

Underperformance by Design: A Scoping Review and Research Agenda of Intentional Task Underperformance at Work

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Recent workplace trends reveal that workers frequently discuss and engage in deliberate underperformance, underscoring the growing relevance of intentional underperformance at work. Although various disciplines have long studied purposeful reductions in work effort, these investigations have remained largely siloed, hindering conceptual clarity. In this scoping review, we integrate perspectives from management, social and educational psychology, and economics to establish a unified conceptualization of intentional underperformance (i.e., the deliberate suppression of task contributions, such that contributions fall below a relevant benchmark). In doing so, we make five primary contributions to the performance literature. First, we review and consolidate 36 related constructs to develop an umbrella conceptualization that can promote cumulative scientific understanding. Second, based on our review, we present

Acknowledgments: We are sincerely grateful to associate editor Nicky Dries and two high-performing anonymous reviewers for their expert time, incisive questions, and generative comments offered throughout the review process, which improved our contribution considerably. For insightful discussions and generative feedback, we thank Nitya Chawla, Kristie Rogers, Cassie Scharber, Michelle Duffy, Theresa Glomb, John Kammeyer-Mueller, Connie Wanberg, and Betty Zhou. We also thank our wonderful research assistants for their invaluable support: Claire Watsabaugh, Alyssa Myers, Andrew McArdle, Peyton Duncan, Shawn Zhou, Sarah McGaw, and Mia McGraw. Finally, we'd also like to thank colleagues along the way who helped us grow curious, rather than stay frustrated, about intentional underperformance.

Supplemental material for this article is available at https://osf.io/xzbuc/?view_only=8428a2a703634fdd9eb3e4479f685c87

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an organized view of the antecedents and proximal motives of intentional underperformance. Third, we introduce the Intentional Underperformance Framework, a two-by-two that organizes forms of intentional underperformance, and organize the associated outcomes of these different forms. Fourth, we identify cross-disciplinary patterns in operationalizations, summarizing prevailing methods and their implications. Fifth, we outline a research agenda to guide future inquiry into when, why, and how intentional underperformance arises, as well as how organizations can constructively intervene. By integrating disconnected literatures and promoting a shared language, this review provides a foundation for more integrative theoretical and empirical inquiries. Ultimately, we aim to equip scholars and practitioners with a clearer, more comprehensive understanding of intentional underperformance in today's workplace.

Keywords: *intentional underperformance; performance management; talent management; job crafting*

Workplace buzzwords like “quiet quitting” and “weaponized incompetence” have become prominent in cultural discourse, fueling debates about shifts in worker engagement. Indeed, the hashtag “weaponized incompetence” has amassed more than 50 million views on TikTok (Wong, 2022), while “quiet quitting” has emerged as a significant workplace trend (Google Trends, 2025). Despite its rise in practical relevance, these behaviors are not novel and have been studied for decades by scholars across many disciplines. Specifically, scholarship in management, social and educational psychology, and economics has each sought to understand the causes and effects of how, why, and when workers *purposefully* disengage from specific work contributions. Yet, each of these research streams has largely grown in isolation from one another, hindering a cohesive understanding of intentional underperformance and contributing to the proliferation of seemingly novel concepts that may actually represent “old wine in new bottles.” Indeed, in a critical reflection of contemporary trends, Margolis (2022: 1) noted, “Although quiet quitting is not new, the message is now louder, and management should think about why it’s happening.”

These workplace trends surface two key issues: (1) Workers are increasingly reevaluating how they deploy their time and energy at work, often navigating competing goals that force difficult tradeoffs (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023; Neal, Ballard, & Vancouver, 2017), and (2) practitioners and academics alike lack a precise definition and sufficiently comprehensive understanding of *intentional underperformance*. Practically, when managers seek evidence-based insight, they find, at best, incomplete answers and, at worst, fragmented terms and information that can fuel confusion regarding how to manage this in the workplace. Theoretically, construct proliferation across these fields has frustrated the advancement of science, with multiple disciplines expanding their own conceptual and empirical variations, but not sufficiently learning from one another. For example, management scholars have conceptualized intentional social loafing (i.e., a tactic to lower effort while working in groups; Bluhm, 2009; Karau & Williams, 1993). Social and educational psychologists have framed intentional underperformance as self-handicapping—an approach aimed to avoid standing out (e.g., Tice & Baumeister, 1990). Meanwhile, economists have described strategic shirking—a scheme to prioritize promotable tasks at the expense of non-promotable ones (e.g., DeVaro & Gürtler, 2016b).

Although each stream offers valuable insights into individual intentions to purposefully pull back the deployment of performance contributions, we still lack cohesive, interdisciplinary knowledge due to overlapping conceptualizations, duplicated scholarly efforts, and a complex patchwork of perspectives. Such proliferation precludes construct clarity (Suddaby, 2010), and such fragmentation complicates theoretical advancement. This leaves managers ill-equipped with evidence-based understanding of the nuanced challenges posed by intentional underperformance, potentially leading to misguided interventions that fail to resonate with workers' evolving expectations. The rise of new labels, alongside existing scholarship, spotlights the timely need for construct housekeeping via organizing, unifying, and clarifying the disparate strands of related research on intentional underperformance.

To address these needs, we conduct a scoping review of workplace research on intentional underperformance, making five key contributions that join and extend the existing literature and reviews on performance. First, we identify and synthesize 36 related but disconnected constructs to create a unifying conceptualization of intentional underperformance. By mapping constructs and clarifying their similarities and distinctions, we develop an umbrella conceptualization to curb further construct proliferation of terms describing similar behaviors (i.e., the jangle fallacy; Block, 1995; Molloy & Ployhart, 2012). Second, we synthesize the main motives of intentional underperformance and their antecedents, clarifying the conceptual terrain of what leads to intentional underperformance while preserving meaningful distinctions. Third, we introduce the Intentional Underperformance Framework, a two-by-two that organizes intentional underperformance along dimensions of task frequency (episodic vs. repeated) and task scope (single vs. multiple tasks). This gives scholars a way to situate a wide range of intentional performance constructs within a coherent structure. Fourth, we identify patterns of the varied operationalizations of intentional underperformance, synthesizing across measurement method, content, and context. Fifth, we propose a research agenda that moves beyond siloed investigations by highlighting the motive-form intersection as a strategic lens for future work. We argue that future studies should explore how motives and forms co-occur and evolve, providing insight into the dynamic, goal-directed nature of underperformance. In doing so, we identify new theoretical and practical opportunities, including how intentional underperformance can serve as protective strategies and address equity concerns depending on context.

While we do not seek to relegate discipline-specific constructs, we hope our review can catalyze a more cohesive and integrated body of research that bridges disciplinary boundaries and drives meaningful advancements in both theory and practice. Even if scholars retain narrower constructs, situating them within this broader framework can enhance theoretical integration and facilitate more meaningful comparisons across studies. Given the dispersed and multidisciplinary nature of this review, we clarify that our primary audience is researchers focused on individual work performance (vs. depletion, withdrawal, or CWB). As such, in the following sections, we provide a performance-focused conceptualization of intentional underperformance that will inform our review and outline our methodology. We then review and synthesize the motives (and their antecedents) and forms (and their outcomes) of intentional underperformance, summarize themes across operationalizations, and conclude with a discussion of future research directions centered on the motive-form intersection.

Intentional Underperformance Conceptualization

Given our review centers on intentional underperformance, we first clarify its conceptualization, which we define as *the deliberate suppression of task contributions, such that contributions fall below a relevant benchmark*. This conceptualization assumes individuals possess the requisite role-specific knowledge, skills, and volitional control. Our conceptual foundation lies in the theoretical groundwork of individual task performance (e.g., Borman & Motowidlo, 1993; J. P. Campbell & Wiernik, 2015; Motowidlo, Borman, & Schmit, 1997), which captures within-person variation (Dalal, Bhawe, & Fiset, 2014) on a task or group of tasks on one or multiple occasions.

Individual performance scholars have delineated three types: in-role performance (i.e., formally prescribed job duties), extra-role citizenship performance (i.e., discretionary behaviors that help the organization and/or others), and extra-role counterproductive performance (i.e., voluntary behaviors that harm the organization and/or others; Rotundo & Sackett, 2002). Intentional underperformance can span all three performance types, provided it refers to suppression of task-specific performance contributions (vs. job-level withdrawal) that are *intentional* (vs. accidental) deviations from a relevant benchmark. Thus, intentional underperformance can be focused on in-role performance (e.g., slacking on a core task responsibility), extra-role citizenship (e.g., slacking on a task undertaken to help a colleague), or extra-role counterproductive (e.g., slacking on a task undertaken to violate norms) performance.

Our conceptualization also draws on three determinants of individual performance—role-specific knowledge, skill, and choice behavior (J. P. Campbell, McCloy, Oppler, & Sager, 1993). A central feature of intentional underperformance is that individuals possess requisite task knowledge (i.e., the understanding of what the task requires and how to complete it), skill (i.e., the capability to perform the task at or above the relevant benchmark), and choice (i.e., the discretion to suppress their contributions). Thus, to intentionally underperform, one must first be knowledgeable and skilled enough to meet or exceed the expected level of performance and then deliberately choose to fall short of it, distinguishing intentional underperformance from accidental underperformance and supplication (Wang & Highhouse, 2016).

