

# **WORKING HARD OR HARDLY WORKING?**

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**A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE QUIET QUITTING  
PHENOMENON IN THE PAST DECADE**

**JULIA LUNDBERG**

**PETTER WINBERG**

Bachelor Thesis  
Stockholm School of Economics  
2023



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### **Abstract:**

The concept of “quiet quitting,” characterized by employees merely fulfilling minimum work requirements without going above and beyond, gained widespread attention on TikTok in 2022, however, the behavior existed before this. Surveys suggest that Sweden is one of the countries where quiet quitting is most prominent in the workforce. This research delves into the discourse surrounding quiet quitting behaviors over the past decade in the Swedish managerial magazine *Chef*, with the aim of revealing underlying values and norms embedded in the discussions of employee conduct. Employing an archival and documentary study, we meticulously analyzed all *Chef* publications since 2010, isolating articles pertinent to the subject. Employing critical discourse analysis coupled with theories on empty labor and counterproductive work behaviors, our findings delineate a notable shift in the dialogue around quiet quitting. Initially centered on performance and outcomes, contemporary discussions emphasize quiet quitting as a means to enhance well-being and foster a healthier work-life balance. We argue that this contributes to the understanding of quiet quitting in Sweden, and how it has become so prominent after the COVID-19 pandemic, gaining a critical perspective on the phenomenon.

### **Keywords:**

Quiet quitting, Discourse, Counterproductive Work behavior, Empty Labor, Meaning of Work, Work-life balance.

### **Authors:**

Julia Lundberg (25454)

Petter Winberg (25456)

### **Supervisor:**

Emma Stenström, Associate Professor, Department of Management and Organization

### **Examiner:**

Laurence Romani, Professor, Department of Management and Organization

Bachelor Thesis

Bachelor Program in Management

Stockholm School of Economics

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## Contents

<b>1.</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1.1.</b>	<b>Research Gap .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1.2.</b>	<b>Purpose and Research Questions .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1.3.</b>	<b>Scope .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2.1.</b>	<b>Understanding Quiet Quitting .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2.2.</b>	<b>Antecedents of Quiet Quitting.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2.3.</b>	<b>Sociology of work.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b>THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3.1.</b>	<b>Critical Discourse Analysis.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3.2.</b>	<b>Empty Labor .....</b>	<b>9</b>
3.2.1.	Slacking .....	9
3.2.2.	Enduring .....	10
3.2.3.	Coping .....	10
3.2.4.	Soldering .....	10
<b>3.3.</b>	<b>Counterproductive Work Behavior .....</b>	<b>11</b>
3.3.1.	Abuse against others.....	11
3.3.2.	Production deviance .....	11
3.3.3.	Sabotage .....	11
3.3.4.	Theft .....	12
3.3.5.	Withdrawal .....	12
<b>3.4.</b>	<b>Theory discussion .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>4.</b>	<b>METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>4.1.</b>	<b>Research approach .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>4.2.</b>	<b>Research method .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>4.3.</b>	<b>Research design .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>4.4.</b>	<b>Data collection.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>4.5.</b>	<b>Data analysis .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>4.6.</b>	<b>Research quality .....</b>	<b>16</b>
4.6.1.	Rigor.....	16
4.6.2.	Reflexivity.....	16
4.6.3.	Ethics.....	17
<b>5.</b>	<b>EMPIRICS .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>5.1.</b>	<b>Post-financial crisis.....</b>	<b>17</b>
5.1.1.	Focus on performance .....	17
5.1.2.	Negative social behaviors.....	18

<b>5.2.</b>	<b>Pre-pandemic – Finding a middle ground .....</b>	<b>19</b>
5.2.1.	Freedom and Autonomy .....	19
5.2.2.	Unsubscribing to the hustle culture .....	19
<b>5.3.</b>	<b>Post-pandemic – Accepting a new normal, focusing on well-being .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>6.</b>	<b>ANALYSIS.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>6.1.</b>	<b>Performance and results .....</b>	<b>21</b>
6.1.1.	Discursive practice .....	21
6.1.2.	Social practice .....	22
<b>6.2.</b>	<b>Recognizing the human aspect .....</b>	<b>22</b>
6.2.1.	Discursive practice .....	22
6.2.2.	Social practice .....	23
<b>6.3.</b>	<b>Quiet Quitting to improve well-being.....</b>	<b>23</b>
6.3.1.	Discursive practice .....	23
6.3.2.	Social practice .....	23
<b>7.</b>	<b>DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>7.1.</b>	<b>Research questions revisited.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>7.2.</b>	<b>Contribution.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>7.3.</b>	<b>Implications for practitioners.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>7.4.</b>	<b>Limitations .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>7.5.</b>	<b>Future research.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>8.</b>	<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>27</b>

# 1. Introduction

In 2022 the term *Quiet Quitting* (QQ) went viral on the social media platform TikTok, originally posted June 25th, 2022, by Zaid Khan (Serenko, 2023). QQ describes a phenomenon where employees do the bare minimum required at work, enough to not get fired but not going “above and beyond”. The movement challenged the dominating and traditional notion of commitment to one’s employer, where the employees are expected to work long hours, be productive, and social slacking is frowned upon. Employees did not subscribe to the hustle culture, where work, and employers, are central to the employee’s life, instead opting for resistance and pursuing better work-life balance (Newport, 2022). In his video, Khan defines QQ as:

“[...] you are not out right quitting your job, but you are quitting an idea of going above and beyond. You are still performing your duties, but you are no longer subscribing to the hustle culture mentality that work has to be your life. The reality is, it’s not, and your worth as a person is not defined by your labor” (Khan, 2022).

During the Covid-19 pandemic our lives changed drastically, many went from working full time in offices, to working remotely. Reports suggest that up to as many as 50% of the US workforce are QQ (Formica & Sfodera, 2022; Clifton & Holliday, 2022), however estimates vary. As a new concept, unheard of pre-pandemic, research on QQ is limited, and there are contradictions when it comes to both its definition and its origin. Several academic articles state that the term was coined by the economist Mark Boldger in 2009 (Formica & Sfodera, 2022; Mahand & Caldwell 2023; Xueyun et al., 2023). However, Hitt (2022) found that Boldger is working on a book which cross-references the QQ phenomenon, and that his publicist added him to the Wikipedia page without his knowledge.

Randstad’s Workmonitor research is the largest survey of its kind, and covers 34 markets in Europe, Asia-Pacific, and the Americas. “The study conceptualizes and measures the gap between the reality and the wishes of the global workforce and tracks how this changes over time” (Randstad, 2023). According to their 2023 edition, Sweden is one of the countries where QQ is most common, placing it in sixth place internationally with 38% of the workforce admitting having quiet quit.

## 1.1. Research Gap

QQ as a concept is generally new, and research on the topic is limited, as seen by the arbitrary understanding of its origin. However, the phenomenon of workers mentally detaching from work is not new but has gained attention and an increasing part of the workforce seems to be involved in it (Hamouche, Koritos, & Papastathopoulos, 2023). It can therefore be argued that studying how the phenomenon of workers mentally detaching has been talked about in the discourse of work can help gain an understanding of how it is affecting the business world. Most of the prior research has focused on trying to understand antecedents, and how to manage QQ, but there is a lack of critical perspectives. QQ has also been discussed mostly in an US setting, and as the US and Sweden have different business climates, norms, and cultures, it is beneficial to study it from a Swedish business perspective. As Sweden is one of the top countries when it

comes to QQ, and there is a lack of research in a Swedish setting, it becomes vital to understand the underlying dynamics in Swedish society.

