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Author/s:

Farrugia, D;Patouras, S;Churchill, B;Allen, K

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Youth side-hustles: Enterprise culture and the post-Fordist work ethic

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David Farrugia¹, Stephanie Patouras¹,
Brendan Churchill² and Kim Allen³

Abstract

This article explores youth ‘side-hustles’ – or small-scale business activities pursued alongside paid employment – as a way of examining how enterprise culture and the ‘post-Fordist work ethic’ is reshaping relationships between identity, productivity and working time amongst young workers. The article goes beyond existing concerns with the ‘entrepreneurial self’ as a generic form of neoliberal youth subjectivity to focus on the everyday lives and business practices of young people who take up the call to become entrepreneurial by starting businesses. It draws on a large-scale mixed-methods project which examined the relationship between employment and entrepreneurship in the identities, motivations and everyday practices of young people with side-hustles. This article shows that young people pursue side-hustles motivated by a desire for self-realisation through productivity, and by uncertainty about the personal and financial rewards of employment. In practice, side-hustles expand the practices and temporalities of productivity as part of everyday life. Side-hustle business practices have a varied and ambivalent relationship to notions of value and profit, in which relatively limited profits are justified so long as nominally unproductive or leisure time is successfully made productive and profitable to some degree. In pursuing side-hustles, young people experience tensions between competing imperatives – between passion, commodification, productivity, value and profit. The article therefore explores enterprise culture and the post-Fordist work ethic as a site of tension and ambivalence, and establishes side-hustles as a distinct form of contemporary entrepreneurship amongst youth.

Keywords

enterprise culture, entrepreneurship, post-Fordism, work, youth

¹Deakin University, Australia

²University of Melbourne, Australia

³University of Leeds, UK

Corresponding author:

David Farrugia, Deakin University, Burwood, VIC 3215, Australia.

Email: d.farrugia@deakin.edu.au

Introduction

'Side-hustles' have become increasingly visible in popular culture as a term for small-scale, entrepreneurial business activities pursued by (usually young) workers alongside paid employment. Manifestations of 'enterprise culture' (McNay, 2009), side-hustles are promoted through podcasts, social media influencers, policy-makers and non-governmental organisations as a way that young workers can realise passions and secure aspirations in an uncertain and competitive labour market (e.g. Churchill et al., 2025; Leviton, 2016; Parker, 2022; YouthSense, 2022). This article draws on data from a large-scale mixed-methods study of young workers with side-hustles to examine how entrepreneurialism and 'enterprise culture' are enacted in the subjectivities and business practices of youth and young adult workers with side-hustles. Our aim here is to establish side-hustles as an object of research and as an aspect of enterprise culture for contemporary youth.

The concept of enterprise culture describes cultural discourses or 'grammars of enterprise' (Carbajo & Kelly, 2022) that encourage entrepreneurial dispositions or an 'entrepreneurial self' as a general approach to life (Ikonen & Nikunen, 2019; Kelly, 2006). In contrast, this article makes a new contribution – it is an empirical investigation of young workers who take up the call to become entrepreneurial by actually starting business ventures. The article situates these side-hustles as a distinct form of entrepreneurial activity that has emerged in the context of enterprise culture, the destandardisation of work, and the socially produced uncertainty experienced by contemporary youth. In doing this, the article brings critiques of enterprise culture together with the empirical research literature on small-scale and 'hybrid entrepreneurship' (of which side-hustles are an example [Bogenhold, 2019; Folta et al., 2010; Murgia & Pulignano, 2019; Schulz et al., 2016]). This article makes new contributions to this literature by exploring side-hustles in terms of the relationship between subjectivity and productivity, labour and leisure, and the social organisation of working time.

Drawing on survey and interview data, this article shows that youth side-hustles are pursued as hybrid labour/leisure activities with an ambivalent relationship with notions of profit and value. To understand this, we theorise side-hustles in terms of the way that the 'post-Fordist work ethic', (Farrugia, 2021; Weeks, 2011) produces new, contradictory relationships between subjectivity, productivity, value and time, which is expressed in business practices and young people's aspirations for self-realising work. Through side-hustles, passionate labour is placed in tension with commodification, and self-actualisation is placed in tension with security amidst precarity and risk. The article analyses these tensions as constitutive of a form of entrepreneurial business activity, and therefore develops theories of the contemporary work ethic into an analysis of small-scale business activities and the destandardisation of work in the lives of contemporary youth.