By defining intentional underperformance relative to a “relevant benchmark” salient to the work context, our conceptualization accommodates the diverse evaluative referents commonly used across the performance literature. These benchmarks may include: one’s typical performance (e.g., Barnes & Morgeson, 2007; Beus & Whitman, 2012), one’s full capability (e.g., J. P. Campbell et al., 1993), personal expectations for performance (e.g., Schlenker & Leary, 1980), others’ expectations (e.g., Gibson, Sachau, Doll, & Shumate, 2002), peer performance (e.g., Greenberg, Ashton-James, & Ashkanasy, 2007), a shared group performance norm (e.g., Murphy, Wayne, Liden, & Erdogan, 2003), or a formalized organizational metric or industry standard for quality, quantity, accuracy, and/or timeliness of contributions (e.g., Harkins & Szymanski, 1988; Welbourne, Johnson, & Erez, 1998). Each of these benchmarks represents a distinct evaluative basis and has varying salience based on the context, as well as different social and organizational implications. For example, underperforming relative to an internal personal standard may be more consequential when studying individual self-efficacy, while less consequential when studying others’ perceptions compared to failing to meet an explicit organizational target.

Our conceptualization also centers the performer’s *intent*, an often-overlooked aspect of performance research. To clarify this definitional element, we draw upon Malle and Knobe’s

(1997) five-way model of intentionality, which conceptualizes intentional action as arising from the combination of belief (i.e., one's chosen action will yield the intended result), desire (i.e., what one wants to occur), intention (i.e., what one plans to bring about), skill (i.e., the capability to carry out the intended action), and awareness (i.e., conscious recognition of one's actions and their effects). Underperformance is therefore intentional when it stems from an intention—rooted in belief and desire—and is supported by the requisite skill and awareness to realize that intention. Collectively, these foundational elements define the scope of our review: Studies must involve (1) a task (rather than all job duties), (2) the suppression of contributions the individual is capable of making, and (3) intentionality.

Methodology

Purpose and Type of Review

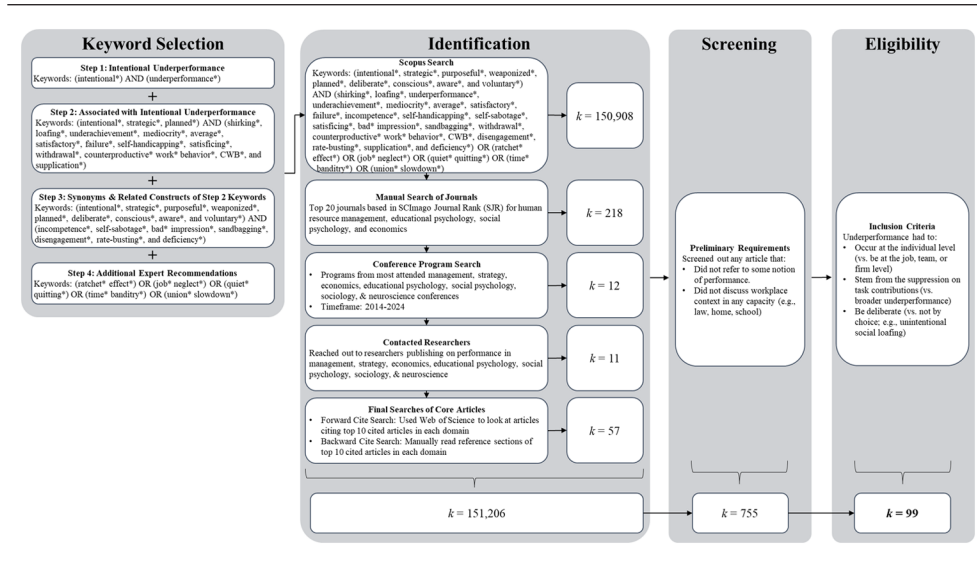
We conducted a scoping review to build a more cohesive view of the literature, establish a unifying conceptualization of intentional underperformance, and synthesize its antecedents, motives, forms, and outcomes. Scoping reviews have recently been utilized in management (e.g., Bolino, Henry, & Whitney, 2024; Watson, Winchester, Luciano, & Humphrey, 2025) as a method well suited for mapping broad, fragmented literatures that lack an integrative framework (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Simsek, Fox, Heavey, & Liu, 2025).

Prior reviews on performance have been formative in building our knowledge of individual performance, which we aim to extend in several important ways. First, while prior reviews have mentioned underperformance, they have predominantly focused on ways individuals and the organization can promote *higher* performance (e.g., Marshall, Aguinis, & Beltran, 2024), whereas we center *lower* performance. Second, reviews considering underperformance typically frame it as *unintentional* or constrained by work-related or motivational challenges (e.g., DeNisi & Murphy, 2017). We depart from this by acknowledging that lower performance can be quite *purposeful*. Third, reviews that have considered performance deviations have principally focused on *positive* departures from norms (i.e. high and star performers; e.g., Call, Nyberg, & Thatcher, 2015; Kehoe, Collings, & Cascio, 2023), while we focus on *negative* departures. Fourth, existing reviews (e.g., Hendricks, Call, & Campbell, 2023) also center on *between-person* differences (i.e., performance for that person compared to others), whereas we focus on *within-person* differences (i.e., task-to-task performance shifts; Dalal et al., 2014). As such, our scoping review offers novel perspectives to the performance literature by building a more comprehensive and cohesive understanding across disciplines. Our review's aims thereby align with Krlev, Hannigan, and Spicer's (2025: 386) "ordering knowledge infrastructure" categorization, seeking to organize a multistage model of the literature.

Concept Demarcation, Search Strategy, and Content Analysis Procedures

We build on the exemplary procedures used in other *Journal of Management* reviews, leveraging Rousseau's (2024) step-by-step guidance across four stages. First, we adapt Oliveira and Lumineau's (2019) concept demarcation and keyword selection process. Second, we leverage these keywords using Harari, Parola, Hartwell, and Riegelman's (2020) five-step search strategy. Third, following Newman, Harrison, Carpenter, and Rariden's (2016) construct mixology

Figure 1
Methodological Process of Keyword Selection, Identification, Screening, and Eligibility of Intentional Underperformance Review



recommendations, we integrate related constructs based on our core characteristics to enrich our conceptualization and to prompt dialogue on this phenomenon that transcends disciplinary labels. Fourth, we employ Elo and Kyngäs's (2008) three-phase content analysis procedures to distill consistent themes and interconnections across the literature. We do this two times: once for the motives of intentional underperformance and their antecedents, and again for the forms of intentional underperformance and their outcomes.

Stage 1: Demarcation of intentional underperformance. Given the “challenges concerning the conceptual fragmentation and field-specific terminology” associated with intentional underperformance and its various forms, we adapted Oliveira and Lumineau's (2019: 233) keyword selection process for ambiguously defined constructs. First, we searched for articles using the term “intentional underperformance.” Second, we identified keywords that were associated with intentional underperformance in the literature (e.g., strategic shirking). Third, we identified synonyms and related constructs of the keywords from step two (e.g., deliberate bad impression). Fourth, we consulted with area experts to identify any additional relevant keywords (e.g., union slowdown). See Figure 1 for full keyword list.

Stage 2: Five-step search strategy. Owing to the breadth of disciplines and journals, as well as the long horizon of publication dates (1960–2025), we followed Harari et al.'s (2020) five-step process to determine the articles to include in our review (see Figure 1). First, we searched the Scopus database, using all possible keyword combinations across all journals and years to ensure a comprehensive search. Second, we manually searched these keywords

within the top 20 journals based on the SCImago Journal Rank (SJR) for human resource management, educational psychology, social psychology, and economics. Third, we searched these keywords within the conference programs of the most attended conferences in management, strategy, economics, educational psychology, social psychology, sociology, and neuroscience across the years 2014–2024. Fourth, we contacted researchers who had published on related topics for unpublished papers. Fifth, we conducted forward and backward searches of the top 10 cited articles in each of our core disciplines (i.e., management, educational psychology, social psychology, and economics). Our five-step search yielded an initial sample of 151,206 potential articles. We reviewed the titles and excluded articles that (1) did not mention performance and/or (2) focused on performance in a non-workplace context (e.g., weaponized incompetence in homelife). These screening steps narrowed the sample to 755 potential articles.