## 1.2. Purpose and Research Questions

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the portrayal of QQ behaviors in Swedish managerial media through a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective. Studying the phenomenon over time can allow the research to see movements leading to today's landscape and changing values. The primary objective is to discern the evolving ideas constructed within the discourse of QQ and analyze how these representations may influence managerial practices in the Swedish business context. The purpose is to gain an improved understanding of how QQ behaviors have been discussed over time, and how this development is reflected in the social practice of business. Additionally, as QQ is a relatively new term, the study wishes to add to the critical study paradigm of work and management. The following research questions were formulated to achieve this:

- How has quiet quitting behaviors been discussed and constructed in Swedish managerial media over time?
- How has the valuation of quiet quitting changed?

## 1.3. Scope

This thesis will focus on how QQ, and related topics, are described and constructed in discourse in Swedish managerial media. Our aim is to understand how QQ has been depicted over the past decade, how the discussion has evolved over time, and if there is a change in how the view of QQ behaviors are described and talked about. Focus will be on the Swedish version of the magazine *Chef*. The choice to focus on *Chef* exclusively was taken because it would provide a stable variable and continuity in the discourse over time. *Chef* was also chosen because it is one of the largest managerial magazines in the Nordic region. Opting for using managerial magazines as data was done because of the impact this has on powerful actors, namely managers, in business life. *Chef* has the potential to influence a plethora of managers and therefore how they depict topics will have direct and meaningful impacts. The study focuses on the years 2010 until today, from the aftermaths of the 2008/2009 financial crisis, until today's post-pandemic situation with new economic difficulties. The study is limited to Sweden, and Swedish media.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Understanding Quiet Quitting

QQ does not have one clear definition (Atalay & Dağıstan, 2023), however, Campton, Tham and Ting (2023) argues that there are two contradicting viewpoints of what QQ entails. The first viewpoint is that quiet quitters do the bare minimum at work and could fit in with the concept of "acting their wage" (Hamouche, Koritos, & Papastathopoulos, 2023). In this viewpoint, QQ can have detrimental effects on organizational performance and inducing a culture of lacking work engagement (Anand, Doll, & Ray, 2023).

Additionally, morale can be affected, as team members are drawn into lower engagement and declining commitment and productivity (Anand, Doll, & Ray, 2023). The second viewpoint is that QQ is a way for employees to regain control, work-life balance and mental well-being and a rejection of the “hustle culture” (Campton, Tham, & Ting, 2023; Serenko, 2023). Serenko (2023), defines QQ as:

“[...] a mindset in which employees deliberately limit all work activities to those of a formal or informal job description, meet yet not exceed the preestablished expectations, set up boundaries, never volunteer for and ignore (if possible) all additional tasks and do all this in a manner that merely maintains their current employment status and prioritizes their well-being over larger organizational goals.”

There are still questions pertaining to if QQ should be seen as a new phenomenon altogether, or a new term for a phenomenon that has existed over a longer period (Hamouche, Koritos, & Papastathopoulos, 2023; Mahand & Caldwell, 2023). Campton, Tham and Ting (2023) links QQ with the chinese movement of “lying flat”, where young chinese youths during the Covid-19 lock-down began rejecting relentless (over)work. There are also links to concepts such as *work to rule* where employees do the bare minimum in order to pressure employees to raise their salary and get better work conditions (Hamouche, Koritos, & Papastathopoulos, 2023).

## 2.2. Antecedents of Quiet Quitting

Hamouche, Koritos and Papastathopoulos’ (2023) study focuses on the connection between the pandemic’s connection to QQ, stating that COVID-19 and its consequences “have fueled quiet quitting from a macro (i.e., societal) level”. Other causes for QQ are what they call “factors at micro (i.e., organizational, employee) level” such as “hustle culture mentality”, poor management and leadership within organizations, employee dissatisfaction and disengagement, and unrealistic work demands (Hamouche, Koritos, & Papastathopoulos, 2023).

According to Formica and Sfodera (2022), the drivers for QQ is a lack of, “(a) feeling cared about, (b) opportunities to learn and grow, and (c) connection with the organization’s purpose”. They further narrow it down and state that the “sources of dissatisfaction of employees revolve around three fundamental characteristics that are common to every human being: needs, values, and purpose”. Additionally, Lu et al. (2023) found that job burnout influences employees QQ intentions. Important factors for job burnout are work overload, perceived pay-for performance, affective organizational commitment, work conditions, and perceived career development opportunities (Lu et al., 2023). Mahand & Caldwell (2023) identified five reasons for QQ, lack of commitment to career development, the failure to value employees, increasing employee disconnection, importance of employee autonomy, and decline in organizational trust.

To better understand QQ and its underlying causes, Serenko (2023) conducted a content analysis of the comments from Zaid Khan’s viral TikTok post. Of the approximately 4000 comments, 2000 of them were downloaded and analyzed with Miles and Huberman’s (1994, as cited in Serenko, 2023) content analysis techniques. Serenko (2023) found that QQ was not a new behavior, as more than half of the comments admitted to engaging in it, and that some stated that they had been QQ for years. Additionally, although the

phenomenon existed pre-pandemic, many indicated that they started QQ because of the pandemic, mostly after switching to remote work.

## 2.3. Sociology of work

The Swedish sociologist Roland Paulsen has studied the phenomenon of empty labor (EL) in Sweden before the term QQ was coined. Much of Paulsen's research focuses on sociology of work, the meaning and meaninglessness of work. Looking all the way back to ancient Greece, the ideology of work has gone through several changes. From Aristoteles and Plato, perceiving work as a curse, to later ideologies seeing work as a duty, to the current ideology of work where it is perceived as a human right (Paulsen, 2017; van der Laan et al., 2023).

Almost a century ago, Keynes (1930) predicted that by the end of the twentieth century technological advancements would allow some countries to have 15-hour work weeks. In Sweden, the retirement age was lowered from 67 to 65 in 1976, and in 1978 a fifth vacation week was introduced. Since then, productivity has doubled in the country, but instead of further work time reductions, Sweden made the decision to prolong working time, for the first time in its history, by increasing the retirement age (Paulsen, 2017). Arguably, there has not been a lack of technological advancements, and instead of reducing work hours, "[...] technology has been marshaled, if anything, to figure out ways to make us work more. To achieve this, jobs have had to be created that are, effectively, pointless" (Graeber, 2013).