Side-hustles in context: Enterprise culture and hybrid entrepreneurship

'Enterprise culture' is a broad term that usefully captures the social and economic centrality of entrepreneurial dispositions for the culture of late modern societies and

subjectivities (McNay, 2009; Peters, 2001; Vallas & Cummins, 2015). Like Boltanski and Chiapello's (2007) description of the 'new spirit of capitalism', it describes an expansion of notions of entrepreneurship beyond the realms of business-ownership and into everyday life (Burchell, 1996). It encompasses the cultural celebration of dispositions such as personal responsibility, flexibility and an appetite for risk, as well as the pressure on all contemporary workers to comport themselves as though they are a business (Gershon, 2017). In this, critiques of enterprise culture have focused on the generalisation of the 'entrepreneurial self' (Brockling, 2015) as an aspect of neoliberalism. Enterprise culture has been enormously influential in studies of youth, because young people are significant targets of discourses and interventions in the areas of education, employability and social welfare aimed at making them more entrepreneurial (Carbajo & Kelly, 2022; Howie & Campbell, 2016; Ikonen & Nikunen, 2019; Kelly, 2000, 2006; Pascual & Martin, 2017). The pressure on young people to mobilise an entrepreneurial self across the whole of their life is discussed as a generic feature of youth subjectivities amidst rising societal precarity (Standing, 2011). These critiques have also focused on the enormous policy enthusiasm for entrepreneurship as a solution to youth unemployment across the OECD and EU (OECD/European Commission, 2021), in which behaving entrepreneurially is discursively positioned as an aspect of employability (Carbajo & Kelly, 2022; Noonan & Kelly, 2020), supposedly enhancing young people's chances in a labour market that demands flexibility and an appetite for risk.

Enterprise culture emerges as a concern in youth studies in the context of longstanding interest in precarious work and in precarity as a state of life more generally. The youth studies literature documents increasing uncertainty amongst young people about the role of employment in supporting a fulfilling adulthood. This is due to elevated levels of youth unemployment, the expansion of employment precarity, and increasingly uncertain relationships between educational qualifications and labour market outcomes, all of which have made biographical movements towards adulthood increasingly uncertain (Andres & Wyn, 2010; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Woodman & Wyn, 2015). In this context, productivity and employability become a critical concern for young people across many aspects of their lives. Concepts such as 'precarious leisure' (Batchelor et al., 2020) describe a tendency for young people to engage in hobbies and leisure pursuits that they hope will contribute to their employability in a competitive graduate labour market. This signals a general shift in which productivity has become a personal attribute to be cultivated in many aspects of life. Farrugia (2021) describes productivity as a kind of ethical imperative for youth subjectivities in general, arguing that contemporary young people now regard work as (ideally) a realm of personal self-actualisation, in which all aspects of the self are at least potentially productive. This is despite increasingly degraded employment conditions.

While this expansive research agenda has been critical for showing that notions of enterprise have expanded into a range of personal and institutional logics, actual business activity has become marginal to the research literature on enterprise culture, precisely because it has focused on a generalisation of entrepreneurial subjectivities in everyday life. Entrepreneurship is discussed in terms of young people's conduct across the whole of their lives, rather than standing for business activity in particular (although see McRobbie [2003, 2016] and Idriss [2022] for an exception to this, focusing on the

creative industries). Moreover, young people are typically excluded from research into entrepreneurship, which mainly focuses on the individual traits of successful business-owner ‘gazelles’ (Geldhof et al., 2014; Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2021) who are celebrated for creating further employment. This literature excludes young people who lack the capital or the desire to start businesses that will make them into employers.

An exception to this trend can be found in the literature on the destandardisation of work. ‘Side-hustles’ are essentially a popular term for ‘hybrid entrepreneurship’, in which workers carry on some kind of entrepreneurial activity alongside formal employment (Bogenhold, 2019; Folta et al., 2010; Murgia & Pulignano, 2019; Schulz et al., 2016). In the Global North, hybrid entrepreneurship is situated within broader trends such as contingent, precarious labour, hybrid and solo self-employment, and increasingly blurred boundaries between waged or salaried employment, self-employment, freelancing, subcontracting and small-scale entrepreneurship (Bogenhold, 2019; Bogenhold & Klingmair, 2016; Murgia & Pulignano, 2019). This literature emphasises the role of entrepreneurship in the broader dynamics of employment precarity, for example what Harvey et al. (2025) call ‘corrosive self-employment’, or independent contracting and self-employment arrangements that operate effectively as ways to discipline and disempower workers (Harvey et al., 2017, 2025). All of these trends emerge in the context of decades of wage stagnation, the expansion of precarious work arrangements, and a shift from ‘managerial’ to ‘entrepreneurial’ capitalism (Bogenhold, 2019; Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017).

The literature on hybrid entrepreneurship shows that it constitutes a form of economic activity distinct from solo self-employment, platform gig work or full-time business ownership. However, some of this literature is limited by the assumption that hybrid entrepreneurship is a rational and strategic response to labour market conditions that motivates a worker to shift slowly to full-time entrepreneurship – a narrative which, we will suggest, captures only one part of the complex biographical experience of youth side-hustles. The literature on older hybrid entrepreneurs suggests that they are motivated by dissatisfaction with their wages and by a desire for flexible and autonomous work, situating hybrid entrepreneurship as part of a cohesive career strategy designed to improve earnings and develop skills (Folta et al., 2010; Schulz et al., 2016). Whilst it is useful for establishing hybrid entrepreneurship as a distinct object of study, this perspective sidelines important issues, including the broader destandardisation of employment, and the working subjectivities emerging in the context of enterprise culture. This is what Murgia and Pulignano (2019) describe as the hybridisation of work more generally, in which the boundaries between employment and self-employment are made increasingly porous in terms of concrete working situations, working biographies and subjectivities. Instead, Murgia and Pulignano (2019) interpret hybrid entrepreneurship as evidence of ‘a deep cultural change that is affecting both employment forms and the ways in which workers interpret their experiences and shape their subjectivity’ (p. 1356). This encompasses the proliferation of non-standard and precarious employment, the idealisation of ‘flexibility’ on both a personal and organisational level, and a cultural emphasis on passionate and self-realising work that is particularly strong amongst youth (Farrugia, 2021; Kelly & Harrison, 2009).

