeber’s case (2018). Through the interviews participants often attempted to project some kind of meaning into their work, which is in line with Graeber’s (2018) statement about a feeling of obligation from the employee’s side to pretend the usefulness of their job.

As the “bullshitness” of the jobs was often not made explicit by the participants, it largely depended on the interpretation of the analyst. This is certainly a possibility for bias, which might lead to that this research implies a different understanding of bullshit jobs, than Graeber (2018) does and highlights different aspects. The main point is, however, that jobs, which have little to no social value, and their existence can hardly be justified, still do exist.

Bullshit jobs seem to play an instrumental role in the life of the interviewees; hence, their uttermost goal is to provide wage for the job holder, enabling them to pursue other interests. Similarly to Graeber (2018), this research found that bullshit job holders often try to avoid talking about their job, and it does not play a central role in their life, despite the long hours which are spent with it every week. Dissociation from work and deteriorated wellbeing might be reasons for many participants to choose quiet quitting.

5.5. The instrumentalisation of work

There was an interview question, which was probably the most suitable to investigate actual underlying attitudes and motivations about the participants' job. Everyone was asked what job they would do if every job in the world was paid exactly the same, hence, money did not matter. There was not one single participant who said that they would do the same as they currently do. This finding highlights that the main motivation for these corporate jobs, regardless whether they are bullshit or not, was money. Participants listed the following occupations that they would do if money did not matter (a few people mentioned more than one occupation):

- | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| · Actor | · NGO worker |
| · Archaeologist | · Painter |
| · Cake baker | · Physiotherapist |
| · Coconut seller | · Police officer |
| · Doctor (mentioned twice) | · Receptionist |
| · Engineer | · Researcher (mentioned twice) |
| · Fashion designer | · Teacher |
| · Gardener | |
| · Musician | |

The listed occupations are diverse and range from rather ambiguous ones (such as coconut seller) to clearly defined professions (such as physiotherapist). Many occupations can be categorised as helping professions, while many have in common that they require creativity. Most of these occupations are not monotonous and can include wide range of diverse tasks. Probably, the most outstanding counterexample from the list is “receptionist” which is according to Graeber (2018) a textbook example of bullshit jobs. The interviewee, who chose this said that she had worked as a hotel receptionist in the past and enjoyed talking to many

different people, while solving ad hoc tasks, and she would be happy to do that again. The remaining occupations fit to Graeber's idea of socially useful jobs (2018).

The fact that people would rather do something else, if they did not have to think about money, points out the importance of money in the current neoliberal capitalist society. As money, in this system, can be acquired by work – the two concepts became inseparable. In the narratives of the participants, work was most often defined as an instrument to make a living:

“Work is something that we'd never in a bloody million years would do had they not paid for it, let's not forget that. This is why it's called work.” Endre, 42, team lead.

“Well, work is the thing that we do to make a living.” Szilvia, 53, employee.

“To me work is just an activity to do. Now, as I was unemployed, it turned out that it's a very, very important activity that happens to you in 40 hours a week. So, it's part of your life in this sense. But otherwise, to me, it's just a means to be able to buy stuff and to travel.” Hanga, 29, employee.

Others also mentioned fulfilling and beneficial aspects of work:

“A meaning of work for me is that it gives you purpose, gives you purpose in life. The way I see it, the idea of work is that it's not just about earning money. I mean, yeah, we do work for a salary and all of that, which is fine. But the idea of it is also that you want to leave a legacy behind.” Argjend, 30, employee.

“We do live in a society that does provide for us, even if not perfectly, how we want to and how we agree with the way our systems are managed. But it does provide for us, and it would be weird to not do anything in return and not be part of the system.” Bogi, 21, intern.

In the case of bullshit job holders, the positive views on work as a concept, were contrasted with their own realities:

“[The meaning of work is] To feel that you are useful. I mean, when you are proud of yourself, of what you are doing. And when you really like what you are doing. So now I'm not sure if I am in this position... I mean, I of course I have to find something that fits to myself, that I will be proud, totally proud.” Isabel, 29, employee.

“Work also means to me to spend the time useful. It would be good in any type of work. Unfortunately, you know, in this current situation, it's not the case. Well, I think in many corporate jobs you just put papers from A to B.” Lilla, 43, employee.