Alvesson (2020) states that a large proportion of the western workforce are frustrated, partly due to the modern-day work environments that contain tasks and structures that lack practical significance. Today there are many "bullshit jobs" – meaningless jobs without any real effect on the world at large (Graeber, 2013; Nørmark & Jensen, 2018). Additionally, organizations are filled with "corporate bullshit talk" – individual's empty claims and misleading communication within the organizational context – done to assimilate into a shared language framework, navigate daily interactions, and enhance their image and sense of self-identity (Spicer, 2020). Paulsen (2015) argues that people who spend time doing non-work related activities during work hours, may do so in an attempt to imbue purpose into seemingly meaningless wage labor, and that such behavior should not be seen as irrational expressions of human life within an efficient system.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

### 3.1. Critical Discourse Analysis

CDA, which forms the basis of our theoretical framework, is a set of theories and methodology for analyzing power relations and focusing on "the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance" (van Dijk, 1993, p. 249), and the use of language as a power resource (Mullet, 2018; Willig, 2014). CDA does not aim to contribute to any particular discipline, instead it is driven by pressing social issues which it aims to understand through discourse (van Dijk, 1993). Within CDA, discourse is a social practice which both constitutes the world, and is constituted by other social



practices, and as such, discourse has a dialectical relationship with other social dimensions (Fairclough, 1992; Fairclough, 2001; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 61). This differentiates CDA from other theories, such as discourse theory, and poststructuralism, where discourse is seen as only constitutive and thereby seeing discourse as the sole source of the social world (Fairclough, 1992; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). CDA focuses on linguistic and textual analysis and tries to reveal discursive practices that maintain the social world and unequal relations of power (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 63). However, it is also a multidisciplinary activity, combining linguistic analysis together with other frameworks, such as sociology and politics (Fairclough, 1992).

CDA has no unitary theory or set of methods (Mullet, 2018; van Dijk, 1993). Nevertheless, Fairclough's three-dimensional model for CDA will form the basis for this paper. The three dimensions are: text, discursive practice, and social practice (Figure 1). The text dimension examines linguistic features of a text, and the discursive practice focuses on how the text is produced and consumed, identifying intertextuality between text and orders of discourse (Fairclough, 1992; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Fairclough (1992) states that "the division of analytical topics between text analysis and analysis of discursive practice (and so between the analytical activities of description and interpretation) is not a sharp one" (pp. 73-74), but formal features are related to the text dimension, and productive and interpretative are related to the discursive dimension. The social practice dimension is then analyzed as CDA ontologically differentiates between discourse and non-discursive practices, which are encompassed by the social practice. Fairclough (1992) states that: "Discourse as an ideological practice constitutes, naturalizes, sustains and changes significations of the world from diverse positions in power relations", and CDA aims to question the hegemony of certain ideologies in discursive and social practices. There is a dimension of contradictions and negotiation of meaning between competing elements, and hegemony is therefore not seen as stable (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002), which gives discourse its critical power potential.

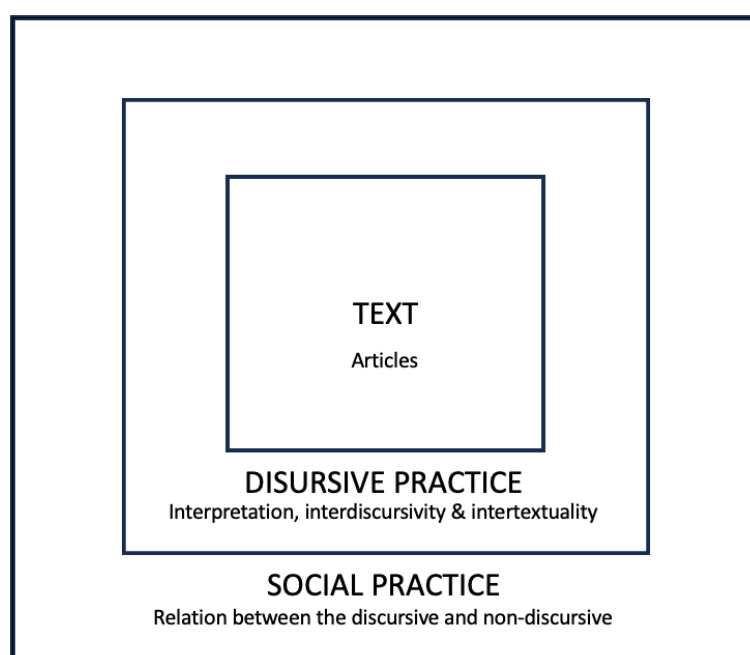


Figure 1: Adaptation of Fairclough's three-dimensional framework (Fairclough, 1992)

## 3.2. Empty Labor

A theory that is often mentioned in Swedish articles on QQ is Roland Paulsen's theory on EL. Paulsen's (2011) studies are based on interviews with employees from different industries, who spend more than half of their work hours on non-work related activities. His suggested typology for such behavior is EL and his model has four distinct variants, depending on work obligation and potential outputs (Paulsen, 2015). The purpose of his 2015 article was to add to the debate on organizational misbehavior, as he argues that:

"[...] both uncritical and critical organization theorists suffer from a rationalistic bias in their assessments of misbehaviors such as 'time appropriation' (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999, 41–44). The general assumption seems to be that 'there is always work if you want it', that the workplace is a rational machine and that efficiency losses are due to individual employees lacking in work commitment and communication. Yet, sometimes, we see the opposite" (Paulsen, 2015).

The four types of EL are *enduring*, *slacking*, *coping*, and *soldiering*, in relation to work obligations and potential output (Paulsen, 2015).

	Low potential output	High potential output
Strong work obligations	Enduring	Coping
Weak work obligations	Slacking	Soldiering

Figure 2: Paulsen's model for empty labor framework (Paulsen, 2014; Paulsen, 2015)

### 3.2.1. Slacking

Paulsen (2014) describes slacking as the "happy marriage between weak work obligations and low potential output" (p. 62). In this form of EL, management, colleagues, or clients do not expect more of you than what you are already doing. If the worker would want more work, the individual must ask for more tasks or expand their area of responsibility. However, the difference from the slacking individual and the latter explained *enduring*, is that a slacking individual enjoys the lack of obligations and has no ambition to change it (Paulsen 2015). This form of EL can be a part of the organizational culture, e.g., employees taking turns of being the DJ for the music in everyone's headphones, sending web links, internal jokes, discussing what to eat at lunch over Messenger, or surfing the web (Paulsen, 2015). Even though this form of EL is very open and not in conflict with work obligations and output, it is still important to act as you are working and not reveal the behavior, even if the manager is part of the slacking corporate culture (Paulsen, 2014; Paulsen, 2015).

### 3.2.2. Enduring

Enduring is a form of EL that is involuntary. The worker would like to do more, or have no problem doing more, however the nature of the job does not allow it. Wage labor itself can be a contributor to an individual's self-esteem, it can be seen as a part of their identity, and the individual might see the activities as meaningful (cf. Bauman, 2004, as cited in Paulsen, 2015; Beder, 2001, as cited in Paulsen, 2015). For these individuals, EL is not always seen as beneficial, as they might get bored from the lack of work tasks. Enduring is a way for the individual to entertain themselves while waiting for the next task (Paulsen, 2014). E.g., a store assistant who says that the down time can be a relief to some extent, but after a while it gets too boring. The colleagues are able to 'invent work' when there is not much to do, but the employee lacks that ability since he perceives it to be utterly meaningless (Paulsen, 2015). This connects to the discussion in 2.2.1 *Sociology of work*, that employees can become frustrated in the contemporary work environment when work activities lack practical significance (Alvesson, 2020), and that there are such employments that are arguably 'bullshit jobs' (Graeber, 2013; Nørmark & Jensen, 2018). Furthermore, it has been argued that these meaningless jobs can cause mental distress (Graeber, 2018, as cited by Gerold, Hoffman, & Aigner, 2023), which is further supported by psychological research drawing from self-determination theory (Gerold, Hoffman, & Aigner, 2023).