Rather than viewing youth side-hustles (only) as rational and strategic labour market strategies, in this article we explore them in terms of enterprise culture, and as examples of what Weeks (2011) has called the ‘post-Fordist work ethic’. Weeks’ analysis explores the work ethic as a way that workers are disciplined through historical shifts in the promised rewards of work. She argues that in return for applying oneself to work, the Protestant work ethic promised salvation in the next life, and the Fordist work ethic promised consumption, leisure and social mobility. In contrast, Weeks argues that post-Fordist capitalism has seen an increasingly porous relationship between work and the rest of social life that has made subjectivity itself the ‘ontological reward’ of work. Work here is positioned as the key realm for realising contemporary projects of self-actualisation. This dovetails with broader discussions about the disarticulated relationships between labour, employment, productivity and value, for example, in discussions of ‘immaterial labour’ which describe how leisure practices are incorporated into valorisation regimes (Terranova, 2000). In this article we consider young people’s uptake of side-hustles within the context of the post-Fordist work ethic, in which economic productivity is positioned as a pathway to self-realisation, and in which all aspects of life are mobilised as potentially productive. In this context, we examine young people’s motivations for pursuing side-hustles, the relationship between side-hustle labour, employment and leisure time, and the everyday business practices through which young people work and price their labour.

Research design

The analysis that follows is based on data collected through a mixed-methods research programme exploring the characteristics, practices and outcomes of youth and young adults pursuing side-hustles. The project was carried out in Australia and funded by the Australian Research Council. In this, the project captures the experiences of young workers in the Global North, as opposed to situations in the Global South where hustles take place in the context of an extremely limited formal youth labour market (Thieme, 2021). The project included a survey of 1497 young workers and biographical interviews with a further 68. This article focuses mainly on the qualitative component of the project and is concerned with making theoretical contributions to studies of enterprise culture and youth subjectivities, although we also draw on some quantitative data to contextualise the participant group. To qualify for inclusion in the project, participants needed to be between 18 and 34 years old. This age range was established through engagement with the literature in the sociology of youth and entrepreneurship research. In the sociology of youth, the youth period is now regarded as increasingly lengthy, extending into the early 30s (Woodman & Wyn, 2015). In the entrepreneurship literature, young entrepreneurs are regarded as those under 35 years of age, since most business owners are above this age (Shaw & Sorensen, 2022).

Aside from this, participants had to be formally employed in a full-time, part-time or casual capacity, as well as carrying out some independent entrepreneurial activity in which they exercised control over their working time and practices, set or negotiated the price for goods or services for clients or customers, and received income directly dependent on the profits derived. This is consistent with the International Labour Organization’s

(ILO, 1993) definition of self-employment. While some of our participants' entrepreneurship was facilitated through digital platforms, ride-share and food delivery workers were excluded from the project because algorithmic control measures limit their autonomy over their working practices and prevent them from setting the price for their work (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2023).

First, a survey was administered to 1497 young workers who met the inclusion criteria. The survey aimed to understand the characteristics of young people with side-hustles, their motivations and expected outcomes, and to understand how they organise their working time. While this article is mainly concerned with participants' narratives and biographical practices, this survey provides important insights into the social characteristics and business activities of our participants. Fifty-four percent of our survey respondents identified as women. Like hybrid entrepreneurs generally, our survey respondents were disproportionately highly educated, with 45% holding a Bachelor's degree and a further 17% having post-graduate qualifications. A further third were studying in higher education at the time of the survey. Their median weekly earnings from side-hustles were A\$200 per week for an average of A\$22 per hour of working time (Churchill et al., 2025). This is less than the minimum wage for an Australian fast-food worker and shows that the majority of side-hustles are not financially lucrative. To establish side-hustles, 54% had invested money gained from employment, 18% from parents, family or friends, and 34% from a credit card or personal loan. Survey respondents' side-hustles fell broadly into four types: those who *bought and sold goods* (43%), those who undertook *personal services* for others, like dog walking (29%), *creating and monetising digital content* on platforms such as YouTube and Instagram (17%) and *creative work* such as photography or graphic design (11%). Most participants (86%) carried out their side-hustles alone.