The centrality of money in the realm of work was also highlighted in the answers to a hypothetical scenario, where participants were asked to decide, whether they would work more in the same job (more than 40 hours/week) for more money or would work less (four days a week) but receive the same amount of wage as they currently do. All participants opted for the increased free time. This points out, that if it did not come with a financial loss, participants would be willing to work less, and the promise of more money is not enough encouragement for more work in a job they only do for the money. It is, however, important to note, that participants, who were content with their current job, were more willing to consider increasing the working hours, yet even they would choose a shorter workweek had they been offered a choice.

5.6. Wellbeing is key, but not everything

An overwhelming majority of participants (83%) were satisfied with their immediate supervisors. They felt that their line managers cared about them and heard them if they had any issues:

“She doesn’t pressure us with anything. She constantly helps us, even though she has a tonne of stuff on her plate, she constantly finds time to help us. And she’s a mother as well. So, imagine the kind of responsibilities that she has. I love her to death. Not once in my two years here, not once, has she ever been angry. Not even once. Yeah, so she is amazing.” Argjend, 30, employee.

“He’s a really good person, and one quality that I really appreciate in him is that he doesn’t treat you as a machine you know. So, when you have concerns or like maybe you’re not in a condition to work, he actually gives you that space to kind of recover. Or like even when you have your ideas, he actually listens and, you know, he has this thing about, you know, not treating you like a machine.” Claire, 24, employee.

“I have very good relationship with my line manager, and I think it’s the same for all my colleagues. She’s always available, and she always stands up for us. She never declines any communication, so she’s very helpful.” Szilvia, 53, employee.

On the other hand, workplace wellbeing was not similarly satisfactory. 58% of the participants felt well at their workplace. Wellbeing was investigated with questions about what emotions the interviewees connect to their workplace, how they feel after work, and what are their

perspectives at the company. Based on these questions it turned out that satisfaction with the immediate supervisor, does not necessarily translate into satisfaction with the company and the workplace environment. Dissatisfaction was caused by multiple factors, such as low salary: *“I don’t feel that I am paid well enough.”* (Szilvia, 53, employee). Lack of career opportunities: *“[How long do you see yourself at this company?] Not so long. I wish I could move on this year.”* (Isabel, 29, employee). Or a feeling that the company does not make a positive contribution to society:

“Say as much as they want about ESG [environmental, social governance], this and that, but you know the end of the day, it’s just an American corporate. Yeah, not too much of a fan of those. So unfortunately, no, it doesn’t really help society. It’s something that bothers me. I really would like to do something more valuable for society.” Alessandro, 36, employee.

Workplace wellbeing was therefore, not related to satisfaction with the immediate supervisor, who seemingly had little effect on overall wellbeing. This was much more defined by company culture, tasks, and the main operational values of the employer.

Low levels of wellbeing indicated higher likelihood of quiet quitting among the participants. If decreased wellbeing was paired with a bullshit job, quiet quitting was always present in the current, small sample. There were three participants who had a bullshit job and reported good wellbeing, while the remaining five bullshit job holders did not feel good at their workplace. Based on this, workplace wellbeing seems to play an important role in connection to both bullshit jobs and quiet quitting, most likely as a partial outcome of the first and a partial antecedent of the second.

This result points out that further examination of possible connections between bullshit jobs and quiet quitting are needed. The usage of workplace wellbeing as a connecting variable might be a good starting point. It is important to note, however, that while decreased workplace wellbeing might be a response to bullshit jobs in certain cases, the phenomenon cannot fully explain that, neither can quiet quitting be regarded as entirely a result of decreased wellbeing. This research uncovered that quiet quitting was often used by participants as a solution to draw boundaries to work. This behaviour seems to be rooted in the appreciation of free time much more than workplace dissatisfaction. The results also showed that bullshit jobs were frequently regarded as a temporal solution towards different career goals, which might explain the lowered levels of willingness to put extra energy into the job.