### 3.2.3. Coping

What differs coping from the rest of the forms of EL is that the coping individual engages in EL to remain at a productive maximum (Paulsen, 2014). Individuals who have a history of burnouts, and long periods of sick leave can engage in coping behaviors as a means to take care of their mental health (Paulsen, 2015). An important factor is the degree of meaningfulness the individual perceives each task to have. The coping individuals prioritize the more important tasks, and those perceived as excessive are ignored in favor of well-being. Less meaningful tasks can for instance be bureaucratic work, excessive cleaning, and certain meetings (Paulsen 2015). Even if the individual loves their job, and sees work as a productive activity, the fact remains that work requires energy and resources (Hoffman & Paulsen, 2020).

### 3.2.4. Soldering

Soldiering is when an employee fills their day with as much EL as they can, in contrast to coping where individuals rarely engage in EL more than an hour a day (Paulsen, 2015). The soldiering employee "has no ethical or identity-grounded relationship to the work activity." (Paulsen, 2014, p. 69). Their purpose is to keep their job but still put in the minimal effort possible. What all soldiering interviewees agreed upon was the importance of the behavior never causing patients/clients any harm, and that their work should not be transferred onto their colleagues and put them in a situation where their workload is affected (Paulsen 2015). Another soldiering behavior can be when there are information asymmetries, e.g. when an individual is hired on an ad hoc basis for a job or project and the client/employer is unaware of the actual time the job requires (Paulsen, 2015). The soldiering employee can use the information asymmetry to their advantage and take extended time to complete the job.

### 3.3. Counterproductive Work Behavior

To understand whether the QQ phenomenon is looked upon in the media as having the intent to actively harm the organization, the theory of counterproductive work behavior (CWB) will be used. CWB are behaviors done on purpose to harm the organization and/or its stakeholders (Spector & Fox, 2005). The research on CWB is broad, and has been discussed under different terms, but much of its work has its roots in the study of human aggression (Spector et al., 2006). CWB involves several concepts such as organizational aggression (Neuman & Baron, 1998, as cited in Spector et al., 2006; Fox & Spector, 1999, as cited in Spector et al., 2006), antisocial behavior (Giacalone & Greenberg, 1997, as cited in Spector et al., 2006), delinquency (Hogan & Hogan, 1989, as cited in Spector et al., 2006), deviance (Hollinger, 1986, as cited in Spector et al., 2006; Robinson & Bennett, 1995, as cited in Spector et al., 2006), retaliation (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997, as cited in Spector et al., 2006), revenge (Bies, Tripp, & Kramer, 1997, as cited in Spector et al., 2006), and mobbing/bullying (Knorz & Zapf, 1996, as cited in Spector et al., 2006). There are of course differences between the concepts, however they mostly share the same antecedents, mediating processes, and outcome variables, as well as rely on the same underlying causal theories (Spector & Fox, 2005). Due to this broad research, several dimensional models of CWB exist, but for the purpose of this paper the model utilized is the *Five Dimensions of CWB* developed by Spector et al. (2006). The Five Dimensions are *abuse against others*, *production deviance*, *sabotage*, *theft*, and *withdrawal*.

#### 3.3.1. Abuse against others

Abuse is considered as harmful behaviors directed towards coworkers and others. It can be displayed either physically or psychologically in several ways, e.g., negative comments, threats, and undermining a person's ability to work effectively (Spector et al., 2006). Stressors and unpleasant situations at work can lead to employees displaying aggressive behaviors and abuse, and are related to immediate stressors and emotions (Spector et al., 2006). A further cause is social norms and organizational culture that can support or inhibit abusive behaviors in the workplace (Keashly & Harvey, 2005).

#### 3.3.2. Production deviance

Production deviance can be described as employees purposely performing job tasks less effectively than supposed to, or failing to perform the job altogether (Spector et al., 2006). This dimension is based on Hollinger's (1986) production deviance concept, however withdrawal is in this framework separated into its own category. It is seen as a passive CWB behavior, it is not as visible as sabotage, and is difficult to prove (Spector et al., 2006).

#### 3.3.3. Sabotage

Sabotage is theoretically linked to production deviance and may have some of the same causes. Sabotage is considered to be a more active behavior than production deviance, as it involves defacing or destroying physical property of the employer. The target of sabotage is an inanimate object, and therefore it causes no personal harm. Sabotage has

been linked to responses to anger and hostile feelings, and as a way to draw attention to problems, affect organizational change, peer acceptance, or gain a competitive advantage (Spector et al., 2006).

#### 3.3.4. Theft

Employee theft is a major concern for businesses, with major costs and often the cause for bankruptcy (Greenberg, 1990; Nguyen & Truong, 2021). Theft has been linked to many different employee behaviors, and is often the result of experienced workplace injustice and perceived unfair treatment of managers (Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001).

#### 3.3.5. Withdrawal

Withdrawal is exhibited as behaviors that attempt to restrict work time to less than what is required by the organization. These are behaviors such as, being late or leaving early, and taking extra-long breaks. These behaviors differ from the other dimensions, as it is not necessarily a behavior one does to cause direct harm, but an attempt to avoid or escape the situations that creates negative emotions for the individual, e.g stressors, injustice, and dissatisfaction (Spector et al., 2006).

### 3.4. Theory discussion

A common criticism of CDA, and social constructivist research, is that since it views the world as constituted by several different realities, which reality should be regarded as truer? However, Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) argues that what should be determined as true should not be decided by a scientific elite, but rather through a public, democratic debate. Our choice of theory determines what we are able to capture and analyze in the discourse. But we argue that using theories such as EL and CWB to support a CDA based research can help to determine what constitutes the QQ behaviors in practice and how it is perceived and depicted. Additionally, throughout the processes, EL has been referred to in many of the articles we encountered while gathering material, and it is therefore seen as appropriate to incorporate it in the theoretical framework.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Research approach

The research will follow a critical humanist approach, and as such take on a subjectivist and radical change approach (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). As CDA focuses on power relations, and governing political and ideological structures, the research will naturally be political in nature (Fairclough, 1992). By performing a CDA, the ontology of the report will take a social constructionist stance (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000), as the goal is to understand how language in particular affects the way we understand the world, and QQ as a phenomenon.

## 4.2. Research method

As CDA is within the social constructivist paradigm and focuses on how language contributes to maintain and legitimize social inequalities, the study will take a qualitative approach (Mullet, 2018; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). We aim to investigate how QQ behaviors have been characterized in discourse, what ideas and values are produced and maintained. CDA takes on a transdisciplinary method (Mullet, 2018), and this study draws theory from management, sociology, and psychology. The focus is to study how discourse and language can influence social practices, and how these are (re)produced and maintained. CDA views discourse and language as a tool in the sense- and meaning-making of the world. However, unlike discourse theory, CDA differentiate between the discursive and non-discursive, and there is a dialectical relationship between these where they both influence and are influenced by each other (Fairclough, 1992; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Throughout the course of the study an iterative process has been utilized, where theory and findings have been developed in tandem as the research has been ongoing. As new concepts and theories emerged, these have influenced each other and the research has thereby taken an abductive approach (Mullet, 2018; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019), as it moves between data and theory to explain the world.