Following the survey, we conducted semi-structured biographical interviews with 68 participants who were recruited through social media advertising on Facebook and Instagram. Social media advertising asked for people who did something to make money, as well as working in a paid job. Inclusion criteria were the same as the survey. As we recruited, we interviewed all participants who came forward and met inclusion criteria until we arrived at a sample that allowed us to address our research questions. The qualitative sample included 40 women, 26 men and 2 non-binary participants. Interviews asked about participants' pathways into entrepreneurship, their motivations and expected outcomes, their everyday business practices, the relationship between employment and entrepreneurship in their own lives and their future career aspirations. In discussions of business practices, interviews also asked about issues of time, money and pricing – how participants established what to charge, how much they expected to earn, and how this related to the time they spent on their side-hustles.

To establish side-hustles as an aspect of enterprise culture, the analysis presented in this article explores young people's motivations, personal investments and everyday practices, rather than the outcomes of side-hustlers or their impact on young people's economic situations. Our aim is to explore what is specific to side-hustles as a form of entrepreneurial labour and hybrid entrepreneurship, focusing on the practices and ethics that constitute this intersection of employment and entrepreneurship. With this focus, our findings are divided into two sections. First, through an analysis of participants' motivations and

expected outcomes, we explore the role that side-hustles play in participants' definitions of themselves as workers, and the way that participants understood their side-hustles as forms of work. Second, we explore the relationship between time, money and value in the way that side-hustles are practised.

Side-hustles: Leisure, labour and a critique of work

Throughout their narratives, participants described the urge to make a hobby, passion or leisure activity productive, alongside a broader critique of employment as a realm that placed limits on aspiration and self-actualisation. This emerged amidst a general anxiety about economic uncertainty. Exploring these narratives, this first part of our analysis develops side-hustles as forms of labour organised through tensions that reflect the structural conditions and imperatives of enterprise culture. With this analysis, we develop concepts of enterprise culture and the post-Fordist work ethic as sites of contradiction and ambivalence that emerge from the intersection of precarious employment and the desire for self-actualisation through labour that is constitutive of the relationship between employment and entrepreneurship in young people's lives.

Our survey shows that the number one motivation for starting a side-hustle was enjoyment and passion, and our conversations with participants about their motivations and definitions of work uncovered those for whom side-hustles were seen as 'hobbies' or passion projects, and therefore not really as work at all. For example, Aditi was a 26-year-old bartender who buys and resells clothes from second-hand stores in what she called 'thrift-flipping'. Aditi described how her side-hustle developed slowly from a love of 'op-shopping' and from her success in selling clothes online that she had initially bought for herself:

The shift was because I was inspired. Obviously, people liked my taste and they wanted to buy stuff. I found the profit margin was quite good, because it's just going to go to waste sitting in my closet and I have a lot of clothes. That shift began. I went out op shopping and I started noticing pieces that I might not wear, but I know other people would wear. I just started doing it because it was fun. I obviously love op shopping, and it's a great way to spend a day. Just in your mind, it takes my mind off work and everything else.

Obviously, it's not anywhere near as stressful as real-life work of any kind. I started because it was really fun and I just enjoy doing it. Now, I've got a studio in the back of my house. Yes, and I just organize stuff there and fix things up.

In this narrative, Aditi goes so far as to define her side-hustle as a break from work, that is, as a kind of productive leisure activity. For these participants, turning a profit was regarded as a satisfying way to practise and extend their hobbies. Reminiscent of discussions of passionate attachments to paid employment, other participants described their side-hustle in terms of 'passion', gesturing towards notions of self-actualisation through work (Farrugia, 2021; Kelly & Harrison, 2009). Sebastian, a 30-year-old casual audiovisual worker with multiple side-hustles in photography, web development, editing and production, provides an example of this trend:

I'm a very creative person. For whichever reason, all these different things are interesting to me. The bit where someone can— all these different things are interesting to me. The bit where you can offer something and then maybe get hopefully a bit of money or something back is obviously better than nothing. . . Definitely a passion. . .

In previous discussions of passionate labour, such as Farrugia (2021), passion is theorised as an ethic of middle-class self-realisation. However, while young people with side-hustles are disproportionately tertiary educated and professionally employed, notions of passion were articulated in this project by participants with a range of employment situations and class positions. In this sense, for young people with side-hustles, passion and passionate labour are better understood as aspects of entrepreneurial practice, rather than a reflection of classed dispositions towards work. This argument runs parallel to discussions of passion as an aspect of creative industry work in locating passion as an aspect of a specific labouring practice. In the case of side-hustles, passion is best understood as a way that the desire for self-realising work is pursued at the intersection of employment and entrepreneurship. This is because while these side-hustles were described in terms of creativity, passion and leisure, Sebastian's narrative also introduces an ambivalence that we suggest is critical to understanding how side-hustles relate to broader dynamics of enterprise culture. Rather than seeing profit-making as a straightforward pathway towards passionate self-actualisation, participants' narratives suggested that side-hustles brought passion and commodification into tension with one another in a way that is specific to side-hustle entrepreneurship:

I think the ethics of that definitely is difficult because you start to think if it feels right or moral to ask for anything in return for something that you just pump out and that you enjoy doing. As I've heard people describe it to me, it's like people are paying for your time and your knowledge and all this stuff.