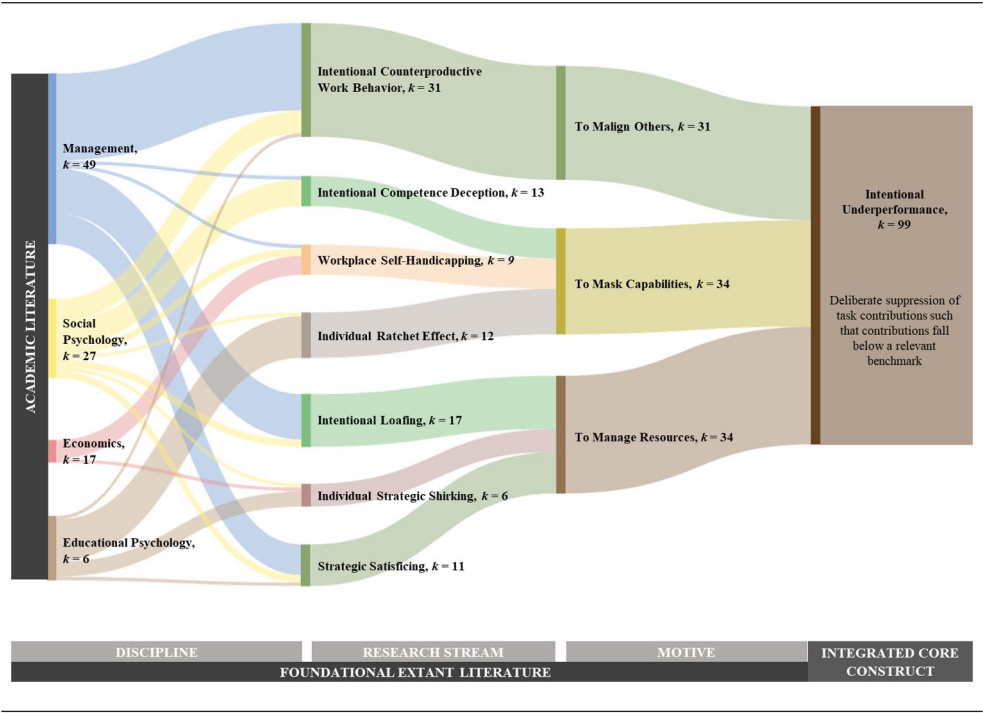
Stage 3: Concept clarity development for article screening and integration. One of the central challenges of our review is the inconsistent use and construct proliferation surrounding intentional underperformance across disciplines. To avoid the construct redundancy fallacy (Hodson, 2021) and distinguish intentional underperformance from orbiting concepts (Colquitt, Sabey, Rodell, & Hill, 2019), we implemented a structured screening approach informed by Newman et al.'s (2016) construct mixology framework. Specifically, we adopted the “acknowledging” approach, which involves identifying compound constructs and recognizing their constituent elements (Newman et al., 2016: 970). This allowed us to build conceptual clarity while preserving theoretical richness across disciplines.

Specifically, to be included, an article's focal construct had to meet all characteristics outlined in our conceptualization of intentional underperformance (see right side of Figure 1). This meant that some articles researching the same construct were included while others were not. For example, Charbonnier, Huguot, Brauer, and Monteil (1998) and Bluhm (2009) study social loafing, but while Bluhm (2009) was included for meeting all characteristics, Charbonnier et al. (1998) was excluded because social loafing was not an intentional behavior in their article. This screening process yielded 99 included articles (see online Supplementary Table 1¹).

We then aggregated the 36 constructs in these 99 included articles. First, we categorized these 36 constructs into seven research streams based on their behavioral manifestation and nomological relation in the literature. These streams include individual ratchet effect, individual strategic shirking, intentional competence deception, intentional counterproductive work behavior, intentional loafing, strategic satisficing, and workplace self-handicapping. For example, cloak of incompetence (e.g., “disguise limitations”; McLuhan, 2020: 122) and competence deception (e.g., “deceive others about their competence”; Yoon, Knight, & Martin, 2019: 210) both relate in deceiving others about one's competence and were thus grouped into intentional competence deception. Each construct's research stream and the definition that informed its classification are listed in online Supplementary Table 2.

Next, we identified three overarching motives that cut across the seven research streams: (1) to mask capabilities, (2) to malign others, and (3) to manage resources. These motives reflect the primary reason a worker is motivated to intentionally underperform. For instance, the research streams of intentional competence deception, workplace self-handicapping, and the ratchet effect align in their broad motive of workers wanting to mask their capabilities.

Figure 2
Sankey Diagram of the Foundational Research Streams and Forms of Intentional Underperformance



Note. Size of colored flows indicate the number of articles within our review scope.

These are explicated further in the following section and listed in online Supplementary Table 2. This multilevel aggregation—from construct to stream to motive—enabled us to integrate a fragmented literature, clarify conceptual boundaries, and detail the diverse manifestations and strategic motives of intentional underperformance. This additional coding aligns with methodological recommendations to explore similarities and differences across forms (Levac, Colquhoun, & O’Brien, 2010; Simsek et al., 2025), in line with goals of a scoping review. Indeed, scoping reviews aim to establish a foundational understanding of a domain by mapping its boundaries, identifying key concepts, exploring interconnections, and spotlighting areas for further research (Levac et al., 2010; Simsek et al., 2025). These flows are summarized in Figure 2.

Stage 4: Article coding and categorizing. With the conceptual domain mapped, we then coded the findings related to antecedents, motives, forms, outcomes, research contexts, and operationalizations (e.g., surveys, archival methods). Our content analysis followed Elo and Kyngäs’s (2008) three-phase approach: preparation, organization, and reporting. We applied this process twice—once for motives and antecedents and once for forms and outcomes—to surface themes and interconnections across the literature (Grbich, 2007; Mayring, 2000).

In the preparation phase, we thoroughly read each article to immerse ourselves in the conceptual domain and ensure we understood the specific terminology and context surrounding each article's findings. During the first organization phase, we focused on antecedents and motives. Using open coding, we extracted segments that explained what led workers to the different motives of intentional underperformance. These initial codes were iteratively grouped into higher-order categories, surfacing patterns of recurring antecedents. This phase resulted in the identification of four overarching antecedents: stable individual differences, variable individual states, variation in task characteristics, and disparity in social experiences.

In the second organization phase, we examined forms of intentional underperformance and their associated outcomes. Using open coding, we categorized behavioral manifestations of underperformance (e.g., "one-off underperformance" or "generalized underperformance"). Through iterative coding, we grouped the different forms of intentional underperformance along two dimensions: task frequency and task scope. We subsequently grouped similar outcomes by their form (e.g., outcomes related to psychological well-being or outcomes related to social perceptions). Both phases involved repeated team meetings to iteratively refine themes and ensure consistent interpretation. In line with recommendations for scoping reviews (Levac et al., 2010; Simsek et al., 2025), we focused on mapping conceptual boundaries, identifying key concepts, and revealing theoretical linkages across research domains.

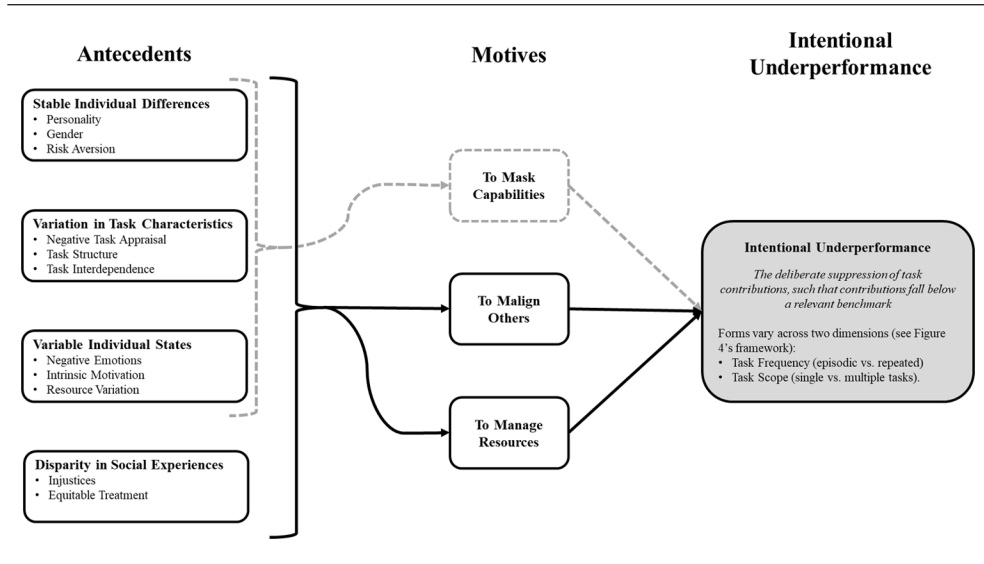
Finally, in the reporting phase we present the synthesized results of both coding rounds: first, the motives and their antecedents; second, the forms and their outcomes. While we note that any motive can lead to any form, our synthesis offers a foundation for understanding which patterns dominate in existing research. We conclude by identifying gaps and future research opportunities. Of note, not every use of the constructs in the seven research streams qualifies as intentional underperformance. However, when a construct meets all characteristics of intentional underperformance, we refer to it as such in the following sections. Next, we explore the motives of intentional underperformance and their antecedents before detailing the forms of intentional underperformance and their outcomes.

