

Managing Hustle Culture through Psychological Life Skills: A Review on Burnout Prevention in the Creator and Gig Economies

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Abstract

The expansion of digital labour has transformed contemporary work structures, with increasing numbers of individuals engaging in creator-based, freelance, and gig-oriented occupations. While these work models offer flexibility, autonomy, and creative expression, they are also embedded within a pervasive hustle culture that normalizes constant productivity, visibility, and self-optimization. As income and professional relevance become tied to performance metrics, algorithmic favour, and self-branding, workers experience heightened psychological vulnerability, including burnout, anxiety, identity–work fusion, and emotional exhaustion. This paper adopts a mixed qualitative–review approach to examine how psychological life skills function as protective mechanisms against burnout in the creator and gig economies. A narrative review of interdisciplinary literature is integrated with qualitative insights derived from semi-structured interviews conducted with corporate employees and information technology professionals experiencing high-performance work cultures. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory, Conservation of Resources Theory, and Social Comparison Theory, the study explores how life skills such as self-awareness, decision-making, emotional coping, interpersonal relationships, and effective communication enable individuals to regulate motivation, manage uncertainty, and establish sustainable work boundaries. Findings indicate that both digital creators and corporate professionals report parallel experiences of overwork, emotional depletion, and guilt associated with rest. Participant narratives further reveal that strong life skills facilitate resilience, reduce burnout symptoms, and promote long-

term career sustainability. However, the study emphasizes that individual skill development alone is insufficient. Platform organizations, employers, and policymakers must share responsibility by fostering transparent systems, social protection, and mental-health support. Strengthening psychological life skills should therefore be viewed as a critical economic and well-being investment within evolving labour ecosystems.

Keywords: *hustle culture, creator economy, gig work, burnout, life skills, qualitative research, self-determination theory, digital labour, resilience*

1. Introduction

Rapid digitalization has fundamentally reshaped the organization and meaning of work in the twenty-first century. Platform-mediated labour, freelance marketplaces, and digital content creation have enabled millions of individuals to earn income outside traditional employment structures. From ride-hailing and food delivery services to graphic design, digital marketing, software development, and influencer-based content production, contemporary labour systems increasingly promise autonomy, flexibility, and creative independence. The International Labour Organization (2021) notes that digital labour platforms now constitute a significant component of national and global economies, particularly among young adults and creative professionals.

Despite these apparent advantages, the psychological and economic realities of digital labour are far more complex. Unlike conventional employment systems that offer stable wages, defined roles, and institutional protections, creators and gig workers must continuously manage their own employability, visibility, and income security. Success is frequently tied to opaque performance metrics, algorithmic favour, and sustained online presence. As a result, work becomes inseparable from identity, and professional relevance demands constant self-promotion and availability. Duffy and Wissinger (2017) describe this condition as self-commodification, wherein individuals themselves become the product within attention-based economies.

This environment has given rise to what is widely termed hustle culture. Hustle culture promotes relentless productivity, speed, and overcommitment as moral virtues, framing rest as laziness and self-sacrifice as ambition. Although often portrayed as motivational, hustle culture

has been increasingly associated with anxiety, emotional exhaustion, identity–work fusion, and burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Smith & McBride, 2023). Importantly, hustle culture is not confined to creators or freelancers; it also permeates corporate and technology sectors where constant connectivity, long working hours, and performance dashboards normalize overwork.

Burnout is commonly defined as a syndrome comprising emotional exhaustion, depersonalization or cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). While burnout research has historically focused on healthcare and organizational settings, emerging evidence suggests that creators and gig workers may experience intensified burnout due to financial precarity, isolation, blurred work–life boundaries, and continuous evaluation. In this context, psychological life skills emerge as critical internal resources that enable individuals to regulate motivation, manage uncertainty, and sustain well-being under prolonged pressure.