## 4.3. Research design

A mono method qualitative study design has been utilized, with the use of secondary data gathered through archival and documentary studies (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019), with emphasis on comprehending the phenomenon through textual analysis and its socially constructed meanings. The decision to utilize secondary data stems from the desire to conduct a longitudinal examination of the evolution of managerial discourse. Opting for an archival and documentary study offers the advantage of unobtrusiveness, particularly considering the potential sensitivity of the topic, where obtaining reliable data through interviews might pose challenges (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). Given the research's focus on developmental changes over time, interviews and surveys are deemed inadequate for ensuring data reliability, as they rely on memory, which is susceptible to distortion.

In line with CDA, the objective is to investigate the intricate relationship between discursive and non-discursive social and cultural practices (Fairclough, 1992; Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004) through an exploratory strategy (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019).

## 4.4. Data collection

The data in a discourse analysis consists of written accounts, to investigate how the use of language shapes and upholds the social world (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000). Therefore, the data consists of articles from Chef related to QQ and similar phenomena and topics over time. The articles from 2010-2022 were gathered through database searches and at Kungliga Biblioteket in Stockholm that has a collection of press

publications in Sweden. As the magazines from 2023 had not all been published or archived at the time of writing, articles from 2023, and additional articles from 2022, were gathered through Chef's website.

To gather a robust dataset for analysis, we employed a systematic approach spanning over a little more than the past decade, encompassing magazines published between 2010-2023. Our research focused on identifying articles that discussed the concept of QQ, exploring its related terms and examining its connection to other subjects prevalent at the time. We sought articles that covered not only QQ specifically but also those indirectly associated with the topic, including themes such as motivation, employee engagement, stress, work-life balance, and mental health. Each magazine, 11 issues per year, was systematically read through. For every article deemed to have some degree of relevance to the topic the title and page numbers were noted to allow for the meticulous scanning and saving process that was later performed. The magazines were divided between us, with each reading every other year, to account for differing individual evaluations of article relevance. By doing every other year, the biases are systematically dispersed over the studied period, so as not to have one bias over an extended period alone. In tandem with the scanning process, a second evaluation of the article's relevance was performed with both authors present. These articles were digitally archived for subsequent analysis. The broad criteria for inclusion aimed to capture a wide spectrum of information, allowing for a more holistic examination and selection of key articles.

With the literature review as a base, topics were identified that acted as a tool for the initial data collection of articles. Found to be connected were the following topics:

- |   |                                   |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| ▪ Quiet quitting                            | ▪ Employee dissatisfaction        |
| ▪ Corporate culture                         | ▪ Individual growth               |
| ▪ Work-life balance                         | ▪ Empty labor                     |
| ▪ Perception of work (e.g., hustle culture) | ▪ Reduction of work hours         |
| ▪ Management & leadership                   | ▪ Daily work interactions         |
| ▪ Care/empathy of the individual            | ▪ Time spent at work              |
| ▪ Remote work                               | ▪ Work commitment                 |
| ▪ Technological advancements                | ▪ Employee's freedom/control      |
| ▪ Corporate bullshit talk                   | ▪ COVID-19                        |
| ▪ Organizational performance                | ▪ Work demands                    |
| ▪ Employee engagement                       | ▪ Purpose                         |
| ▪ Mental health                             | ▪ Meaning/meaninglessness of work |
| ▪ Organizational misbehavior                | ▪ Productivity                    |

After gathering articles, 470 were found to be of interest. These were then narrowed in steps, first reduced to 63 that were closely related to the topic, and lastly down to 13 articles that captured the essence of themes seen in the previous step, and directly linked to QQ.

## 4.5. Data analysis

The data was analyzed based on the theoretical framework presented in part 3. As CDA is the foundational method of the study, Fairclough's three dimensions have been imperative for the analysis. In accordance, questions were formulated relating to each dimension that guided the analysis, and helped to identify themes, values, and power dynamics in the data.

- 1) Text – What is being said in the text when QQ is talked about?
- 2) Discursive practice – How can the text be interpreted and connected to already existing discourse? What ideas are being used to describe QQ? What values are being used in relation to QQ?
- 3) Social practice – How do the texts link to social practice? Are they upholding the current social practices or are they evoking social change?

As the main approach is of a social constructionist nature, to avoid influencing each other's analysis of the data, a preliminary individual read through an initial analysis was performed prior to the data being analyzed together. As the articles are in Swedish, the analysis was conducted on the Swedish versions, and was later translated into English for the purpose of presenting results. In the first individual read through, individual coding was performed on each article, which was compared when the findings were compiled. In the translation process, the use of AI, namely chat GPT, was used as a tool to help with correctness and grammatical syntax.

## 4.6. Research quality

### 4.6.1. Rigor

There is a lack of discussion regarding the qualitative rigor within CDA, but two main criteria have been agreed upon in most approaches, namely completeness (that new data does not reveal any new finding), and accessibility (the material is readable by the social group under investigation; Mullet, 2018; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Completeness has been taken into consideration and fulfilled by the extensive data gathering performed, where all magazines from 2010 until today were read through and 470 articles were deemed as being of interest. This ensures that the most relevant articles were gathered and included. As the material used was secondary data, the authors are not contacted and therefore are not aware of the study. This can be seen as problematic for the accessibility; however, the thesis will be published through SSE's archives and are accessible to everyone. As CDA and subjectivist approaches reject the notion of neutral and objective research, it is important to be transparent in how the research has been conducted and any subjectivity by the researchers (Mullet, 2018). This has been considered throughout this thesis, with an in-depth methodology and theoretical framework which has been the foundation for how the work has been structured and performed.

### 4.6.2. Reflexivity

The research is situated within a social constructionist epistemology, the results and discourse found is seen as possible representations of the world, and not a reflection of



an objectivist reality (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000). Knowledge is seen as productive and contributing to the understanding, construction, and (re)production of a social reality. Reflexivity has thus been one important aspect of this paradigm (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000). As we have selected what material has been included in the research, and how this has been analyzed, we are central for, and co-producers of, the results. Furthermore, “reflexivity involves considerations about the power relations between researcher and informants” (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000, p. 117). As the empirical material used throughout the study is secondary data, the informants, or producers of said data, were not contacted and thus not aware of the analysis being carried out on their work. Therefore, they do not have the chance to defend, or explain, any interpretations we might have had that do not align with their intentions or meaning.

#### 4.6.3. Ethics

One of the ethical considerations that must be taken into account is the use of AI to guide and improve the body of the thesis. AI, such as chat GPT, has for this project been used as a tool to help with translation from Swedish to English, and to improve the text from a linguistic point. However, as language is the main subject of investigation throughout this text, utilizing an external AI can influence the meaning of what is produced, and influence the outcomes. However, we argue that the limited, and specific, use of AI for the mentioned purposes does not influence our process or conclusions, since the content was produced prior to the use of any AI.

The thesis does not include any proprietary information about people, as all the empirics used are already published in the media landscape, considerations do not have to be given to GDPR to the same extent. However, what must be considered is copyright laws and restrictions. The texts here are generally not presented in their entirety, except for some shorter ones that consist of only a few sentences. We do not take credit for the production of the articles; our only goal has been to critically interpret the underlying structures and usages of language to produce a social reality.

## 5. Empirics

In this section the empirical material, i.e., the texts, will be presented, focusing on the first dimension in Fairclough’s framework. The material is divided into three periods, the time immediately after the financial crisis until 2013, the time before the Covid-19 pandemic, 2017-2020, and the time after the pandemic 2022-2023. Five main themes were discovered in the texts, *focus on performance*, *negative social behavior*, *freedom and autonomy*, *unsubscribing to the hustle culture* and *accepting a new normal, focusing on well-being*.

