

Exploring Work Identity and Side Hustle Identity: A Theoretical Framework

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Abstract

Changes in the global workforce, the onset of the pandemic, and the rise of the gig economy are several reasons why individuals have undertaken additional work alongside their primary work. As a result, there has been an increase in side hustles. Hence, there is a need to expand on theories that inform how multiple jobholding affects work identity, and understanding the distinctions between a primary job and side hustles is crucial for developing a nuanced perspective on modern and contemporary work identities. By examining these dual identities, Primary Work Identity (PWI) and Side Hustle Identity (SHI), this study aims to contribute to the broader field of organisational behaviour and identity theory, providing insights into how individuals derive meaning and fulfilment from their multifaceted professional lives. Primary Work Identity (PWI) is the identity individuals form from their primary traditional job, shaped by job responsibilities, organisational culture, professional relationships, and career aspirations. Side Hustle Identity (SHI) refers to the identity individuals develop through their engagement of side hustles alongside their primary work. We present four propositions on primary work identity and side hustle identity. A theoretical, conceptual paper was presented through a non-empirical study, and a narrative approach was employed.

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1. Introduction and background to the study

The employment landscape is rapidly changing (Barley et al., 2017). In contemporary work environments, it is increasingly common for individuals to engage in side hustles in addition to their primary jobs (Sessions et al., 2022). Side hustles are considered an alternative employment arrangement that extends beyond full-time employment, such as temporary work, contract work, freelancing, and part-time work (Caza et al., 2017; Selenko et al., 2018). Many individuals already had a side hustle long before the pandemic (Barrett, 2020). Side hustling has gained popularity in South Africa, with 1 in every 3 South Africans having side hustles to supplement their income (Henley, 2019). Changes in the global workforce have also transformed into a dual labour market, encapsulated by the primary market of traditional jobs within the gig economy, where a flexible and contingent workforce characterises work, and they contract directly with customers for short-term engagements (see Ashford et al., 2018; Dokko et al., 2015). Moreover, those engaged in more than one job are considered multiple jobholders (MJHs) and are individuals who have a full-time job and participate in the gig economy. However, their supplementary work role is commonly called a side hustle (Sessions et al., 2021).

The optics of this may differ from the societal and economic needs of individuals. Individuals with more than one type of formal employment simultaneously are multiple job holders (MJHs) (Marucci-Wellman et al., 2014; Campion et al., 2020). MJHs are prompted to take on more than one job (Kimmel & Conway, 2001) for several reasons, namely, single parents working flexible jobs requiring additional income out of necessity to meet financial obligations due to stagnant wages and rising living costs (Conen & de Beer, 2021), and being dual job holders due to low income and poverty conditions (Blundell & Shephard, 2012). The concept of multiple job holders can be distinguished from side hustles.

Side hustles are considered income-generating work performed alongside a full-time job (Ashford, Caza, & Reid, 2018; Dokko, Mumford, & Schanzenbach, 2015) and can be linked to work arrangements such as moonlighting or multiple job holding (Betts, 2006; Caza et al., 2018). Pursuing a passion generally drives side hustles without relinquishing a reliable source of income from their primary full-time work (Henley Business School, 2019). Side hustles allow individuals to choose how, with whom, and when they work, thus helping to bring new experiences and enhance their skills (Ashford et al., 2018; Wegman et al., 2018). Side hustling may also be triggered by difficult labour market conditions where there is a lack of

job security (Tetty, 2006). Seeking skill development also drives side hustling activity (Tetty, 2006).

This phenomenon prompts questions about how individuals construct their identities around their primary work and side hustles. This paper introduces the concepts of Primary Work Identity (PWI) and Side Hustle Identity (SHI) to explore how these identities differ and interact.

1.1. Problem statement

Changes in the global workforce, the onset of the pandemic, and the rise of the gig economy are several reasons why individuals have undertaken additional work alongside their primary work. As a result, there has been an increase in side hustles (Sliter & Boyd, 2014; Anteby et al., 2016). Hence, there is a need to expand on theories that inform how multiple job holding affects work identity, and understanding the distinctions between a primary job and side hustles is crucial for developing a nuanced perspective on modern and contemporary work identities. As such, management research must remain relevant and impactful. By examining these dual identities—Primary Work Identity (PWI) and Side Hustle Identity (SHI)—this study aims to contribute to the broader field of organisational behaviour and identity theory, providing insights into how individuals derive meaning and fulfilment from their multifaceted professional lives.