Motives of Intentional Underperformance and Their Antecedents

We begin by examining studies of the antecedents and motives that drive intentional underperformance (Figure 3). As Figure 2 depicts and our methodology section detailed, we conducted a content analysis integrating seven research streams across disciplines (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). This theoretical synthesis enables a more comprehensive understanding of intentional underperformance. Specifically, it reduces construct redundancy (Hodson, 2021) by clearly delineating intentional underperformance from constructs outside its content domain. It also enables greater cumulative insights and explanatory power—information lost when treating constructs in isolation (Newman et al., 2016). Third, it enables future research across disciplines.

Across 99 articles, our content analysis surfaced seven distinct research streams that fall within the domain of intentional underperformance, from which our review identified three overarching motives. We do not claim that these motives subsume all possible reasons why workers intentionally underperform, but based on our content analysis, they appropriately reflect all articles included and unify fragmented insights while honoring the diversity within each research stream and motive. Our content analysis revealed three distinct motives as to

Figure 3
Model of the Motives of Intentional Underperformance and Their Antecedents



why workers intentionally underperform: (1) to mask capabilities, (2) to malign others, and (3) to manage resources. Synthesizing these motives' similarities and differences helps connect and organize interconnected antecedents and potential future directions.

To further delineate these motives, we inductively analyzed their associated antecedents. Iterative coding revealed four overarching antecedent categories that span the literature: (1) stable individual differences, (2) variation in task characteristics, (3) variable individual states, and (4) disparity in social experiences. Figure 3 depicts how these categories map to each motive. Later, we distinguish each motive, describe the research streams and constructs it encompasses, and link corresponding antecedents to each motive. This enables within-motive depth and cross-motive comparison, laying the groundwork for more integrated future research.

To Mask Capabilities

The motive to mask capabilities refers to the motive to misrepresent or conceal one's true task-related competence as a strategic form of impression management aimed to protect oneself or shape how others perceive one's capabilities. This subsumes three research streams: intentional competence deception ($k=13$), workplace self-handicapping ($k=9$), and individual ratchet effect ($k=12$), which have most frequently been studied through the theoretical lens of impression management theory (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) and self-handicapping theory (Jones & Berglas, 1978). First, intentional competence deception represents a type of impression management in which workers intentionally attempt to convey bad impressions. It manifests as several narrower constructs: cloak of incompetence, competence deception, counterproductive knowledge behavior, intentionally looking bad, playing dumb, sandbagging, self-denigrating

behavior, and self-derogation behavior. Collectively, these represent impression management strategies where individuals intentionally mask, downplay, or misrepresent their true competency or knowledge. The overarching pattern is one of self-limiting or self-effacing behaviors, often used to avoid responsibility, reduce expectations, or manipulate social or organizational dynamics. This often manifests as workers pretending to be unintelligent (e.g., Yoon et al., 2019) or feigning presentation of inability (e.g., Petersen, 2014). Second, workplace self-handicapping “involves placing barriers in the way of one’s own success as a strategic ploy to manipulate the attributional ambiguity of an evaluation” (Ferrari & Tice, 2000: 74). This manifests as workers sabotaging their chances of success by procrastinating (e.g., Ferrari & Tice, 2000) and creating other obstacles for themselves (e.g., Tice & Baumeister, 1990). Third, the ratchet effect, also known as target ratcheting in the economics literature and as strategic failure in the social psychology literature, involves a worker limiting output to conceal their full capability, thereby avoiding heightened expectations or increased future demands. Examples of these include reducing sales in a year’s final quarter (e.g., Bouwens & Kroos, 2011) and suppressing contributions when first starting tasks or projects (e.g., Gallier & Sturm, 2021).

Stable individual differences. Stable traits and demographic characteristics play a critical role in shaping an individual’s propensity to mask capabilities via intentional underperformance. Among personality traits, conscientiousness negatively predicts such behavior, while neuroticism tends to be positively associated with it (Yoon et al., 2019). These traits influence how much individuals value performance (i.e., conscientiousness entailing dutifulness) and how they respond to perceived threats or failures (i.e., neuroticism involving worry or anticipating negative outcomes even in relatively safe situations). Our review also surfaced gender as a meaningful factor. Brown and Kimble (2009) found that men were more likely to intentionally underperform, especially when observed by male experimenters, suggesting impression management motives are conditioned by social dynamics. Similarly, Gove, Hughes, and Geerken (1980) reported that men (compared to women) were more likely to intentionally disguise competence, citing the avoidance of commitment. Risk aversion further contributes to this motive, with risk-averse individuals more inclined to intentionally appear less capable to avoid the reputational risk of possible failure (El Hazzouri, Carvalho, & Main, 2021) and to avoid drawing attention to themselves (Baumgardner & Brownlee, 1987).

Variable individual states. Fluctuating emotional and psychological states also shape the motive to mask capabilities, often by triggering self-protective strategies under conditions of perceived vulnerability. Notably, negative affective states such as anxiety, depression, and performance concerns have been repeatedly linked to intentional underperformance, particularly when individuals anticipate negative evaluation (Brown & Kimble, 2009). Jealousy also explains why individuals may intentionally underperform, particularly in contexts where their peers’ success elicits envy or competitiveness (Smith, Hardy, & Arkin, 2009). Even perceived deficiencies in personal capabilities have been shown to prompt reduced effort and lower exertion (Hwang, Kim, & Lim, 2023). However, self-regulatory mechanisms can mitigate these tendencies. For example, Petersen (2014) found self-compassion can buffer against the impulse to sabotage one’s own performance. These findings suggest that emotional states influence whether individuals feel compelled to hide their capabilities.

Variation in task characteristics. The nature of the task itself plays a pivotal role in motivating the masking of capabilities, particularly when the task is perceived as aversive or socially risky. Tasks viewed as boring, dissatisfying, excessively challenging, or overly evaluative are more often associated with intentional underperformance (Becker & Martin, 1995; Kowalski & Leary, 1990; Silvera, 2000). Experimental evidence has shown individuals are more likely to intentionally underperform on unenjoyable or evaluative tasks than on intrinsically motivating ones (Ferrari & Tice, 2000). Daunting or effortful tasks can provoke disengagement or strategic self-sabotage as ways to avoid strain or failure (Kowalski & Leary, 1990). Further, perceptions of low reward reduce the motivation to exert full effort, particularly when individuals perceive little benefit to performing well (Becker & Martin, 1995; Shearer, 2022; Weitzman, 1980). Task visibility further influences this motive, as highly identifiable performance has been shown to increase the likelihood of underperformance intended to shape others' views of their competence (Kolditz & Arkin, 1982; Tice & Baumeister, 1990). Task permanence also plays a role, such that more temporary tasks, like those assigned during job rotations, elicit less intentional underperformance due to their short-term nature (Ickes & Samuelson, 1987; Wei, 2020). Thus, both the features of a task and its social framing can amplify this motive by altering the costs and benefits of revealing one's true competence.

In sum, the motive to mask capabilities represents a strategic form of impression management whereby workers intentionally misrepresent or conceal their true task-related competence. This phenomenon encompasses both intentional competence deception and workplace self-handicapping behaviors that create plausible deniability for potential failure. It is shaped by three core antecedents: stable individual differences, variable individual states, and variation in task characteristics. Collectively, these findings suggest this motive operates as a complex, multidetermined phenomenon that serves protective functions for workers navigating evaluative workplace contexts. This enhances our theoretical view of impression management by revealing how individuals manage perceptions in both positive *and* negative directions, underscoring the value of evaluation approaches that account for intentional capability masking.

To Malign Others

The motive to malign others involves engaging in obstructive behavior intended to impair others' success, undermine team or organizational functioning, and/or inflict harm. This includes the research stream of intentional counterproductive work behavior (CWB; $k=31$), defined as "employees' behavior conducted to harm an organization and its members (Spector & Fox, 2002)" (Ahmed & Zhang, 2024: 4801), and this also includes a number of narrower constructs: cyberslacking, deliberate failure of communication, deliberate mind-wandering, intentional unsafe behavior, knowledge hiding behavior, knowledge sabotage, slowdown, time banditry, and workplace deviance. Scholars have most frequently examined these behaviors through the lens of equity theory (Adams, 1963), social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), and the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Common examples are doing non-work tasks instead of work tasks (e.g., Martin, Brock, Buckley, & Ketchen, 2010), conducting tasks in an unsafe manner (e.g., Yao, Shi, Wang, Ji, Liu, & Li, 2024), deliberately miscommunicating with colleagues (e.g., Azuelos-Atias, 2015), and taking shortcuts (e.g., Hochstein, Lilly, & Stanley, 2017).

Stable individual differences. Enduring individual characteristics shape the extent to which workers intentionally underperform as a means to malign others. Big Five traits agreeableness and conscientiousness are negatively related to motives to malign others, with more cooperative and disciplined individuals less inclined to sabotage others (O'Neill, Lewis, & Carswell, 2011). Whereas neuroticism is positively related to such behaviors, reflecting a heightened susceptibility to emotional instability and reactive tendencies (O'Neill et al., 2011). Studies have demonstrated that the Dark Triad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) consistently and positively predict harmful workplace behaviors including sabotage and obstruction (Hannesdóttir & Könecke, 2023; Islam, Wahab, Malik, & Nawab, 2021; Serenko & Choo, 2019; Travis & Craig, 2023). Additionally, workers higher in risk aversion may use intentional underperformance as a preemptive strategy to navigate job insecurity, avoiding actions that might expose them to scrutiny or failure (Shoss, Su, Schlotzhauer, & Carusone, 2023).