### 5.1. Post-financial crisis

#### 5.1.1. Focus on performance

During the time after the financial crisis, the articles are focused on employees’ performance. In a letter to the editor, the manager Torgny talks about one of his employees, who has been one of the best performers but is now performing worse. He is

concerned with her declining sales figures, but also how he should manage this without being too personal.

“[...] Most [employees] perform well and meet their targets, but I have a salesperson who has been a real standout. She outshines the others by a mile and has been doing so ever since she started two years ago. But over the last two months something has changed. Her sales have gone down, and she’s more quiet and introverted. [...] I’d like to believe that it’s just a rough patch [that she’s going through], that I can wait it out. But I’m also worried that it won’t improve.” (“Min stjärna,” 2011)

Respondents give several suggestions, which can be separated into two main lines, helping the employee help herself or letting her go, and direct changes in work structures and communication. For the former, answers such as: “My advice is that you invite her to a counselor/coach she can talk to. ‘Waiting out’ her sales motivation might eventually be ‘costlier’ for you than providing her with this opportunity.” (“Min stjärna,” 2011), and “Replace her. It’s like a soccer team; motivation can’t be at its peak all the time.” (“Min stjärna,” 2011), indicates that the expenses of keeping the employee on the team need to be prioritized in determining the way forward. For the latter, answers such as: “After two years at the absolute sales top, something needs to ‘happen,’ otherwise, a drop in motivation is inevitable. My advice is that you quickly and immediately (if you haven’t already) find new areas of responsibility for her. [...] It has to be something meaningful, so it doesn’t become ridiculous.” (“Min stjärna,” 2011), indicate that there might be more to the decrease in performance and motivation, and that there are concrete measures that can be taken to increase the employee’s motivation, and by extension performance.

#### 5.1.2. Negative social behaviors

Here the texts portray how employees take part in negative social behaviors, such as getting revenge, laziness, stealing, or as cheating at work. In a web survey, employees were asked “Have you stolen from your employer?” (“Har du stulit,” 2010), one of the options is “Stolen and stolen, [sic] sometimes I do private errands during work hours” (“Har du stulit,” 2010).

It is explained that employees often are lazy at work as a sort of revenge on managers. There are further explanations for why employees would want to get revenge.

“Seeking revenge on you as a boss is one of the most common reasons why employees slack off at work. [...] Other common causes of work avoidance are ideological reasons or feeling that the work is meaningless.” (“Lathet – en hämnd,” 2013)

The article “Vad tillåter du på jobbet?” (what do you allow at work?) discusses how different managers deal with employees spending time on non-work related activities, such as scrolling on their phone etc. Here managers draw different lines for what is, and what is not okay, however there are a broad range of topics surveyed, ranging from theft and watching porn, to sending private email and answering private phone calls.

“However, most managers draw the line even at milder forms of work misconduct. Eighty-two percent of [the surveyed] managers find it unacceptable for employees to spend time during work hours looking at friends’ vacation photos on Facebook [...]. Similarly, managers firmly reject actions such as charging personal expenses to the hotel bill and having the employer cover them, browsing pornographic websites, or reporting more overtime hours than actually worked.” (André, Löfvenhamn, & Ovmark, 2013)

The articles use words that have negative connotations to explain QQ behaviors. Words such as “stealing”, “revenge”, and “cheating” are used in order to explain employee’s behaviors. Even if other reasons are mentioned from time to time, such as stress or whether the job itself is meaningful or not, the emphasis is put on how the organization and production is affected negatively due to the behavior.

## 5.2. Pre-pandemic – Finding a middle ground

### 5.2.1. Freedom and Autonomy

Here the focus is on how an employee in an asymmetrical power position can use his leverage to slack off, skip meetings, and take large liberties, which are detrimental for coworkers. For the employee, freedom and autonomy is important, and this is the basis for his behavior. If there is any infringement on his autonomy he threatens to leave and work somewhere else.

“A person on my team possesses an extremely niche expertise that is very challenging to find in our industry. [...] My employee is well aware of this and knows that he can easily secure an equally good position with one of our competitors. Unfortunately, this also means that he takes significant liberties that disrupt things for the rest of us. While his work always maintains high quality, it is often delivered late. He skips every other meeting and can have a rather indifferent attitude. When I’ve addressed this with him, he emphasizes the importance of freedom to him and states that without it, he’ll have to move on. I know this is unsustainable, and I’m already hearing some discontent within the team. At the same time, I’m extremely worried that he might resign.” (“Fråga experterna,” 2017)

In another article, working from home is discussed as something that is seen as ‘bad’, or not as good as working from the office.

“There’s still something slightly truant about working from home. It’s considered better to arrive early at the office and put in the hours. That way, everyone can see that you’re working hard, and no one can criticize. You’ve done the right thing. But is it really that certain?” (Elwin, 2019)

But this way of thinking is wrong according to the article. The question should not be where work is performed, rather that it gets done. Allowing employees a certain degree of autonomy can redirect focus from a time centric focus, to a performance centric one.

“There’s a bit of a dodger [smitare] in all of us at times. However, one cannot escape if they understand their responsibility and start self-regulating. Tasks can be completed in various ways, in different locations, and over varying durations. But in today’s increasingly specialized workplaces, each individual must fulfill their role. There’s no one else who can do it. So, it’s actually not about WHERE you do it, but rather HOW and THAT it gets done.” (Elwin 2019)

### 5.2.2. Unsubscribing to the hustle culture

Here the focus is on how employees in different ways detach from work, in order to get a break. As with the following quote, where employees go to an unneeded toilet visit, to get a break.

“Going to the bathroom during work hours to check Facebook (or something else on your phone). You sit on the toilet seat and get a much-needed break. [...] As an office worker, finding natural breaks can be challenging. It’s also not very enjoyable to sit in an empty break room (unless you and your colleagues have scheduled breaks). So, other ways are needed to sneak away for a while.” (“Skenbajsa,” 2019)

Another article discusses the idea of relaxing more at work, and thereby gaining a better work-life balance by minimizing the risks of burnout and easy mistakes caused by exhaustion. The idea is that people who are more relaxed can gain career opportunities and improve their mental well-being.

“Take an extra round to the coffee machine and don’t unnecessarily stress – it’s good for your career. [...] Those who take it a bit easier at work are happier, healthier, and have a greater chance of being promoted. People who constantly work at a high pace rate their mental and physical health lower than those who work at a more relaxed pace, and at the same time, feel less satisfied and secure in their jobs [...]. Excessive work efforts not only lead to decreased well-being but also to deteriorated career outcomes [...]” (“Chilla och bli,” 2019)

### 5.3. Post-pandemic – Accepting a new normal, focusing on well-being

As QQ started to flourish as a concept in the post-pandemic era, we can here start to see it being used in articles. When defining QQ, it is linked to the pandemic, and the work overload many employees experienced due to cut downs. QQ is seen as a natural reaction to the new, more demanding, circumstances. In the following quotes, the Swedish terms for QQ, *smygsluta* and *tyst nedtrappning*, will be translated as sneaky quitting and quiet de-escalation.