Quiet quitting seems to be an antidote to Han's achievement society (2015; 2017) for participants of this research. They do not want to reach the point of burnout, and if their financial needs are met, they do not want to take on more work than necessary. This can be understood as a self-protection against the pressure of the system. This is an emerging "negativity" amidst the "toxic positivity" of achievement society (Han, 2015). The "yes-culture" of neoliberalism is contrasted with the "no" of quiet quitting, which sets a boundary between private life and work. In this sense, quiet quitting can be seen as more than just a question of wellbeing – it is a quiet call against neoliberal working conditions.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated quiet quitting within the framework of the neoliberal society, as described by Han (2015; 2017) and Voswinkel and Kocyba (2005/2007). Using semi-structured interviews, the research aimed to answer the questions of how quiet quitting responds to the current reality of working conditions (Q1), how can the relationship between quiet quitting and bullshit jobs be described (Q2), what is the relationship between quiet quitting and wellbeing (Q3), and what role does work play in participants' lives (Q4).

According to Han (2015), the achievement society's mechanisms prevent subjects from showing organised resistance to the system. Quiet quitting can be seen as a passive "resistance" – or much rather a self-protection. It is neither organised, nor cooperative, but an individual solution that can still be arranged in an achievement society, without significant backlash. Quiet quitting, namely, does not harm the system, but attempts to minimise harm to the individual. It can therefore be understood as an individual response to current working conditions. However, an individual response to a societal problem may not be sufficient in the long run; in fact, such a solution may even help to prevent active, cooperative resistance, since the pressure on the individual is limited.

This research was, to my knowledge, the first to establish the theoretical possibility of a relationship between quiet quitting and Graeber's theory of bullshit jobs (2018). A large number of participants worked in positions that could be described as bullshit jobs. Based on their responses, there is a visible pattern, that shows an increased likelihood of quiet quitting along with deteriorating wellbeing. Participants in bullshit jobs tended to view their status as temporary and had no long-term plans in their current positions. The interviews highlighted

that researching bullshit jobs requires a holistic approach and the formulation of complex, multifaceted questions, which quantitative studies in the past failed to accomplish. This research pointed out that the survey questions used in previous studies (Soffia et al., 2022; Walo, 2023) may be misunderstood and possibly measure different attitudes than anticipated. It is important to note, however, that these criticisms should be considered with regards to the limitations of this study.

Wellbeing plays a crucial role in the context of quiet quitting. This fact has been highlighted in previous studies on the topic (Hiltunen, 2023; Mahand & Caldwell, 2023; Makridis, 2023; Parekh & Shah, 2023), and was confirmed here as well. Deteriorated wellbeing can be associated with quiet quitting. However, quiet quitting is a more complex phenomenon, that can also be related to an increased valuation of free time, a self-protection against burnout, and the fact that participants of this research do their jobs most importantly for the purpose of earning money, which is the result of the current economic conditions. Having a bullshit job also increased the likelihood of deteriorated wellbeing, and in turn, the probability of quiet quitting as well. Thus, wellbeing seems to be an important link between bullshit jobs and quiet quitting, yet it cannot be used as the sole result of the former and explanation of the latter. Especially, because, wellbeing is a variable that needs to be explained. Previous studies (such as Johnson, 2023; Lee et al., 2023) explained declining wellbeing by pointing to the management. This research has shown that, although company culture plays a role in wellbeing, immediate supervisors have little effect on it, and the reasons for quiet quitting are not to be found in individual workplaces, but in the neoliberal system.

Work played an instrumental role in the lives of the participants. Many of them explicitly stated that they were only working in the given position because this was the only way they could earn a living. In a theoretical scenario, where all jobs were paid the same, none of the participants would have chosen the job they currently have, and most of the chosen occupations were in the category of either helping or creative professions. This underscores that the examined, lower level, white-collar service jobs are not “dream occupations”, but ways of earning enough money to support other activities. When offered a choice between a shorter workweek for the same salary, or overtime for a higher wage, all participants opted for the shorter workweek, further emphasising the importance of free time and the instrumental understanding of work.

This research contributed to the field of the sociology of work by proposing a new interpretation of quiet quitting, reframing it as a response to neoliberal working conditions. Furthermore, it linked the theory of bullshit jobs (Graeber, 2018) to quiet quitting, opening a new direction for scholarship on the field. As a novelty, the study provided qualitative insights into the standpoint of workers in bullshit jobs, and employees who engage in quiet quitting – thus contributing to a deeper understanding of the two phenomena and their connection.