Variable individual states. Fluctuating emotional and motivational states also facilitate intentional underperformance aimed at maligning others. Apathy and emotional distress, particularly anxiety, depression, and negative performance-related affect, have been positively associated with counterproductive work behavior (Rana, Slade, Kitching, & Dwivedi, 2019; Spector & Fox, 2002). Intrinsic motivations can also drive individuals to underperform in ways they view as well-deserved retaliation or justifiable defiance against others. For instance, Hochstein et al. (2017) demonstrated that intrinsic motivation to carry out harmful behaviors against the organization increases the likelihood of follow-through. Similarly, Costantini, Ceschi, and Sartori (2021) found that internally driven intentions to malign their organization significantly predicted actual pullback in performance contributions.

Variation in task characteristics. Certain task features can provoke suppression of performance designed to impede others or malign organizational outcomes. The absence of meaningful extrinsic rewards such as pay also motivate individuals to intentionally engage in performance sabotage or neglect (Hammett, Seidman, & London, 1957). Additionally, high task autonomy may ironically enable destructive behavior, with self-managed workers exploiting their discretion to not only protect their own autonomy but to actively undermine or restrict others' autonomy, thereby safeguarding their control, status, or influence within the group and preventing others from attaining similar levels of autonomy (Costantini et al., 2021; O'Neill, Hambley, & Chatellier, 2014; Shirahada & Zhang, 2022). Likewise, competitive task environments can foster a hostile climate where workers underperform to gain an advantage over others, particularly in cultures emphasizing individual achievement over collective success (Sofyan, De Clercq, & Shang, 2022). The overall implication is that task characteristics, both in form and context, create situational levers that can motivate workers to malign others via intentional underperformance.

Disparity in social experiences. Perceptions of unfair treatment or unmet expectations can also elicit retaliatory motives, often expressed through underperformance intended to malign others or organizational norms. Workers who perceive procedural injustice or violations of psychological contracts are more likely to intentionally underperform by sabotaging or knowledge-hiding as resistance or retribution (Ahmed & Zhang, 2024; Oakley, 2016). Such actions are not always spontaneous but may emerge from simmering resentment due to

unmet expectations of fairness, voice, or recognition (e.g., O'Neill et al., 2011). In contrast, environments characterized by equitable treatment and procedural justice tend to inhibit the motive to malign others (Carvallo Bada & Schuller, 2023). These findings highlight that intentional underperformance is often a socially conditioned response to perceived mistreatment or unfairness, not merely a product of personality or task design.

Overall, the motive to malign others often manifests as deliberate counterproductive behaviors intended to impair colleagues' success or organizational functioning. Like the motive to mask capabilities, it is predicted by stable individual differences, variable individual states, and variation in task characteristics. Additionally, social experiences (notably perceptions of injustice) spark purposeful underperformance designed to malign others. These findings reveal that intentional underperformance represents a complex social phenomenon emerging from person-situation interactions rather than individual deviance alone. Recognizing that deliberate performance pullback stems from multiple determinants underscores the need for interventions that address individual, task, and climate-related variables to effectively curb underperformance.

To Manage Resources

The motive to manage resources refers to self-preservation and strategic reallocation of effort, when workers underperform on one task to conserve energy for another, allowing them to manage their workloads over time. For example, an employee may intentionally slow their pace on routine reporting tasks to dedicate more focus and energy to an upcoming high-stakes project. This motive encompasses three research streams: intentional loafing ($k=17$), strategic satisficing ($k=11$), and individual strategic shirking ($k=6$), which have most frequently been studied through the lens of conservation of resources theory (COR; Hobfoll, 1989). First, intentional loafing is the intentional decrease in effort on a task, represented in the literature as "BallotLoafing," cyberloafing, intentional noncompliance, social loafing, and withholding of effort. These commonly entail workers exerting less effort than if they completed tasks individually (Bluhm, 2009) and engaging in nonwork activities during work hours (Hensel & Kacprzak, 2020). Second, strategic satisficing reflects doing just enough to fulfill the required task responsibilities, also represented in the literature as quiet quitting. Engaging in these can manifest in many ways such as workers setting out to do "good enough" when they could do better (e.g., Vargová, Zibrinová, & Baník, 2020) and not performing tasks beyond those explicitly specified in their job description (e.g., Formica & Sfodera, 2022). Third, strategic shirking involves suppressing performance quality on tasks to redirect focus on high priority ones, which is also reflected by constructs of depressed self-presentation and gaming performance. Examples include workers deploying varying levels of effort across different tasks (e.g., DeVaro & Gürtler, 2016b) and underperforming non-promotable tasks (e.g., DeVaro & Gürtler, 2020).

Stable individual differences. Certain enduring personality characteristics predispose individuals to intentionally underperform as a means of regulating workload and conserving personal resources. In particular, individuals higher in Dark Triad traits (i.e., narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) tend to intentionally underperform to avoid overexertion or exploitation (Wilhau, 2021), which is attributed to their self-serving orientations and

willingness to manipulate people and contexts for personal gain. Additionally, in high-stakes situations where underperformance could lead to punitive consequences, individuals may curb their underperformance due to uncertainty and fear of loss (Artinger, Gigerenzer, & Jacobs, 2022).

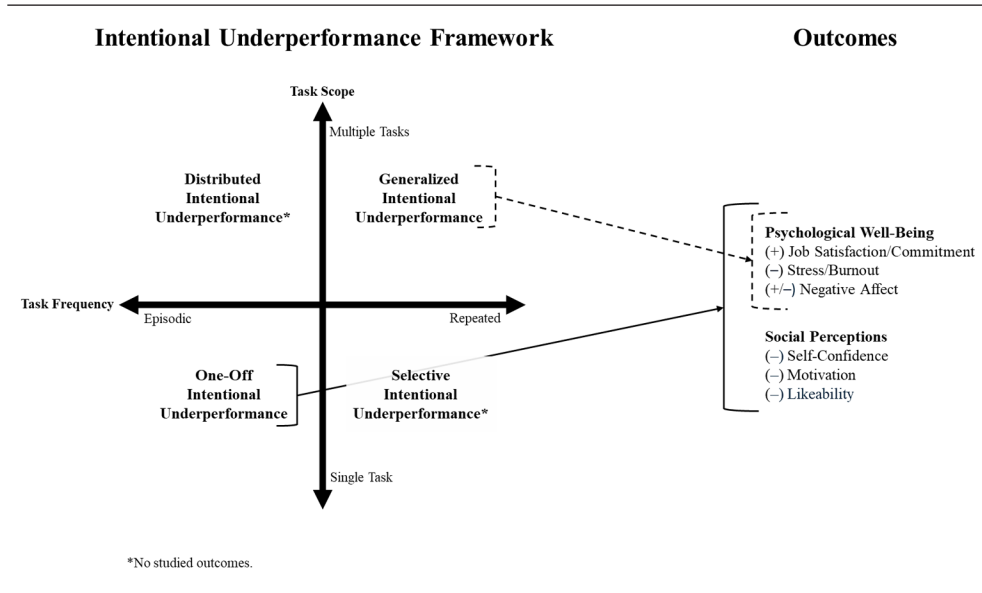
Variable individual states. Beyond traits, temporary psychological states also shape the decision to intentionally underperform. Negative emotional experiences, such as anxiety, envy, and depressed moods, are consistently linked to intentional underperformance through their impact on priorities and resource preservation strategies (Awee, Mohsin, & Makhbul, 2020; Weary & Williams, 1990; Serenko, 2023). Negative emotions may especially divert workers' attention from organizational objectives toward individual coping strategies. Motivational orientation also shapes underperformance propensity. Workers with a "satisficing" orientation, who seek minimum acceptable standards, demonstrate greater likelihood of intentional underperformance compared to "maximizers" pursuing optimal outcomes (Harrison & Pelletier, 1997). Importantly, actual resource depletion—whether physical, emotional, or cognitive—exacerbates intentional underperformance tendencies. Burnout, fatigue, and emotional exhaustion have all been tied to intentional pullback on work tasks (Boy & Sürmeli, 2023; Lu, Al Mamun, Chen, Yang, & Masukujjaman, 2023; Uysal, Ak, & Çelik, 2021).