“Sneaky quitting, or what is known in English as ‘quiet [sic] quitting’, is the phenomenon where employees only do the bare minimum, nothing more. It can be seen as a result of the pandemic rather than individuals slacking off [maskar]. Many have been laid off, and those remaining have more work to handle, leading to feelings of exhaustion and a loss of both motivation and energy. Sneaky quitting becomes a reaction to this situation. The person in question only does what is necessary, at the bare minimum level, without doing anything extra.” (“Smygsluta,” 2022)

Another article states “The new trend, which can be translated as ‘quiet de-escalation’ or ‘sneaky quitting,’ involves staying at the workplace – but not really.” (Kullberg, 2022). QQ is described as a way that employees mentally detach from work, only being there “in body”.

“In quiet de-escalation, one avoids mentally engaging with their job and only performs the absolute minimum of tasks required by the employer, distances themselves from a career-focused corporate culture, and never works overtime or in any way stands out beyond the ordinary.” (Kullberg, 2022)

Focus has shifted from employee performance and commitment, to viewing QQ as a way for workers to ‘take back’ some of their time. The pandemic caused employees to push their efforts to the limits when the economy slowed down, and many were forced to leave their workplaces. QQ is seen as something “healthy” and a reaction from employees who want to improve their work-life balance.

“Despite its negative, passive-aggressive tone, HR experts argue that quiet de-escalation can be a healthy response among stressed or nearly burnt-out employees who, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, have realized what is truly important in life.” (Kullberg, 2022; Kullberg, 2023; Hadjipetri Glantz, 2023)

QQ is seen as a counterreaction to the increasing work pressures in today's business landscape. "According to such an interpretation, quiet de-escalation is rather a much-needed call for a more reasonable existence and better balance." (Kullberg, 2022; Kullberg, 2023). This viewpoint is taken further: "I would prefer if people called it a rational way of living, instead of quiet de-escalation [...]" (Allen, as cited in Kullberg, 2022; Allen, as cited in Kullberg 2023), where QQ is seen as a more natural way of life.

But there is also proof that managers are involved to a greater extent than their employees with QQ behaviors.

"Did you think that quiet quitters were more inclined to leave their workplace? That's not the case. However, it turns out that managers in Sweden exhibit more behaviors associated with quiet quitting than non-managerial employees." (Hadjipetri Glantz, 2023)

The article also concludes that even employees who are QQ still view themselves as engaged, "Approximately 75 percent of the respondents perceive themselves as engaged even if they show signs of quiet quitting or not." (Hadjipetri Glantz, 2023)

When discussing QQ, Roland Paulsen and his dissertation on EL is often mentioned. Where it is stated that Paulsen has studied the QQ phenomenon in Sweden before the term was coined, and suggests that EL and QQ would be the same phenomenon under different names.

"In fact, Swedish sociologist Roland Paulsen has been able to study the phenomenon on Swedish soil for many years, albeit under different signs. [...] While some slack off [maskar] for purely selfish reasons, feeling that the job or certain tasks don't concern them or are meaningless, others do it to get back at the company or their boss, according to Roland Paulsen. [...] Additionally, some have ideological reasons, such as not wanting to contribute to a societal system they feel exploited by. His studies also show that empty labor – or quiet de-escalation, if you will – can arise against the will of the employee." (Kullberg, 2022)

## 6. Analysis

With the texts as foundation, this section will focus on Fairclough's second and third dimensions, the discursive practice and social practice that was presented in sections 3.1 and 4.5. Three focal points have been identified, corresponding to each of the time periods previously established respectively. These are, *performance and results*, *recognizing the human aspect* and *quiet quitting to improve well-being*.

### 6.1. Performance and results

#### 6.1.1. Discursive practice

In the themes *focus on performance* and *negative social behaviors*, performance and conformity to organizational norms and rules are established as the most important variables. It links QQ behaviors to CWB behaviors such as theft and production deviance, and soldiering in the EL framework. By portraying QQ behaviors as stealing, cheating, laziness, and revenge, behaviors viewed as not conforming to social norms and rules, employees displaying such behaviors bear the same negative properties. The discourse does not discuss why employees would involve themselves in such behaviors, completely

excluding any individual personal explanations for underlying reasons, such as work-family conflicts, burnout, etc. Through these values, the discourse implies that employees who exhibit QQ behaviors should be monitored, controlled, and punished. This is further supported by the answers in 5.1.1, where managers view decreased performance as the basis for substitution of employees who no longer perform at high levels, and such behaviors should not be permitted.

#### 6.1.2. Social practice

Here, the discourse works to cement the idea of QQ behavior as something negative and unethical that should be monitored and controlled. It reproduces the idea of unquestioning employee loyalty and commitment, where employees are expected to direct full focus on their work tasks and go above and beyond. In 5.1.1 focus on performance, this can be seen in the answers, where focus is on measures to either increase the employee's performance, or substitute her until her performance is better. By depicting employees who do not follow this norm as cheaters, or as stealing, the idea that employees should direct their attention solely towards work, and performance, is upheld. In relation to the social situation after the financial crisis, there were insecurities and fluctuations in the market, which could have furthered employers' need for control and focus on performance. The discourse used helps to further establish the power asymmetry between employers and employees.

### 6.2. Recognizing the human aspect

#### 6.2.1. Discursive practice

In *Freedom and autonomy*, the articles draw on discourses regarding remote work and how autonomy drives motivation and buffers against the pressures of job demands (Sardeshmukh, Sharma, & Golden, 2012). However, autonomy and power asymmetries can be the basis for negative experiences, such as the case with the engineer with a niched skill. Employees who work from home are also portrayed as dodgers, which points toward that such behaviors are still not accepted in the workplace, as this increases opportunity for QQ behaviors. By using words such as dodging, and truant, it gives the impression that such behavior is done with devious intent, and thereby draws from the theory of CWB and relates to the production deviance behavior. In *Unsubscribing to the hustle culture*, the articles discuss behaviors connected to EL, such as fake pooping, when one needs a break, and the benefits of taking an extra trip to the coffee machine. Here, these behaviors are portrayed as natural and needed, however there are still negative connotations to this as it depicts it as dodging. Even if these articles do not give the impression that the behavior is seen as a CWB, calling it dodging indicates that it is viewed as a behavior of withdrawal. The discussion indicates that individuals tended to deprioritize work tasks that they perceived as meaningless (Alvesson, 2020; Graeber, 2013; Nørmark & Jensen, 2018; Paulsen 2015). As for the engineer with a niched skill who delivered high quality work. One can speculate that his behavior may be related to the enduring type of EL (Paulsen, 2015), as he did his duties, yet had time over to reduce his time at the office. The articles who state that being relaxed at work is beneficial for your well-being, can be related to coping EL (Paulsen, 2015).

### 6.2.2. Social practice

Here, the discourse partly broadens the discussion regarding behaviors such as withdrawal, production deviance and soldiering. It still upholds the idea that misaligning with the norms is something that can be seen as negative. The articles draw on the discourses related to remote working and increased autonomy for employees, and opens up the discussion for new ways of working, at least at the time as such forms of work arrangement was much less prevalent pre-pandemic. This discourse opens a discussion with regards to the ideology of work, and a basis for critique to work itself. However, it is not openly discussed as a critical perspective on modern-day work.