1.2. Research purpose and objectives

The purpose of this study is to develop a theoretical framework for individuals involved in primary work and side hustles and build upon various theories, including work identity theory and identity theory. The objectives of the study include:

- To introduce the concepts of primary work identity and side hustle identity
- To present propositions on primary work identity and side hustle identity
- To present propositions on the impact of primary work identity and side hustle identity

The primary contribution of this study lies in the introduction and conceptualisation of primary work identity and side hustle identity through the lens of work identity. Through this endeavour, the study aspires to extend the boundaries of theoretical exploration within the

domain of work and organisational psychology and organisational behaviour. The study holds significant conceptual advancements by introducing these concepts; the study brings forth a novel perspective on holding primary employment and embarking on a side hustle. As such, this nuanced approach will enhance our understanding of individual aspirations in taking on side hustles and their implications for their primary work.

2. Literature review

2.1. Work Identity

Work identity is defined as "...a work-based self-concept, constituted of a combination of organisational, occupational, and other identities that shape the roles a person adopts and the corresponding ways he or she behaves when performing his or her work" (Walsh & Gordon, 2007, p. 2). Similarly, it has also been defined as "...a multi-identity, multi-faceted and multi-layered construction of the self (in which the self-concept fulfils a core, integrative function), that shapes the roles individuals are involved in, within their employment context" (Lloyd, Roodt, & Odendaal, 2011, p. 31). Work identity is multifaceted and "is a combination of educational, occupational, professional, and career identity, competences, various organisational roles and work relationships" (Toivanen, 2021, p. 28). These work roles contribute to an individual's sense of self (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) and lead to positive work outcomes such as work engagement (Bester, 2012). Work identity directly impacts work engagement and turnover intentions (Jerez Jerez et al., 2022). Work environments that provide sufficient and adequate job resources, such as organisational support and growth opportunities, predict work identity (De Braine & Roodt, 2011; Van Rensburg, 2020). The sub-dimensions of work identity include person-organisation fit, work centrality, and value congruence (Bester, 2012). Other sub-dimensions of work identity include organisational identification.

2.2. Side hustles

Side hustling or moonlighting is described as work that individuals do on a part-time basis alongside their full-time employment (Ara & Akbar, 2016; Bertel, 2021; Betts, 2005; Boyes, 2022; Clark, 2018). Side hustlers choose to work directly with customers or clients in comparison to their primary work, in which they are allocated customers or clients (Ashford et al., 2018). Other characteristics of side hustling are that it is typically done on a freelance basis and side hustlers rely solely on the income derived from it (Dua et al., 2022; Wu & Huang, 2024). The side hustle is generally in a field that is unrelated to the primary full-time

employment that the side hustler holds (Walsh & Stephens, 2022). It is observed globally amongst skilled and unskilled labour in both industrialised and developing countries (Betts, 2005, p. 4). Side hustlers have one or more of the following: “(a) a job and their own business in different spheres, (b) a job and a side business in different spheres, (c) a self-employed business and a side hustle in different spheres, and (d) a secondary job in a different sphere from their main job” (Henley, 2019).

2.3. Identity Theory

The main premise of identity theory is that an individual’s identity is fulfilled through the various roles that individuals occupy. The meanings and expectations associated with each role become incorporated into the individual’s self-concept (Stets & Burke, 2000). This, in turn, guides the behaviour of the individual occupying the role. As individuals occupy these roles, they develop role identities (Stets & Burke, 2003). Individuals form and maintain multiple identities based on these social roles (Stryker & Burke, 2000). In this study, the two identities are Primary Work Identity (PWI) and Side Hustle Identity (SHI). Both these identities require the fulfilment of a particular role or roles.

2.4. Primary Work Identity (PWI)

Based on the definitions expounded earlier in the discussion on work identity, we conceptualise Primary Work Identity (PWI) as the identity individuals form from their primary traditional job, shaped by job responsibilities, organisational culture, professional relationships, and career aspirations. We further argue that this PWI is shaped predominantly within the context of a formal employment relationship within an organisation. People spend a significant portion of their lives at work organisations, shaping their identity (Elsbach, 1999).

Long-term professional goals and core skills, a stable work environment, and a sense of belonging within an organisation help influence identities in the workplace (Ibarra, 1999). We argue that this also occurs for PWI. Work identity is maintained through continuous engagement in work-related activities (De Braine & Roodt, 2011), adherence to organisational norms, and alignment with professional values (Watson, 2008). We argue that this also applies to PWI. We then argue that this expression of PWI includes professional behaviour (Caza et al., 2018), performance-based (Beech, 2008) and commitment to career advancement (Strauss et al., 2012).