Variation in task characteristics. Task characteristics shape whether individuals choose to intentionally underperform as a resource-conservation strategy. When tasks are viewed as unpleasant, overly demanding, or low in perceived value, individuals are more likely to intentionally disengage (Hensel & Kacprzak, 2020; Suhendar, Setiadi, Artati, & Rohman, 2023). Moreover, disliked tasks may be deliberately performed poorly as a strategy to avoid similar assignments in the future (DeVaro & Gürtler, 2016b). Greater autonomy allows individuals the latitude to self-regulate their performance, increasing chances for intentional underperformance (Campton, Tham, & Ting, 2023). Additionally, when task interdependence is high and performance is evaluated collectively, individuals have been shown to underperform if their own efforts do not yield proportionate benefits (Xu & van der Schaar, 2015). Lack of competition on tasks may remove extrinsic incentives to strive, while extreme competition can also backfire depending on relationships within the team and with the leader (Murphy et al., 2003; Wilhau, 2021). Overall, unfavorable, low-reward, or ambiguously structured tasks increase the chance workers will strategically reduce their effort to avoid overextension or recalibrated expectations.

Disparity in social experiences. Interpersonal and organizational injustices are powerful drivers of intentional underperformance aimed at restoring perceived equity. When fairness perceptions are high, however, intentional underperformance diminishes owing to enhanced organizational commitment (Luo, Qu, & Marnburg, 2013). Thus, experiences of fairness or injustice within the workplace are central in shaping whether individuals intentionally underperform as a means of protecting or reclaiming personal resources.

Taken together, the motive to manage resources manifests as intentional performance regulation aimed at preserving personal resources, preventing exploitation, or maintaining manageable workloads. We explore these through the same four antecedent groups: stable individual

Figure 4.
Model of the Forms of Intentional Underperformance and Their Outcomes



differences, variable individual states, variation in task characteristics, and disparity in social experiences. These findings challenge traditional performance models by revealing how intentional underperformance can be a rational, resource-conservation strategy focused on adaptive effort regulation rather than mere deviance. In this view, work engagement exists within a complex resource-allocation framework where individuals strategically calibrate their contributions based on perceived costs and benefits. Notably, this motive is often triggered by goal conflict, prompting individuals to intentionally reallocate effort away from lower-priority tasks to preserve resources for more pressing demands. Accordingly, organizations may better manage performance through deeper attunement to workers' resource-protecting behavior resulting from genuine concerns about exploitation and sustainability. Interventions that promote workload equity, clear expectations, and procedural justice are likely to be more effective than simply intensifying performance pressures or increasing incentives.

Intentional Underperformance Framework and Related Outcomes

Intentional underperformance can take multiple forms, depending on how broadly and persistently it is enacted. We build an organizing framework of intentional underperformance comprised of two continuous dimensions: *task frequency* (i.e., extent to which underperformance occurs once versus repeatedly over time) and *task scope* (i.e., extent to which underperformance occurs on a single task versus multiple tasks). Together, these dimensions form a two-by-two *Intentional Underperformance Framework* (see left side of Figure 4). Although described categorically for clarity, it is important to note that both dimensions are continuous, meaning real-world cases can fall anywhere along the task frequency and task scope continua.

Further, we emphasize that across all four forms, the underlying motive for intentional underperformance may vary. Whether to mask one's true capabilities, malign others, or manage resources, any motive can give rise to any form. For example, one-off intentional underperformance may reflect marketing experts' motivation to malign others (Azuelos-Atias, 2015), scientists' motivation to manage resources (Graf, Wendler, Stumpf-Wollersheim, & Welpe, 2019), or team members' motivation to mask capabilities (Yoon et al., 2019). Thus, it is the pattern of enactment—defined by the dimensions of task frequency and scope—rather than motive, that distinguishes these forms. However, the interaction of different motives overlaying these forms represents important future research opportunities, which we elaborate on after outlining each of the forms.

In the following subsections, we delineate each form along these task dimensions and summarize known outcomes (see right side of Figure 4). Though the conceptual grid is fully populated, empirical research has concentrated on two forms—generalized and one-off underperformance—especially regarding their effects on psychological well-being and social perceptions. Distributed and selective underperformance remain relatively understudied, presenting opportunities for future inquiry to unpack their distinct outcomes. We begin in the top-right quadrant with generalized intentional underperformance and proceed counterclockwise.

Generalized Intentional Underperformance

When individuals intentionally underperform across multiple tasks and do so repeatedly, we describe this as *generalized intentional underperformance* ($k=57$). This broad and sustained pattern suggests pervasive disengagement from one's work. For example, Baskin and McKee (2019) found that workers deliberately divert their attention from work tasks to engage in non-task-related activities (e.g., chatting with coworkers or browsing the internet) during work hours. In another example, O'Neill et al. (2014) offer a compelling account of generalized intentional underperformance, showing how personality traits influence workplace behavior in the context of Internet-enabled technologies, which enabled workers to repeatedly disengage from a host of tasks to engage in personal matters (e.g., vacation planning, online shopping).

The outcomes of generalized intentional underperformance have been studied primarily through the lens of psychological well-being. This form of intentional underperformance has often been framed as a coping mechanism that protects workers' mental and emotional health in demanding environments. For instance, Serenko (2023) analyzed TikTok comments and found generalized intentional underperformance helped workers reduce job stress, avoid burnout, and renew commitment to their roles. Similarly, a lab study by Vargová et al. (2020) revealed that workers who engaged in generalized intentional underperformance were less likely to experience depression and unhappiness associated with typical or maximal performance, while G. Kim, Min, and Choi (2024) found underperformance increased job satisfaction. These findings suggest that generalized intentional underperformance may serve as a form of psychological self-regulation; however, the relationship may not be uniformly positive. Indeed, Gove et al. (1980) reported that intentional underperformance generally led to unhappiness, poorer mental health, and lower self-esteem.

Generalized intentional underperformance represents perhaps the most organizationally consequential form due to its sustained and pervasive nature, yet the contradictory findings regarding psychological well-being outcomes suggest critical boundary conditions remain

unidentified. Theoretically, the mixed evidence—ranging from stress reduction and renewed commitment to decreased self-esteem and poorer mental health—indicates that this form's effectiveness as a coping mechanism depends on contextual factors that current research has not adequately explored. Practically, this ambiguity presents challenges for organizations attempting to diagnose and intervene. Misinterpreting generalized underperformance as mere laziness or burnout could lead to ineffective or even counterproductive responses.

Distributed Intentional Underperformance

When intentional underperformance occurs on multiple tasks but episodically for each, we refer to this as *distributed intentional underperformance* ($k=9$). This form reflects purposeful yet irregular underperformance across various tasks without regular repetition on any particular task type. For example, Hensel and Kacprzak (2020) illustrate a compelling case of distributed intentional underperformance in their investigation of unsanctioned computer behaviors in the workplace. In their study, activities such as visiting non-work-related websites or accessing social media and news platforms collectively exemplified a pattern of intentional underperformance that is broad in scope but episodic in nature—capturing the essence of distributed intentional underperformance. Another example comes from Bouwens and Kroos (2011), who found that store managers occasionally slowed client service or reduced cross-selling efforts across task domains, revealing distributed underperformance in diverse but nonrepetitive ways that spanned multiple domains of responsibility. No outcomes have been studied for this form of intentional underperformance.

Theoretically, distributed intentional underperformance represents a particularly understudied yet potentially widespread phenomenon that may reflect strategic resource allocation across diverse task portfolios, suggesting individuals selectively underperform from various responsibilities without establishing consistent patterns that might attract managerial attention. Its episodic and dispersed nature suggests a more nuanced form of task performance variability. In organizations, this form may limit its detectability by managers and performance evaluation systems, obscuring its cumulative impact for colleagues and organizations. The absence of empirical research on outcomes represents a significant gap, as distributed underperformance may serve unique functions such as cognitive load management or testing of task boundaries that differ markedly from the sustained coping mechanisms associated with more generalized patterns. Distributed underperformance in particular may function as an adaptive strategy for managing competing goals by aligning with the literature on goal conflict and multiple-goal pursuit (Locke, Smith, Erez, Chah, & Schaffer, 1994; Louro, Pieters, & Zeelenberg, 2007; Neal et al., 2017; Vancouver, Weinhardt, & Schmidt, 2010).

One-Off Intentional Underperformance

When intentional underperformance is limited to a single task and is episodic, we describe it as *one-off intentional underperformance* ($k=29$). This form reflects an isolated, tactical decision to suppress task contributions. For example, Kowalski and Leary (1990) demonstrate this in their laboratory experiments, which revealed that individuals deliberately underperform as a calculated move to circumvent a forthcoming task perceived as onerous or aversive. Rather than reflecting a habitual pattern, this behavior was isolated and strategic,

emerging in response to a specific situation in which underperformance served as a temporary escape from an undesirable assignment.

Research links one-off intentional underperformance concern to outcomes in both psychological well-being and social perceptions. Regarding well-being, this form of intentional underperformance has been linked to both relief and distress. For instance, Bluhm (2009) found that intentional underperformance reduced stress, suggesting that even a singular instance of underperformance can serve as a powerful temporary coping mechanism. Conversely, Weary and Williams (1990) observed that depressed individuals who engaged in one-off underperformance experienced greater negative affect and discomfort, indicating that intentionally underperforming can sometimes intensify emotional strain.