I feel a bit weird when I see money in an account at all. It's always a blessing. It's a good thing. I'm not rolling in buckets of stuff. When it does happen, it's a good thing. I'm just thankful and just try to do a better job the next time and all that.

This tension between passion and commodification is constitutive of side-hustles as a form of entrepreneurship. It is one of the factors in participants' decisions to run their businesses as side-hustles rather than pathways to full-time entrepreneurship. When asked about her motivations, Evelyn, a 28-year-old retail worker selling digital art on the side, spoke of side-hustles as a compromise between passion and money:

A little bit of both. It was something I did anyway and I wanted to do it in a way that wouldn't ruin it. I didn't want it to be my full-time job, but just as, I'm making this art anyway. I may as well sometimes make a little bit of money off it.

Evelyn's narrative is critical for understanding the role of the post-Fordist work ethic in shaping side-hustles. The tension between passion and commodification comes from participants' passionate investment in their side-hustles, which they are afraid of 'ruining' by making them more like 'jobs'. For example, Tina, who had a side-hustle baking cakes, stated:

I love what I do. . . but I don't know that I would want to make it a full-time business, to be honest. . . I'm pretty grateful for where I'm at and I don't want to turn it into a full-time role just simply because I think that I would lose my passion for cake making if I was doing it every single day.

On the one hand, the reticence to formalise or invest fully in side-hustles can be seen as a resistance to commodification, which would 'ruin it'. However, participants maintain their side-hustles as such precisely to realise their desire for passionate labour. When mobilised as part of a side-hustle, passion emerges here as something fragile, highly cherished but contradictory – nurtured and developed through entrepreneurship but vulnerable to ruin by becoming a 'job'. Thus it was not simply the case that our participants wanted their side-hustles to remain 'fun' and youthful as opposed to more 'serious' forms of work, but rather that their investment in passionate labour is accompanied by a broader critique of work – or more specifically, of employment – in relation to its potential to provide personal satisfaction, self-actualisation and reward for effort.

In our quantitative survey, over 75% of participants felt satisfied in their jobs. However, our qualitative data demonstrate a general attitude that the rewards from employment are limited to whatever financial security it could provide, that work is likely to be alienating, and that self-realisation should thus be pursued through entrepreneurship. Emma, who worked full-time in finance and thrived on the side, was worried about the consequences of dedicating her life to paid employment for these reasons:

I don't really want to go into a role where I, for lack of a better way of putting it, kill myself because I'm working so many hours a week that I can't dedicate time or mental space for things that I enjoy like thrifting or even like spending time with family and doing other things, essentially.

Like Emma, Darcy also projected himself into an imagined future in which a lifetime of alienating labour left him with regrets. Darcy worked full-time in finance with a mobile coffee trailer as his side-hustle:

With corporate it's like, 'Oh yes', your career ladder that they expect is 30 years. Being so young it's not quite what I want to do to lock into that. It's like I don't want to get 10 years in of just burning out and then realize, 'Oh, crap, I didn't enjoy that.'

A commitment to the post-Fordist work ethic is evident here, where labour is desired to be a fulfilling, rewarding investment in the self. This is understood in a biographical sense, that is as part of a biographical project of self-realisation now in which participants hope for a fulfilled adulthood. However, participants were wary of committing themselves to paid employment for fear of ending up burnt out, dissatisfied and under-rewarded. Participants were also critical of the hierarchical nature of workplaces, and the uncertain reward for effort that they experienced in their jobs. This scepticism could be found in participants' narratives regardless of what kind of work they were in, and was shared amongst participants of different class locations. This included relatively poorly paid or precarious workers such as Steven a 25-year-old who worked in fast food, or Josh, a 33-year-old who worked in an administrative capacity for an insurance company

and who talked about being a ‘wage slave’. It also included participants with relatively well remunerated professional work, such as Tim, a 33-year-old data management professional with an e-commerce side-hustle selling toys and home goods. Tim also positioned his side-hustle and entrepreneurship generally as a situation in which he would be rewarded for effort and an appetite for risk in ways that he would not in a hierarchical corporate workplace:

The way I look at it as well is like, your career is capped at X amount because you’re only making X amount per month. . . Whereas at least this way, the more effort you put in, then it’s unlimited. However [much] effort you want to put, you want to put a little effort, then you could get a little return. If you put heaps of effort, you get more. You could put heaps of effort and get little return as well. I guess that’s the nature of it. There’s that element of risk, which is the exciting side of it.

Unlike the ‘hobbyists’ discussed above, Tim here positions himself much more closely to the ideal of the entrepreneur in business. His personal satisfaction comes from competently managing risk and receiving a direct reward from his own efforts, and is described in contrast to his experience of paid employment, despite his well remunerated and secure job. Tim is open to the possibility of growing the business into a full-time commitment. However, like other participants, he says that he would not want to attempt this until he had paid a mortgage on his house and would therefore incur less financial risk. In this, Tim is representative of most of the participants in our qualitative sample in saying that their main job provides the security they need to spend time and money on their side-hustles. In this sense, the security gained from Tim’s employment facilitates his ability to take risks with his side-hustle. Jack, working part-time with an e-commerce side-hustle, also articulated this reliance on paid employment:

I feel like that’s the primary type thing. If that was to be taken away, I feel like I wouldn’t really have a leg to stand on. If I took the side hustle away, then I would still be okay, if you know what I mean. It’s the thing that gives me security and safety.