2.5. Side Hustle Identity (SHI)

Based on the scant literature on side hustles and the integration of work identity literature, we present the Side Hustle Identity (SHI) concept. This refers to the identity individuals develop through their engagement in side hustles alongside their primary work. Side hustles are typically pursued for financial gain, personal interest, skill development, or entrepreneurial aspirations (Henley, 2019). We further argue that individuals with an SHI engage in entrepreneurial activities and believe they can handle the potential downsides accompanying entrepreneurship, which is characteristic of individuals who display an entrepreneurial identity (Malmström & Öqvist, 2024). Some individuals may maintain their side hustles; others may transition to full-time entrepreneurship and leave their formal work employment (Walsh & Stephens, 2022). In this process, the SHI and PWI are being abandoned, and the individual embraces becoming an entrepreneur.

Propositions

Based on the literature review and conceptual analysis, the following propositions were developed to describe the relationships between PWI, SHI, and their impact on job satisfaction and personal fulfilment:

Proposition 1: Differentiation of PWI and SHI

Individuals develop distinct identities (PWI and SHI) based on their primary work and side hustle roles. These identities are shaped by the unique demands, environments, and motivations associated with each role (Ashforth, 2001). How individuals perceive themselves in their work context is significant, as this shapes their roles and behaviours when representing their organisations (Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997). This concept likely extends to their side hustle identities, where the specific context of the side hustle similarly influences self-perception, role adoption, and behavioural expression. The motivations behind engaging in primary work versus side hustles differ significantly, contributing to the differentiation of PWI and SHI. While primary work often focuses on job security, career advancement, financial stability, and professional growth, side hustles may be driven by passion, creativity, or the desire for additional income. We propose that understanding this differentiation is

crucial for realising how individuals navigate and integrate multiple professional roles and how their self-perception in various work contexts influences their behaviours and overall work identity.

Proposition 2: Complementarity of PWI and SHI

Primary Work Identity (PWI) and Side Hustle Identity (SHI) are complementary, each contributing uniquely to an individual's overall sense of identity and job satisfaction. Both PWI and SHI serve to meet different but complementary needs of individuals. As discussed in the previous section, the differentiation between PWI and SHI also serves as a means of complementarity. For example, an individual's PWI may help with financial stability, providing resources to support the side hustling initiatives, thus enhancing and strengthening the SHI. Fulfilling roles in one's primary work and side hustle allows individuals to have multiple identities. Multiple identities allow workers to experience and balance various spaces and ideas in which they work (Brown, 2017). According to Nahrgang et al. (2020), side hustlers need to choose a side hustle that builds on already-developed abilities and offers the chance to add variation to their work life, thus complementing their work life.

Proposition 3: Role Identity Balance between PWI and SHI leads to higher overall job satisfaction

Individuals who successfully balance their PWI and SHI will experience higher job satisfaction and personal fulfilment.

If PWI and SHI are complementary, they may allow for balancing these distinct roles within the individual's work life. This balance allows for a richer and more diverse professional identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) and work life. Side hustles that provide autonomy grant employees independence and freedom, offering more enriching work experiences (Nahrgang et al., 2020). Engaging in side hustling can lead to more positive emotions (Hansen, 2021), improve performance (Sessions et al., 2021), increase job satisfaction (Rodell, 2013), and skills development (Betts, 2006).

Proposition 4: Identity Conflict between PWI and SHI

In cases where PWI and SHI conflict (e.g., competing time demands, conflicting values), individuals may experience stress and reduced job satisfaction. Effective management of identities is crucial for maintaining well-being and professional satisfaction (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). However, individuals may experience stress and reduced job satisfaction

when side hustles conflict with full-time employment (Hirschman, 2020; Sessions, 2020). Furthermore, employees who engage in side hustles are more likely to work more hours to meet the demands of the supplementary work and vice versa (Scott et al., 2020). This can result in an excessive workload that may lead to fatigue and stress. It can also affect the employees' overall mental and physical well-being (Cham et al., 2021) and ultimately affect work performance in the primary work role. This then could lead to identity conflict and tensions experienced between PWI and SHI. Employees who engage in side hustling must balance the requirements and demands of full-time employment and side hustling. These situational factors create identity demands that are external to the individual and impact how the individual responds to creating and maintaining the balance between their various roles (Kreiner et al., 2006).