The World Health Organization (1997) defines life skills as psychosocial abilities that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. These include ten core competencies: decision-making, problem-solving, creative thinking, critical thinking, effective communication, interpersonal relationship skills, self-awareness, empathy, coping with emotions, and coping with stress. This paper reviews interdisciplinary literature and integrates qualitative insights from corporate and information technology professionals to examine how these World Health Organization defined life skills function as protective mechanisms against burnout in creator, gig, and high-performance work cultures.

2. Objectives of the Study

The present study seeks to

1. Examine the psychological risks associated with hustle culture across creator, gig, and corporate work environments.
2. Analyze how psychological life skills function as protective mechanisms against burnout.
3. Integrate qualitative insights from professionals experiencing high-performance work stress.
4. Propose implications for individuals, organizations, and policymakers.

3. Significance of the Study

Life skills are frequently dismissed as secondary or “soft” competencies when compared with technical expertise or professional credentials. This study challenges such assumptions by reframing psychological life skills as essential economic and survival tools within contemporary labour systems characterized by uncertainty, self-management, and precarity. By connecting psychological well-being to employability, creativity, and productivity, the study contributes to interdisciplinary discourse in psychology and economics and offers a practical framework for sustainable work in the future of labour.

4. Review of Literature

4.1 Hustle Culture, Identity, and Psychological Pressure

Hustle culture frames continuous productivity as a moral obligation and equates professional success with personal worth. Digital capitalism encourages entrepreneurial identities in which individuals must remain visible, responsive, and competitive at all times (Millar & Thomas, 2021). In creator economies, where personal narratives, emotions, and aesthetics are commodified, professional evaluation often feels like evaluation of the self. Ibarra and Barbulescu (2020) describe this process as identity–work fusion, wherein work outcomes significantly shape self-concept and self-esteem.

Visible performance metrics intensify these pressures. Likes, views, ratings, and follower count function as public scoreboards that invite constant social comparison. Even in corporate environments, performance indicators and ranking systems replicate similar dynamics. Over time, workers internalize the belief that rest threatens relevance and that slowing down signals failure, leading to guilt, anxiety, and compulsive productivity.

4.2 Gig Economy, Autonomy, and Resource Insecurity

The gig economy offers flexibility and autonomy but simultaneously transfers economic and emotional risk to workers. Gig workers often lack guaranteed income, paid leave, health benefits, or institutional support. Conservation of Resources theory posits that stress arises when individuals perceive threats to valued resources or experience sustained resource loss without replenishment (Hobfoll, 1989). In gig and creator economies, unstable income, algorithmic unpredictability, and limited bargaining power constitute chronic resource threats.

To protect against perceived loss, workers may accept excessive workloads, underprice their labour, and postpone rest. While these strategies may offer short-term security, they accelerate long-term depletion and burnout. Research consistently links such conditions to emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and disengagement (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

4.3 Burnout in Digital and High-Performance Work Cultures

Burnout emerges when sustained effort exceeds opportunities for recovery. Digital labour intensifies this imbalance through blurred boundaries, constant connectivity, and rapid feedback cycles. Smith and McBride (2023) report that workers whose income depends on continuous performance monitoring experience heightened anxiety and guilt associated with rest. Creators frequently describe hypervigilance toward analytics, isolation due to solitary work, and pressure to remain perpetually “on.” Corporate professionals operating in metric-driven environments report parallel experiences of exhaustion and emotional depletion.

4.4 Integrating Psychological and Economic Perspectives

Three theoretical perspectives clarify the relationship between hustle culture and burnout. Self-Determination Theory emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness for well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Hustle culture undermines these needs by converting autonomy into self-exploitation, tying competence to unstable external validation, and weakening meaningful social connection. Conservation of Resources theory explains burnout as a resource loss spiral in which depleted energy, time, and finances increase vulnerability to further loss (Hobfoll, 1989). Social comparison processes amplify distress in highly visible environments, where constant upward comparison erodes self-worth and fuels imposter feelings.

5. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an integrative framework combining Self-Determination Theory, Conservation of Resources theory, and Social Comparison theory. Within this framework, hustle culture increases demand while eroding protective resources. Psychological life skills intervene by restoring internal regulation, protecting motivational needs, and stabilizing identity. These skills operate as internal buffers that mitigate burnout risk while supporting sustainable engagement and productivity.

6. Methodology

The study employs a mixed qualitative–review methodology. A narrative literature review synthesized peer-reviewed research and institutional reports published between 2018 and 2024 on burnout, digital labour, and life skills. Qualitative insights were drawn from semi-structured interviews with 12 professionals (six corporate employees and six information technology professionals) aged 25–45 years, selected through purposive sampling based on experiences of high workload and performance pressure. Interviews explored perceptions of productivity, rest, self-worth, and coping strategies. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and triangulate findings with existing literature.

7. Analysis and Discussion

7.1 Psychological Risk Factors in Hustle Cultures

Participants consistently reported chronic exhaustion, anxiety, and guilt associated with constant availability. One Information Technology professional stated, “Even on weekends, I feel anxious if I’m not checking emails. Rest feels like I’m falling behind.” A corporate manager observed, “Your worth is measured by how visible you are. If you slow down, people assume you’re not serious.” These narratives closely mirror creators’ experiences of algorithm-driven visibility anxiety.

Across contexts, five interconnected risk factors emerged: constant availability, identity–work fusion, performance opacity, social comparison, and financial precarity. Together, these forces create a self-perpetuating burnout cycle in which insecurity drives overwork, overwork leads to exhaustion, exhaustion undermines performance, and reduced performance intensifies insecurity.

7.2 World Health Organization Life Skills as Protective Mechanisms

The ten life skills identified by the World Health Organization function as an integrated protective system in digital labour environments. Self-awareness enables individuals to recognize early warning signs of burnout and separate self-worth from fluctuating metrics. Decision-making supports value-based choices about workload and compensation, preventing impulsive overcommitment. Problem-solving transforms vague stress into manageable action steps, while creative thinking allows workers to design sustainable routines rather than repeating harmful patterns.

Critical thinking helps individuals question internalized hustle narratives and unrealistic comparisons, reducing shame and perfectionism. Effective communication enables clear boundary-setting and negotiation with clients, teams, and platforms. Interpersonal relationship skills reduce isolation by fostering peer support networks. Empathy, including self-compassion, stabilizes emotional responses to feedback and failure. Coping with emotions supports regulation under criticism and rejection, while coping with stress focuses on recovery, rest, and physiological regulation. Together, these skills protect psychological resources, restore motivation, and support long-term sustainability.

7.3 Limits of Individual Skill Development

Although life skills significantly enhance resilience, structural conditions can still undermine well-being. Algorithmic opacity, unstable compensation, and organizational cultures that reward overwork limit the effectiveness of individual coping. Gender dynamics and power imbalances may further constrain boundary-setting. These findings underscore the need for shared responsibility among individuals, organizations, platforms, and policymakers.

8. Implications

For individuals, cultivating the ten World Health Organization life skills can support sustainable engagement, healthier motivation, and economic stability. For platforms and organizations, reducing burnout requires transparency, fair compensation, mental health resources, and cultures that normalize rest. For policymakers, recognizing burnout as an occupational risk and extending social protection to non-traditional workers are essential steps toward sustainable labour ecosystems.

9. Conclusion

The expansion of creator and gig economies has generated new opportunities alongside profound psychological challenges. Hustle culture, performance pressure, and identity–work fusion threatens well-being and long-term career sustainability. This review demonstrates that WHO-defined psychological life skills function as essential protective resources that support resilience, creativity, and economic durability. However, individual resilience must be complemented by systemic accountability. Sustainable labour futures require shared responsibility to ensure that innovation and productivity do not come at the cost of human well-being.

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