As such, rather than a cohesive career strategy to move away from paid employment, these participants largely saw themselves continuing to work both side-by-side. Unsure whether paid employment could fulfil them, but equally unable to part with its benefits, side-hustles provided a sense of freedom and mitigate against the disenchantment with work. This runs contrary to policy enthusiasm for entrepreneurship as a pathway into the labour market, because in these cases, employment is a condition for the viability of young people’s side-hustles.

Despite this, tensions between passionate self-actualisation, commodification and employment are articulated against a broader sense of economic uncertainty. After passion and enjoyment, our survey respondents ranked not earning enough money in their current job a close second in their motivations for starting their businesses, and public debates about the ‘cost of living’ were frequently discussed alongside broader concerns with issues such as homeownership and debt. Lucas, a 23-year-old former chef, hospital ward host and student who had a side-hustle as a photographer and painter, said that he used money from his side-hustle to fund discretionary spending beyond his daily living expenses:

The thing is the passion for it, it is motivated by passion. It's also during the cost of living crisis as a nearly graduate student it's just good to make some extra cash on the side that I can use for other stuff. My logic is if I can use that for cash, I don't really want to tap into my savings for a lot of non-essential purchases. I pay my rent and utilities with my savings, but if I need to buy let's say a tub of protein or a hoodie, things like that if I can sell a painting for that, that's cool.

Some participants hoped that their side-hustle would support larger economic goals, such as homeownership. Independent housing is a key marker of adulthood, but as Adkins et al. (2020) have argued, the financialisation of housing has meant that the cost of houses has become disarticulated from the value of wages, meaning that even well remunerated professional employment does not constitute a pathway to homeownership for young people. The housing market is a key driver of other relatively new financial practices amongst youth, such as small-scale investing in stocks and cryptocurrency (Hanckel & Hendry, 2025), and it also motivates side-hustles. Darcy mentioned the desire to buy a house in the future as a reason for starting a side-hustle, which supplemented his salary as a full-time financial planner in a graduate position:

At this point, it's a little bit of a side hustle, working more towards a business, hopefully. Myself and my partner, we run a mobile coffee trailer. I think that just doing something on the side. We wanted to look to save up for a house and we thought it would be a good opportunity to earn a little bit on the side, which eventually it did become.

I like working in financial planning as an associate for a financial planner. It's quite different. I just feel like because I'm pretty new, I only graduated from uni in 2023, so it's like, 'Oh, I'm on a graduate wage.' I just feel like, 'Oh, I got to do extra to make up the difference', because graduate wages are fairly entry-level. It just makes me feel better.

Again, this aspiration was shared by young people in different forms of employment and class backgrounds. Kylie, a 23-year-old retail worker with a side-hustle selling collectibles, situated her entrepreneurial work as a way of replicating the success that her working-class parents had had in paying off their own mortgage:

My mum was a stay-at-home mum. A lot of work, no pay. My father, he did retail, but he was in and out of employment. We were definitely struggling. I thought you're like, oh, we were quite poor. . . but my parents paid off their house when they were, I must have been about 12 at the time. I just remember thinking that was just the coolest thing, like to have paid off your house, I just think it's absolutely incredible. . . I'm definitely prepared to sacrifice a lot of everyday expenses if that means then that I can own an apartment.

Taken together, these narratives reveal tensions in young people's investments in work and productivity amidst a backdrop of economic uncertainty. They include a critique of the contemporary workplace and employment more generally, in which both the rewards of employment are regarded as uncertain, incomplete or absent, even when participants report being satisfied with their jobs. Whilst it is a critique of work, it is articulated in and through the post-Fordist work ethic, including the desire that work should, at least ideally, mobilise passionate commitments and be self-actualising. Side-hustles, therefore,

reflect an ongoing investment in productivity as a means for personal fulfilment outside of paid employment. Faced with uncertainty in the world of work, young people convert their leisure practices and personal interests into small business ventures, thereby reinvesting themselves in labour as a means for self-realisation despite the structural uncertainty of the labour market. In this way, the work ethic becomes more pervasive with the expansion of side-hustles, precisely because of the expansion of precarious work and the degraded and uncertain role that employment can play in supporting fulfilling biographical movements towards a secure adulthood. A general critique of employment is accompanied here with an intensification of a young person's personal investments in labour more generally, encompassing leisure practices, passionate investments, and aspirations for a future adulthood signified by achievements such as homeownership. With this in mind, the second part of our analysis focuses on the way that these tensions are articulated in young people's business practices, in particular in the relationship between time, productivity and value as a part of everyday working life.