Socially, one-off intentional underperformance can shape how others perceive the underperformer. Advantageously, Azuelos-Atias (2015) showed that one-off intentional underperformance among elite groups (e.g., marketing experts, legal professionals) can be interpreted as a display of social power, enhancing influence in the moment. Yet, the same behavior can also provoke disadvantageous impressions, such as reduced likeability (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). These findings highlight the complex implications of one-off intentional underperformance, which may protect psychological well-being or enhance social status, but may also carry the risk of internal discomfort and more punitive social judgments.

Overall, one-off intentional underperformance represents the most contextually sensitive form, with notably divergent outcomes—suggesting its implications hinge on situational factors such as observer characteristics, organizational norms, and individual status levels. This points to the need for models that account for short-term, high-variance deviations in performance. Practically, one-off intentional underperformance may go unnoticed or be misinterpreted as noise within performance observations, despite potentially signaling important psychological or social dynamics. Alternatively, it may be misconstrued as more generalized underperformance, resulting in counterproductive responses from managers.

Selective Intentional Underperformance

At the other end of the task scope dimension, when intentional underperformance pertains to a single task type and occurs repeatedly, we refer to this as *selective intentional underperformance* ($k=4$). This pattern suggests a targeted and enduring choice to underperform on a specific kind of task. For example, Shearer (2022) studied a tree-planting firm where management warned workers that their high per unit rates may be reduced if average earnings were considered too high. In response, workers consistently withheld their tree planting output, deliberately reducing performance by 16% in a show of sustained and targeted intentional underperformance. Similarly, Zadeh and Haggerty (2023) showcased selective intentional underperformance in a study of nurses, highlighting their deliberate deviation from established protocols during service execution. Consistently choosing to act outside prescribed patient care standards reflects task-specific and repeated underperformance. Outcomes related to this form of intentional underperformance have not yet been studied.

Selective intentional underperformance represents perhaps the most strategically sophisticated form, as its sustained focus on specific tasks suggests deliberate cost-benefit calculations that may be highly rational responses to organizational incentives or constraints. Theoretically, this pattern challenges models of disengagement by revealing a targeted,

task-specific calculus and raises important questions about how individuals weigh costs, risks, and expected returns in repeated underperformance. The complete lack of empirical research on its outcomes seems a critical and practically important gap for the management literature to inform. Practically, this form is often more visible and detectable and therefore more actionable for organizations. However, without understanding underlying motives, interventions may backfire by correcting behavior without addressing root causes.

In reviewing existing manifestations of intentional underperformance, we were able to distinguish these four forms, each representing fundamentally different behavioral patterns with distinct psychological mechanisms and organizational implications. Collapsing or conflating the forms obscures important theoretical and practical insights about when, why, and how intentional underperformance occurs in workplace settings. Methodologically, our typology can enable greater alignment between theory and operationalizations, as well as comparability across studies. Indeed, whereas research on one-off underperformance focuses on episode-level outcomes (e.g., immediate stress relief or momentary impressions), research on generalized patterns covers aggregate-level variables instead (e.g., job satisfaction or long-term well-being).

Operationalizing Intentional Underperformance

Over the decades, research related to intentional underperformance has yielded numerous measurement approaches. While identifying a single best measure for future studies seems reductionistic, we offer a consolidated view of operationalizations to strengthen construct validity and enable greater comparability for future research (Edmondson & McManus, 2007; Molloy & Ployhart, 2012; Suddaby, 2010). As Bono and McNamara (2011: 658) emphasized, when considering operationalizations of umbrella constructs, authors “must clearly articulate the definition and boundaries of the new construct, map its association with existing constructs, and avoid assumptions that scales with the same name reflect the same construct and that scales with different names reflect different constructs.” To achieve this, and help preempt the jangle fallacy in future research, we reviewed operationalizations of intentional underperformance constructs across disciplines. We synthesize operationalizations around *measurement methods* and *measurement content and context*. Across different approaches, we note their advantages and challenges and offer guidance for future research that can mitigate limitations and leverage strengths of each approach for valid and reliable measurement.

Measurement Methods

Our review identified four primary measurement methods, from most to least common: self-reports (e.g., De Castella, Byrne, & Covington, 2013), unobtrusive (e.g., Bouwens & Kroos, 2011), experimental manipulations (e.g., Gallier & Sturm, 2021), and other ratings (e.g., Murphy et al., 2003). The predominance of self-ratings is both *limiting* (given its susceptibility to self-serving bias) and *fitting* (given intentional underperformance is goal-directed and distinct from accidental or unconscious underperformance). In self-reports, one’s typical performance was commonly implied as the relevant benchmark. For example, self-rated items from scales measuring self-handicapping (e.g., “I purposely don’t try hard”;

De Castella et al., 2013) and quiet quitting (e.g., “I try to perform above others’ expectations” [reverse-coded]; Suhendar et al., 2023) effectively capture the purposefulness of underperforming one’s typical performance level. Similar items appear in other-rated measures (e.g., Murphy et al., 2003), relying on raters’ inferences (as intent cannot be directly observed) and inherently rooting to others’ expectations as the relevant benchmark.

Beyond rating-based methods, unobtrusive and experimental approaches are fitting when seeking to compare specific levels of intentional underperformance or to detect deviations from formal performance standards. In archival studies, unobtrusive methods were most often used and usually involved temporal comparisons (i.e., inferring underperformance when performance at time t fell meaningfully below that at $t-1$). For example, Bouwens and Kroos (2011) operationalized intentional underperformance as a drop in fourth-quarter sales (relative to earlier quarters) once workers met annual quotas, speculating intentionality in order to avoid higher targets in subsequent years. Experimental studies typically relied on manipulations such as stating that others (i.e., confederates) underperformed. Jackson and Harkins (1985), for instance, manipulated intentional underperformance by informing participants that peers had produced either less or more than would have been expected based on their capacity. While such unobtrusive methods and manipulations are well-suited for capturing downward shifts in individual performance, they rely on assumed rather than explicitly measured intent, representing a significant and fruitful area for development related to this phenomenon.

Each method for operationalizing intentional underperformance has its advantages and challenges. Notably, self-reported and experimental procedures are particularly effective for capturing or manipulating (respectively) *intentionality*. For instance, they are well-suited to account for, or systematically vary, where an individual’s performance level falls along Dittrich and Seidl’s (2018) intentionality spectrum, from purposeful actions aligned with preestablished goals to purposive actions detached from such goals. Doing so may strengthen construct validity.

Measurement Content and Context

Our review surfaced several themes regarding content of different operationalizations and the extent to which they aligned with their research context. First, the most appropriate content measurements are those that consider and appreciate the types of task performance most relevant to the specific context. For example, operationalizations of underperforming motivated to mask capabilities, such as Yoon et al.’s (2019) competence deception items (e.g., “how that person deceived others in detail, including what s/he lied about and specific behaviors or strategies that person demonstrated”) are apt for observable actions but disadvantaged in accounting for hidden, intentional underperformance.

Many operationalizations of content domains capture intentional underperformance effectively across varying levels of visibility, but the degree to which the content of these assessments is appropriate (or not) depends heavily on the work context and relevant benchmark. For example, Hoeksema-van Orden, Gaillard, and Buunk’s (1998) loafing operationalizations (i.e., direct comparisons between an individual performer and their group members) may be fitting in workgroup contexts but cannot capture its occurrence outside a well-defined group. Similarly, Chambers’s (2024) withholding of effort operationalization (i.e., intentional

decrease in the rate of voluntary contributions) is well-suited when using typical performance as the benchmark but fails to capture others' expectations if that were the desired benchmark. Continued use of these content-specific operationalizations may be suitable in appropriately matched contexts (e.g., using loafing operationalizations in teams). However, to advance the field, future research should develop operationalizations that explicitly capture the intentional nature of underperformance while specifying the relevance of a particular benchmark(s) to the focal phenomenon and work context, thereby laying the groundwork for more integrative, cross-disciplinary measurement.

Our review of operationalizations also suggests that future measures would be advantaged when they capture a broader set of performance suppression indicators. For example, Brock, Martin, and Buckley's (2013) time banditry scale captures aspects of loafing (e.g., "I put less effort into my work than I know I can"), competence deception (e.g., "I tell my boss/colleague a task will take longer than I know I can finish it in, so I can take my time"), and counterproductive behavior (e.g., "If my boss is gone for the day, I will leave early"). Although the scale was designed to assess time banditry behavior, its content overlap offers a useful starting point for measuring multiple motives underlying intentional underperformance. As research advances this phenomenon, we see substantial merit in rigorously developing and validating a dedicated scale that explicitly reflects its three defining characteristics (i.e., pertain to task performance, suppression of contributions one is capable of, and intentionality). Doing so will foster greater integration of intentional underperformance across disciplines and contexts.

Discussion of Future Research: The Motive-Form Intersection

In this review, we sought to bring coherence to the fragmented landscape of intentional underperformance by organizing a dispersed literature into a synthesis of motives (and their antecedents) and a framework of forms (and their outcomes). We do not aim to discourage future work on discipline-specific constructs or constrain scholars from using discipline-appropriate terminology; rather, we seek to offer a unifying foundation that enables conceptual alignment across disciplines. Even when narrower constructs are retained, connecting to this framework can foster theoretical integration, methodological clarity, and cross-disciplinary dialogue.