## 6.3. Quiet Quitting to improve well-being

### 6.3.1. Discursive practice

In the post-pandemic period, the focus shifted to a more employee centered perspective. Here the articles draw on discourses pertaining to well-being, work-life balance, and employee health to explain QQ. As the term QQ was established on TikTok, and employees themselves spread the concept, it can be seen as a more grassroot movement to achieve a better working life. In the articles, the terms *tyst nedtrappning* and *smygsluta* are used. *Tyst nedtrappning* indicates that the employee involves themselves in quiet de-escalation, rather than outright quitting that the English term suggests. This can be described as withdrawal behaviors through the CWB framework, where employees attempt to reduce stressors and demands. Contrary, *smygsluta*, which translated means sneakingly quitting, can be seen as related to the production deviance behavior in the CWB framework explained in section 3.3.2.

The texts show clear intertextuality, as three contain almost identical explanations of how HR-practitioners view QQ. This interconnectedness indicates that even though the topic is relevant in today's landscape, there is little understanding of it. The limited understanding of QQ is further shown when they relate it to Paulsen's EL, where they suggest that the two phenomena can be regarded as the same. There are contradictions between statements as they in another article states that the QQ behavior should not be regarded as slacking (*maska*) when the interviewees in Paulsen's dissertation were selected based on their slacking, and the word used was *maska*. Further intertextuality can be seen, as the discourse of EL has been seen in previous articles. In the article *Lathet – en hämnd på chefen* from 2013, the emphasis in the EL discussion was revenge behaviors, as seen in 6.1.1. Whilst in 2022 emphasis is on employee well-being, and alternative causes of EL are discussed, where revenge is not central to the discussion.

### 6.3.2. Social practice

Here the discourse has started to shift towards a more critical perspective on work, where QQ is accepted as the new normal. The shifting dynamics after the pandemic has affected several different parts of organizational life, and not the least employee behaviors. The pandemic caused strain for many workers, with company cutdowns and tougher budgets. Even if the discourse here has a somewhat more positive position towards QQ, seeing it as a way for workers to regain some balance and decrease stress, it still upholds the

dominating view of what work should be. How we work, our work weeks, and organizational structure is not questioned. For instance, Paulsens (2017) talks about the effectivization of work, and that in Sweden there has been no real reduction in work hours over the last several decades even though productivity has increased. It also acknowledges that QQ is more prevalent among managers than employees, which can be a contributory factor for this stance.

## 7. Discussion

### 7.1. Research questions revisited

Throughout this thesis, the following questions were at the center:

- How has quiet quitting behaviors been discussed and constructed in Swedish managerial media over time?
- How has the valuation of quiet quitting changed?

The analysis identified an overall movement in how the discourse regarding QQ behavior has been constructed over the past decade, taking on an employee well-being perspective as time passed. Starting in the aftermath of the 2008/2009 financial crisis, the discourse was focused on performance and result. This had the effect of polarizing employees who displayed QQ behaviors, seeing them as problematic and in need of control and steering. Thereafter, in the period immediately before, and at the start of, the Covid-19 pandemic, the discourse moved toward a more humanistic perspective on QQ behaviors, focusing on employee autonomy and unsubscribing to the hustle culture. Nevertheless, here QQ behaviors were still depicted as not following the social norms of work. And lastly, in today's post-pandemic environment the discourse focused on employee well-being and work-life balance. Here QQ behaviors are depicted as a way for employees to take back control over their lives, and not measure their worth based on work performance.

### 7.2. Contribution

Our research contributes to the overall existing literature on QQ, incorporating a more critical perspective on an emerging topic within business life. Much of the existing knowledge concerning QQ has focused on establishing antecedents, often seeing the pandemic as a major cause, but also stating that the phenomenon is not something entirely new (Atalay & Dağistan, 2023; Formica & Sfodera, 2022; Hamouche, Koritos, & Papastathopoulos, 2023). Our study instead focuses on *how* QQ behaviors are talked about, and how this contributes to our understanding of work. It has reinforced the notion that QQ is not a new phenomenon, as it shows that QQ behavior has been discussed previously. However, we show that how we value QQ has changed, from being more employer centric after the 08/09 financial crisis, where the focus was on control and results, to being more employee centric. Today, QQ is seen as a way for employees to gain back some control from work pressures, and a way to leave the hustle culture that has been dominant in the twenty-first century.

Our research also adds to the topic of the meaning of work, as it critically explores how we view individuals' contributions, and how we organize our daily work. In their article



van der Laan et al. (2023) explores how the definition of work has changed over the past century, and that there is a need for a revision of such a definition in today's changing environment. However, this thesis takes a critical perspective to work, where people do not see their jobs as defining for who they are, as is often historically the case (van der Laan et al., 2023).

### 7.3. Implications for practitioners

As has been shown throughout this paper, the notion of what constitutes QQ behaviors, and how these are depicted in managerial media over the past decade, has changed over time. By examining the discourse regarding QQ behaviors, underlying assumptions and values have been shown. This highlights how media's depiction of such behaviors may influence managers' views on employees who display QQ behaviors. By contributing with a critical perspective on QQ, we gain a deeper understanding of how discourse contributes to the way work is organized, and why some values and ideas might change. Seeing how the media talks about the topic gives insight into why QQ has become an important topic, and gives insights into a changing work environment where employees are more at the center. Understanding why employees are displaying QQ behaviors, instead of only seeking to chastise such behaviors, can help managers create a more dynamic, attractive, and sustainable work environment.

Furthermore, a new trending phenomenon was published in *Chef* on November 7, 2023, called "lazy girl job" (Kullberg, 2023), which also rose in popularity on TikTok. Similarly, to QQ, it is not about slacking off at work, but rather a career balancing between work and leisure, to a point where you almost feel lazy (Kullberg 2023). The indications from this are that the topic of QQ, and other similar concepts, are highly relevant, and that the business, and media landscape is fast changing in today's environment, and therefore continuous research must be done to keep up with the ever-evolving climate.

### 7.4. Limitations

As the study follows a social constructivist and interpretivist approach, selection and presentation of material is highly affected by the authors' own interpretation. The selection process was influenced by our understanding of QQ, and therefore the articles that were deemed to be relevant follow this interpretation. As the contemporary concept of QQ is unique for the post-pandemic period, it leaves the possibility of many different interpretations of what the phenomenon pertains to. How to define it in previous periods where QQ was not used is dependent on the reader's own experiences and interpretation of texts. Therefore, it can be seen as a limitation of the transferability of the results, as other individuals might find alternative articles as relevant for the study of the subject.

Further, the decision to only use one magazine as the basis for collection of articles can be argued to limit the generalizability and transferability of the finding to other contexts. The choice to use another magazine or newspaper might produce different results, with other implications than those found in this study. A more extensive, cross-sectional method could have produced other results, as the underlying ideologies of magazines can differ, e.g., *Chef* contra *ETC*.

## 7.5. Future research

We suggest that future research should continue to critically examine the relationship between QQ behaviors and the implications these have for the structure of work. With several different generations in the work environment today (with older generations nearing retirement), differing priorities between these interact and affect each other. Understanding how work will be perceived in the future can help guide business in the development of how to organize and structure work going forward. Additionally, as AI becomes more prevalent today, and possible implications for the nature of work, and meaningful work, we suggest that future research should examine how technological advancement will affect how human work will be perceived and meaningful for employees' lives, psychological health, and well-being.

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