Time, productivity and value

An article offering advice on how to start a side-hustle published in *The Guardian* ('Jumpstart your side-hustle', Leviton, 2016) encourages readers to ask themselves the question: 'What do I love so much, it makes time stop?' Indeed, conversations with participants about their everyday business practices show that through side-hustles, the work ethic reshapes the temporality of labour as a part of everyday life. Examining the relationship between time, value and side-hustle labour shows that side-hustles are carried out in and through nominally 'unproductive' time in young people's daily life, either by expanding disciplined work-time to more of the day, or through being intermingled within leisure activities. In all cases, they represent a deliberate effort to minimise unproductive time in general. Conversations about how young people attribute value to their labour and price their goods or services also reveal an ambivalent and indirect relationship between labour time and value that is specific to side-hustles as hybrid labour/leisure activities. Side-hustles represent an expansion of working time with an ambivalent and highly circumscribed relationship with profit and value.

In conversations about how they fit side-hustle labour into their days and weeks, participants commonly talked about a need to avoid unproductive time, as though if they had time to relax or carry out unproductive leisure activities, then they should or 'may as well' convert this into productive working time through their side-hustles. Comments like the following were common:

I just justify it to myself with being like, well, you're just going to sit on your phone and scroll on TikTok, so you might as well be trying to do something productive. (Alison, a 32-year-old administration assistant who also sold ornaments)

If I wasn't doing the baking, I'd just be doing nothing. It's more about just keeping myself occupied and not rotting away on my phone or something like that. . . it's a bonus of keeping myself occupied. (Elijah, 20-year-old student and casual church assistant with a side-hustle baking)

Young people with side-hustles regard unproductive time as something to be avoided and which would lead, in Elijah's words to 'rotting away'. Side-hustles were also therefore a way that leisure time or downtime can be made productive. There were two ways that this took place: some young people would work to a structured routine, treating this time as though they were 'at work', whereas for others the temporality of their side-hustle labour was intermingled with other activities and times.

Beginning with the first strategy, defining this time as 'work time' was described first of all as a way of enhancing productivity. Mia, a 27-year-old full-time dental assistant with a side-hustle as a freelance writer offers an example of this process, in which she deliberately structures her side-hustle as if it were employment:

At dental. . . It's literally a job where I just go in, do my job, clock off, and it's finished. Then for writing, I've got my own structure now where it's very similar, but with writing, it's very much in my own control. I've got the discipline structure.

I'll be in my own space, which is where I am now. My partner will be asleep. The dog will be chilling out on the couch. . . My phones are away. . . I would say it's a lot more productive in the work. . . I treat it as if I'm at work, like I've clocked in, I'm at work, this is what I'm here to do, and then just treat it like a normal working time slot.

Practising their side-hustles in this way means that the temporal discipline expected of employees who are 'on the clock' is extended into other parts of the day. However, whilst it is a disciplined practice designed to enhance productivity, this approach to working time is also a strategic way to limit the time spent working on side-hustles, and to draw distinctions between this and (increasingly limited) leisure time. Aditi, who we quoted above discussing her 'thrift-flipping' side-hustle, followed a similar routine to make time for tasks such as photographing and setting online listings to sell items. This is to avoid 'doing it forever', and feeling a sense of control over the temporality of her working day:

I set specific hours and days where I'm like, 'I do this', and then it's kind of checked off for the day, and I can go back to my regularly scheduled life. . . I find that setting hours is really helpful, because otherwise, I can get sucked in and I can just keep doing it forever.

However, participants who took this disciplined approach to the distinction between working and non-working time were far outnumbered by those who took the second approach, in which they worked on side-hustles whilst also carrying out other everyday activities. This second strategy generally reflects participants' desire to avoid turning their side-hustles into a 'job'. Rather than simply turning leisure time into labour, for these participants side-hustles take place in ways that intersperse leisure and labour practices into a single activity and moment in the day or evening. Participants like Alison, a 32-year-old administration worker and ornament seller also quoted above, would often describe working on their side-hustles whilst doing other things, such as watching television:

Most of it's like, well, I can do two things at the same time. I can put the TV on in the background if it's just, if I want to really watch something, I'll sit and watch it. Most of the time I can just

put something in the background and I can work on something else and I feel like I'm achieving something.

This was even the case for participants like Tim, whose commitment of 20–30 hours a week on his side-hustle was substantial relative to other participants, but still took place interspersed with leisure activities in the evening:

When I'm packing, I'll be having Netflix on, or watching some movies, something like that. It's winding down, but then also doing something at the time. If I was to sit there and treat it like work, I think that would be different as well, but normally, like I said, it's winding down before I go to bed, or after dinner, and I'll just put the kids to sleep. Then it's like, 'All right, that four to five hours then what can I do?'. . . I feel like if I didn't have it, I'll be bored. I think it's just become part of my life. . .

Tim emphasises that he does not treat his side-hustle 'like work', but rather as something that he does to 'wind down', suggesting that this kind of productivity is relaxing for him. Nevertheless, his side-hustle takes up the majority of the time left over after working and looking after his family. In this way, time spent working on side-hustles is made productive but is not regarded as 'work' in the usual sense.