3. Methodology

A theoretical, conceptual paper was presented through a non-empirical study, and a narrative approach was employed (Hammersley, 2001). A deductive research approach was followed to draw links between work identity and side hustles. Hence, the study is considered as a qualitative research approach. A narrative review was adopted. The narrative review process included an exploration and synthesis of scholarly articles, theoretical frameworks and empirical studies relevant to work identity and side hustles. By employing this comprehensive narrative approach, the study contributes to the theoretical understanding and linkage of work identity and side hustles to present two new theoretical concepts, which are primary work identity and side hustle identity.

3.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretical Implications

The development of the PWI and SHI framework contributes to the broader field of organisational behaviour and identity theory by expanding the concept of work identity. By integrating the concept of SHI, the framework acknowledges the growing trend of side hustles and their impact on individuals' professional identities. As such, the introduction of primary and side hustle identities

Practical Implications

For practitioners and organisations, understanding PWI and SHI has several practical implications. According to Walsh and Stephens (2021), employers' entrepreneurial intentions

are prompted by leaders and managers who want their employees to be entrepreneurial and innovative. In doing so, there is a need to provide the relevant support. In addition, there is a need to support employee well-being, as organisations are likely to benefit from recognising and supporting employees' side hustles. They can do this by providing flexibility and resources, employers can help employees balance their PWI and SHI, leading to higher job satisfaction and overall well-being.

From a talent development perspective, encouraging side hustles can be a strategic approach to talent development. Employees can acquire new skills and experiences through their side hustles, benefiting their primary job roles.

There will also be a need to manage identity conflicts. Awareness of potential conflicts between PWI and SHI can help organisations implement policies and practices that minimise stress and enhance employee satisfaction. For instance, clear communication and support for work-life balance can mitigate the negative effects of identity conflicts.

3.2. Future Directions

Work identity is not a novel study. However, the take on this research is novel in contributing to the development of work identity theory. The paper highlights the potential need for future empirical research to test and validate the proposed framework of primary work identity and side hustle identity. Due to the theoretical and conceptual nature of the study, there are several recommended future directions on suggested methodologies. Future research should empirically test the proposed framework and propositions. Quantitative research is needed to develop a measure and subsequently generate longitudinal studies on examining how PWI and SHI evolve over time and how individuals navigate potential conflicts between these identities. Additionally, future research could explore strategies for effectively balancing PWI and SHI to maximize professional fulfilment and well-being. More so, studies could also investigate the impact of organisational support for side hustles on employee satisfaction and retention. By understanding the dynamics of PWI and SHI, researchers and practitioners can develop interventions and policies that promote a more integrated and fulfilling work-life experience for individuals engaged in both primary work and side hustles. Qualitative research through focus groups and interviews can assist in understanding employee experiences in engaging inside hustles and will allow for a more nuanced approach in

understanding side hustles, including individual and organisational factors that promote or inhibit this type of work.

3.3. Limitations of the study

Studies are never void of limitations. One of the primary limitations of this study is its theoretical nature. While the conceptual framework for understanding Primary Work Identity (PWI) and Side Hustle Identity (SHI) offers valuable insights, it lacks empirical validation. The propositions and relationships proposed in the framework are based on existing literature and deductions rather than empirical data. This limits the ability to generalise the findings without further empirical research. The literature review, while comprehensive, may not encompass all relevant studies and perspectives on work identity and side hustles. The rapidly evolving nature of work, particularly with the rise of the gig economy and technological advancements, means new research and insights are continually emerging. This study primarily relies on foundational and seminal works, which might not fully capture the latest trends and nuances in how work identities are formed and maintained in contemporary settings. The study provides a strong theoretical foundation but offers limited insights into the practical implementation of supporting dual identities within organisational settings. While it discusses potential organisational practices and policies, it does not provide detailed guidelines or case studies on how these can be effectively implemented and managed. This limits the immediate applicability of the findings for practitioners seeking to support employees with side hustles. While the conceptual paper presents a foundation for understanding primary work identity and side hustle identity, future studies should address these limitations to enhance the theoretical and practical implications of the concept.

4. Conclusion

The paper successfully achieved its objectives by defining PWI and SHI, elaborating on their formation, maintenance, and expression, and developing propositions to explain their relationships. The constructed theoretical framework offers valuable insights into the dual identities of primary work and side hustles, contributing to academic research and practical application in contemporary work environments. Future research can build on this foundation to further explore the implications of PWI and SHI, enhancing our understanding of how individuals derive meaning and fulfilment from their multifaceted professional lives.

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