6.1. Limitations of the research

This research did not aim to provide generalisable data on the observed phenomena. The goal was a qualitative contribution to a field, largely dominated by quantitative research. This goal was fulfilled to an extent that the financial and temporal limitations allowed. To formulate theories or establish connections, 12 interviews might seem insufficient, yet these can point out certain patterns which can be investigated in further research.

Criticisms against earlier studies voiced in this paper, should be acknowledged with the understanding of the abovementioned limitations. Hence, these criticisms should be considered as theoretical possibilities, rather than empirically funded assessments.

6.2. Further research possibilities

This research found that money was a key motivator for participants to do their jobs, even though in many cases they did not see it as meaningful or useful and did not enjoy it either. Further research could continue this path, collecting insights about the meaning of work, and contrast that with the reality of neoliberal capitalism. A more thorough investigation of “what people work?”; “why do they do that work?”; and “what would they do if money did not matter?” could lead to a better understanding of contemporary society. Sectors, which were not explored in the current study, should also be included to represent a wider range of professions and social positions. This would be especially interesting, as such a research could have practical implications connected to policy development about four-day workweek, or universal basic income.

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Appendices

Appendix 1.

Interview guide:

The participant

Please introduce yourself.

ASK if not mentioned:

- 1.1 What is your job title?
- 1.2 Company HQ?
- 1.3 What kind of tasks do you do at work?
- 1.4 Do you have family (child(ren), partner)?
- 1.5 Do you live in the same city where you work?
- 1.6 Age

Priorities in work and life

- 2.1 Since when do you work at your current workplace?
- 2.2 What were the most important criteria that you considered when you chose your current workplace?

ASK if not mentioned: 2.2.1 How important is leisure time when choosing your workplace?

- 2.3 How many hours do you work weekly?
- 2.4 How content are you with your current work-life balance?
- 2.5 Do you work from home sometimes?

ASK if not mentioned: 2.5.1 What are your average WFH and office hours?

ASK ONLY if 2.5=yes:

- 2.6 What advantages does WFH have for you?
- 2.7 What activities do you do outside work?
- 2.8 Can you recall an occasion when you felt that you did not have enough time to do a leisure activity that you wanted to?
- 2.9 If so, was your worktime an obstacle?
- 2.10 If you had the possibility to earn more than you currently do, but also work more, or work less, but earn the same amount you do now, which one would you choose? More work and more wage or same wage and less work?

Wellbeing at work

3.1 What motivates you in your work?

3.2 How would you describe your relationship to your colleagues?

ASK if not mentioned: 3.2.1 Do you meet colleagues outside work context?

3.3 What emotions does your workplace evoke in you when you think about it? How do you feel about your workplace?

ASK if not mentioned: 3.3.1 What can be the reasons of these feelings?

3.4 How do you feel when you finish work for the day?

3.5 Can you mention an occasion when you felt the best at your workplace?

3.6 Can you mention an occasion when you felt the worst at your workplace?

3.7 Have you ever suggested changes or improvements to your supervisors? If so, were these implemented?

Perception of own work

4.1 Do you think that the tasks you are expected to do in your work, make a positive impact on society?

ASK if not mentioned: 4.1.1 On what way do they do? 4.1.2 Why not?

4.2 Can you recall an occasion when you felt especially proud of your work?

4.3 Can you recall an occasion when you felt ashamed or bad about your work?

4.4 If there were no financial or any concerns, and you could choose any job you want, what would you work as?

ASK if not mentioned: 4.4.1 Why that?

4.5 What does work mean to you? What is the most important part of work generally?

4.6 Does your current job fulfil these expectations?

Appendix 2.

Codes used for the interview analyses:

- Introduction
- Meaning of work
 - Current job vs meaning
 - Perception of own work
 - Ashamed of own work
 - Earlier jobs
 - Positive societal impact
 - Proud of own work
 - Tasks

- Priorities
 - If money didn't matter
 - Dream job
 - Money matters
 - Money vs free time
 - Perspectives
 - Time matters
 - WFH
- Time management
 - Actual vs contractual work
 - Free time
 - Satisfaction with WLB
- Workplace wellbeing
 - Appreciation
 - Negative memory
 - One emotion – workplace
 - One feeling - after work
 - Positive memory
 - Relationship to colleagues
 - Relationship to supervisors