Tim, whose side-hustle was relatively profitable compared to the rest of our qualitative sample, had clear financial goals for his side-hustle and a clear sense of how much money he was making per month. This was typically the case for participants who saw their side-hustles as potentially supporting substantial future financial goals. However, many other participants were much less focused on maximising their profits, precisely because their side-hustles are experienced as a kind of productive leisure time and therefore as less onerous than paid employment. For example Jack, a 34-year-old retail worker with an e-commerce side-hustle, said that because he did not see his side-hustle as a 'job' that he was relatively unconcerned with the degree to which his efforts were remunerated:

I suppose it just depends how onerous I feel it all is. If it was taking up so much time and effort, I would be wanting to get more back from it. If it's something that I find enjoyable and easy and I don't really see it as much as a job that I have to put work into, then I'd be happy to take smaller returns.

Elijah's attitude towards profit is similar: that is, because his side-hustle takes up time that would otherwise be unproductive, he is relatively unconcerned with maximising profit:

I'm just happy to do it because I wouldn't be doing anything else. . . It hasn't really gotten to the stage yet where it feels a chore [or that] I should be getting paid for the time I'm putting in.

Claudia, a 32-year-old administration worker with an e-commerce side-hustle goes so far as to acknowledge that her profits would be fairly minimal if understood relative to the time she puts into her business:

The profit margin-wise, if we don't count my time and energy put into the business, the margin is acceptable. If I really put my time and energy into the consideration, I would say we're not making much money at all. As I said, it started off as a dream, as a passion, and I'm still doing it mostly driven by my passion. It's just something I enjoy doing in my free time. Yes, less about generating income, but obviously need to break even.

For these participants, what matters is not (only) making money, but rather making time productive. As Claudia indicates, the status of side-hustles as passion projects that take place during what would otherwise be leisure time means that these participants felt that they simply needed to make enough money to justify defining this as productive time. Profit operates in large part as an ongoing confirmation of this productive use of time. Whether they expand their disciplined adherence to 'work' hours, or hybridise their labour and leisure time, side-hustle labour has an indeterminate relationship with value and profit because it takes place during otherwise unproductive times, when young people would otherwise be 'doing nothing'. For this reason, even profits that are relatively small are justified as a productive use of time. These profits may be especially marginal compared with the expansive role that side-hustle labour plays in young workers' everyday lives, and indeed this attitude may contribute to a particularly disadvantaged or marginal position within the markets for goods and services that participants are operating within, justifying lower prices relative to competitors so long as they can continue to actualise passionate and autonomous productive subjectivities.

Conclusion

Side-hustles are strategies to make the self, and the time of everyday life, productive, and thereby to realise aspirations for passionate self-realisation through autonomous labour. They are also embedded within broader biographical temporalities, in which young people hope that in the future they will look back on their lives with satisfaction and fulfilment rather than alienation and regret. These aspirations, anxieties and biographical orientations become visible in part in participants' critiques of employment and of the concept of the 'job', which is accompanied by a general uncertainty about whether employment can provide a pathway to a secure adulthood. Ironically, despite participants' critique of the world of work as being stifling and failing to reward their efforts, the financial rewards of side-hustles are uncertain and compare unfavourably to low-wage, precarious work, meaning that the material rewards for side-hustle labour are even more uncertain. Side-hustles are therefore forms of labour that are experienced and practised in opposition to the logic of paid employment, but represent a tremendous personal investment in productivity and labour more generally despite a lack of financial reward. Side-hustles demonstrate the pervasiveness of enterprise culture, but they also show that the post-Fordist work ethic is a source of tension, precisely because of the nature of the contemporary labour market. These tensions – between passion, commodification, productivity, value and profit – underscore the contradictory nature of entrepreneurial subjectivities and of the relationship between employment and entrepreneurship. However, negotiating these tensions actually means a significant expansion of productive time throughout their days, in which more and more of everyday life is converted into labour.

By studying side-hustles, this article makes contributions to studies of young people and enterprise culture, and to critical studies of hybrid entrepreneurship. In relation to enterprise culture, side-hustles are not based on a generic set of entrepreneurial dispositions mobilised across the whole of life. Rather, they are practised through distinct sets of tensions between labour, value and time, and represent a strategic and reflexive response to the nature of the labour market specifically. However, and contrary to much of the literature on hybrid entrepreneurship, side-hustles do not represent a cohesive labour-market strategy. They are not practised in order to enhance young people's careers, and they are also distinctive in that they represent business activities with an ambivalent relationship to profit. For young people with side-hustles the relationship between employment and entrepreneurship is a source of tension rather than strategic synergy, and the same can be said for the money they make through their side-hustle labour. Instead, side-hustles are a distinctive form of hybrid entrepreneurship that emerges within and reproduces the logics of enterprise culture and the post-Fordist work ethic, but that also reveals tensions within the relationship between productivity, labour and self-realisation that emerge from the relationship between employment and entrepreneurship in young people's working lives.

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