In this spirit, we now turn to the implications of our synthesis for advancing theory and practice. Our synthesis reveals that examining the intersection of motives and forms represents a critical advancement for future research. This intersection captures the fundamentally strategic nature of intentional underperformance that has been somewhat discounted by disconnected examinations of related constructs. We next propose specific theoretical and practical advancements that can emerge from considering the motive-form intersection.

Theoretical Advancements of the Motive-Form Intersection

The literature currently assumes workers select forms of underperformance with minimal connection to their underlying motivations, which largely ignores the fundamental reality that individuals likely choose specific behavioral patterns (forms) that best serve their psychological and situational needs (motives). Thus, the most compelling theoretical opportunities involve

examining whether certain motives predict specific forms of intentional underperformance, and under what conditions these alignments emerge or shift. A worker motivated to mask capabilities would likely select different behavioral patterns than someone motivated to malign others. The former might favor subtle, distributed patterns to avoid detection, while the latter might choose more visible, generalized patterns to maximize impact on coworkers. Understanding these relationships can offer insight into the strategic decision-making processes driving intentional underperformance and sharpen our view of root causes that can lend themselves to positive intervention where appropriate. Specifically, we propose three promising avenues for studying motive-form patterns to advance theoretical understanding.

Temporal evolution and form progression. Future research can enrich our understanding by adopting more dynamic and longitudinal perspectives to examine how different forms evolve over time within the same motivational framework. A worker initially motivated to manage resources might begin with one-off intentional underperformance on overwhelming tasks, but if organizational demands persist, this could evolve into selective intentional underperformance on specific task types and eventually into generalized intentional underperformance across multiple responsibilities. Studying such temporal progression may reveal how motives can drive escalating behavioral patterns in intentional underperformance.

Expanding the breadth of motive-form relationships. We also see particular value in examining motives that remain underexplored in the intentional underperformance literature. We propose three directions that we consider particularly fruitful. First, some workers may underperform to strengthen a peer relationship or empower others, intentionally stepping back so as not to overshadow others' contributions (Breidenthal, Liu, Bai, & Mao, 2020) or to create space for colleagues to lead, contribute, and develop (Ahearne, Mathieu, & Rapp, 2005; van Dierendonck, 2011). Second, workers may underperform to adhere to or protect norms, conforming to informal group expectations that discourage overcontribution or standing out (Jensen, Patel, & Raver, 2014; E. Kim & Glomb, 2014)—a dynamic consistent with tall poppy syndrome, in which those who excel risk social penalties for surpassing peers (Feather, 1989), especially in cooperative contexts where harmony and cohesion are valued (E. M. Campbell, Liao, Chuang, Zhou, & Dong, 2017). Third, workers may also underperform as a way of asserting control and autonomy, potentially using reduced effort as a form of dissent in response to new policies, resource cuts, wage disputes, value misalignments, or job-related grievances (Cohen, 1993; Rhomberg & Lopez, 2021)—particularly in contexts where formal union-led strikes are infeasible (Rhomberg & Lopez, 2021). These underexplored motives would expand the conceptual landscape and may reveal distinct motive-form patterns.

Methodological alignment between theory and operationalization. The motive-form intersection addresses a critical methodological gap by promoting alignment between research designs and the behavioral phenomenon being studied. Episode-level outcomes are appropriate for one-off underperformance regardless of motive, whereas pattern-level outcomes are necessary for generalized forms. The specific motive adds crucial context for interpreting these outcomes and designing appropriate measurement strategies. Future research should investigate how the different benchmarks used in operationalizing

intentional underperformance may yield distinct consequences. To capture the nuances of different performance benchmarks in measuring intentional underperformance, we recommend that future research operationalize multiple benchmarks using repeated measures and experience sampling methods (ESM). These approaches are well-suited to detecting within-person fluctuations in intentional performance and expand insight into how motives, task demands, and situational constraints shape it over time.

Practical Advancements of the Motive-Form Intersection

Practically, the motive-form overlay is essential for developing effective interventions. Addressing intentional underperformance requires understanding both why it occurs (motive) and how it manifests (form), as different motive-form combinations likely require distinct management approaches. For instance, an intervention targeting generalized intentional underperformance motivated by resource imbalance (e.g., workload redistribution) would fundamentally differ from one addressing selective intentional underperformance motivated to mask capabilities (e.g., performance evaluation reform). As another example, an intervention focused on mitigating selective underperformance motivated by the desire to malign a coworker (e.g., peer evaluations) should vary from one targeting one-off underperformance motivated to mask capabilities (e.g., strength-based feedback). We propose three related research avenues that may be particularly promising to promote further practical advancement.

Demographic patterns in motive-form selection. First, perhaps the most practically significant research direction involves examining how demographic characteristics influence how, why, and when workers intentionally underperform. Household labor research on “weaponized incompetence” has evidenced that men (vs. women) more often employ capability-masking motives (Bianchi, Sayer, Milkie, & Robinson, 2012), though how and the extent to which this translates to the workplace warrants broader and sharper understanding. Given that women shoulder disproportionate non-promotable tasks (Babcock, Recalde, Vesterlund, & Weingart, 2017), they may strategically employ more selective intentional underperformance—motivated by resource imbalance concerns and seeking to redirect efforts toward career-advancing performance contributions. For example, a woman being asked to mentor more junior colleagues may intentionally underperform on her review of a proposal to rebalance her resource of time. Similarly, studies have evidenced that workers of color are disproportionately tasked with undervalued and uncompensated work (e.g., advising, committee work, outreach; Joseph & Hirshfield, 2011; Miller, Wesley, Bell, & Avery, 2021). Normally, reactions to inequitable workload may motivate workers to intentionally underperform to malign their organization and/or rebalance resources through revised workload distribution. However, because workers of color must often engage in more effortful impression management (Wayne, Sun, Kluemper, Cheung, & Ubaka, 2023), they may be more likely to suppress these motives than risk suppressing their performance. Understanding how demographics shape when and why intentional underperformance strategies are deployed, interpreted, and appraised seems crucial as we strive toward more equitable workplaces.

Positive spillover potential across motive-form combinations. Second, though perhaps initially counterintuitive, certain motive-form combinations may have benefits that span

levels. This would suggest that intentional underperformance may provide a boost beyond the individual worker engaging in it, perhaps for their workgroup and organizations in hidden ways not yet recognized by current performance paradigms. Given limited theory on potential benefits of doing less (at least occasionally), using inductive methods may be particularly informative. Might intentional underperformance function as “positive deviance” (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004) and enhance collective functioning under specific circumstances? For instance, selective intentional underperformance may help teams recalibrate collective performance norms over time, signaling when standards or goals have become unrealistic. Motivated to mask capabilities, highly visible one-off intentional underperformance could, for instance, buffer high performers from being viewed as threatening by peers or being envied by supervisors (E. M. Campbell et al., 2017; Li, Law, Zhang, & Yan, 2024).

Integration with multiple-goal pursuit and goal conflict literatures. Third, we call for greater integration between the intentional underperformance literature and studies of goal conflict and multiple-goal pursuit (Locke et al., 1994; Louro et al., 2007; Neal et al., 2017; Vancouver et al., 2010)—particularly to better understand contexts and specific motives driving episodic intentional underperformance. Both literatures emphasize effort regulation and strategic trade-offs amid competing demands, making them well-positioned to illuminate when and why individuals choose specific forms of intentional underperformance. Integration would offer valuable insight into the intentionality behind deployment of performance, clarifying effort allocation across tasks, motivational influences on these decisions, and observer interpretations of intentional underperformance. These connections may also offer opportunities to distinguish adaptive from maladaptive forms of intentional underperformance.

Conclusion

In this review, we synthesize the constructs reflecting intentional underperformance, establishing a foundation for advancing theoretical clarity and practical application. By unifying disparate constructs into an organized synthesis of motives (and their antecedents) and a framework of forms (and their outcomes), we pave the way for cross-disciplinary integration that enhances research rigor and organizational relevance. As the workplace evolves, understanding the strategic nature of intentional underperformance is imperative for fostering productive, equitable, and sustainable work environments. Moving forward, we encourage scholars to examine the interactions between motives and forms, exploring their evolution, boundary conditions, and broader—and potentially uneven—consequences. Likewise, organizations must shift from reactive management tactics to proactive interventions that address causes of performance variability. We hope our review helps workplace performance not to merely be optimized, but more comprehensively understood.

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Note

1. Online Supplementary Table 1 provides a list of the 99 articles included in this review. This table includes the terminology used by the authors, concise descriptions of the intentional underperformance research streams, and how these were categorized in our model based on their overarching forms. We also chose not to include occasionally mentioned near-synonyms (e.g., “counterproductive work behavior” and “counterproductive workplace behaviors”) that sometimes appear in the text. As a scoping review, this work is not intended to establish a definitive list of all forms of intentional underperformance found in the literature but to integrate existing forms under a unifying framework.

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