

Hustle culture and mental health

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Abstract

Lately it seems like productivity has become the prevailing virtue of our time. Consequently, a new trend in work perception has risen. It is called hustle culture and it resembles some pre-existing trends, such as the *rise and grind* mentality, toxic productivity and toil glamour. This is a culture that promotes relentless effort in pursuit of success or financial gain, often at the cost of one's well-being. Yet, there has not been much talk about its sustainability and its impact on productivity and well-being. The aim of this paper is to define the hustle culture while explaining how it came about and what is assuring its persistence. In addition, it reviews the existing literature in order to determine its short- and long-term effects on mental health and productivity. Finally, it discusses possible future alternatives that would be more sustainable.

Keywords: hustle culture, mental health, productivity

Introduction

If you are a user of at least one social media platform, chances are you have come across motivational posts from successful entrepreneurs advising you to work longer and harder if you want to thrive. They are usually labelled with hashtags like *#ThankGodItsMonday*, *#NoDaysOff* or *#EverydayImHustling*. A perfect example would be a 2018 tweet from the founder of SpaceX and Tesla (and at the time of writing this article, the third richest man on Earth (Forbes, n.d.)), Elon Musk reading: "There are way easier places to work, but nobody ever changed the world on 40 hours a week" (Musk, 2018). Hustle culture promotes the idea of continuous work, anytime and anywhere (Yuningsih et al., 2023). It is rooted in the belief that the harder you work, the better your results will be. Various successful people stand by it while sharing their triumph stories (e.g. books *Rise and Grind: Outperform, outwork, and outhustle your way to a more successful and rewarding life* by Daymond John and Daniel Paisner, and *Be obsessed or be average* by Grant Cardone, etc.). One blog post from a pre-

employment assessment company described hustle culture as a manifestation of the American dream in which all inequalities stemming from race, gender or social status can be erased by *simple* hard work (Test Gorilla, n.d.). Some definitions of hustle culture include more negative connotations. For instance, one blog post described it as a social standard where one can only succeed if they overexert and work themselves to their maximal capacity (Chen and Wen, 2021). Moreover, The New York Times (2019, according to Bregman, 2019) described it as choosing to completely forsake the pursuit of a balanced work-life integration, and instead, defining one's value, and potentially their entire existence, based solely on professional accomplishments. Hustle culture has been closely linked with other phenomenon such as *rise and grind* mentality, toxic productivity, and toil glamour. Hustle culture, toxic productivity, and the *rise and grind* mentality are very similar concepts, perhaps even the same. To date, most research has been done on workaholism, which can be defined as an excessive dedication to work at the expense of other aspects of life (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2023), and which hustle culture further encourages. Most research has used these terms interchangeably with hustling, and with a lack of strong empirical research on the topic of 'hustle culture' specifically this article will try to focus mainly on the term hustle culture, but will report on important findings from research using the mentioned similar terms, as well. The novelty of these concepts seems like the main reason for this gap in scientific literature.

In this paper we will describe the possible underlying causes of hustle culture, as well as what fuels it and how it is sustained. Moreover, we will summarise some of the findings on the effects of hustle culture on mental and physical health, as well as its relation to other variables such as productivity, self-compassion and gender. The limitations in the existing literature and potential future research questions will be mentioned. Finally, we will present some alternatives to hustle culture and mention ways to boost productivity in the workplace while promoting a healthy work-life balance among the employees.

How hustle culture came about

It was the beginning of the 20th century when Frederick W. Taylor published the famous book *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911). Taylor (1911) believed that financial motivation was the primary driver for all workers. As such, he advocated for the concept of "a fair day's pay for a fair day's work," implying that if a worker did not meet a certain level of productivity in a day, their

compensation should reflect that, contrasting with a more productive worker who would receive higher pay (Taylor, 1911). This is similar to the *hustle* mentality that harder work produces better outcomes. However, this term came about some time after Taylor's work.

According to a blog post by Alp Consulting (2023), a consulting company, the term "hustle" originates from the Dutch word *Husselen*, meaning "to shake or toss." Initially encompassing notions of pushing or crowding roughly, its association with hard work emerged in the late 19th and the early 20th century. The hustle culture truly gained prominence in the 1970s during the industrial revolution, demanding employees to work swiftly without set time constraints (Alp Consulting, 2023). Its origins trace back to the technological revolution and the technological community, where a lifestyle promoting an almost masochistic work ethic was actively endorsed. By 1990, technology companies began to dominate the market, establishing a new norm for young employees to embrace overwork (Alp Consulting, 2023). It was during this period that successful entrepreneurs relentlessly supported this idea, praising excessive work and portraying it as a form of liberation. In the early 2000s social media started to take over our everyday lives and it became even easier for individuals to share their personal stories. However, from then to now, social media became a very competitive environment that showcases only the best of a person's life. With the rise of competitiveness, it's not surprising that a culture that promised a glorified life through hard work became so influential.

What is keeping hustle culture alive and trending

This chapter will discuss some reasons why hustle culture arises and why people embrace and promote it. The first reason is the desire for success, followed by impression management, social changes, and cognition. It seems that success, especially professional, has become central in people's lives. In that case, it's possible that the people who strive for professional success more, are more likely to partake in the hustle culture. For example, Seligman (2002) proposed a categorization of happiness into three levels: (1) pleasure and gratification, (2) embodiment of strengths and virtues, and (3) meaning and purpose. According to Seligman (2002), while the pleasant life may bring more positive emotions, achieving a deeper and more lasting happiness requires delving into the realm of meaning. Without applying one's unique strengths and developing virtues toward a larger purpose, the pursuit of pleasure can

lead to a mundane, inauthentic, and ultimately unfulfilling existence. Success in one's career often encompasses all three levels of happiness. Firstly, achieving professional success can provide individuals with pleasure and gratification through tangible rewards such as financial stability, recognition, and a sense of accomplishment. Secondly, it embodies strengths and virtues as individuals utilize their unique skills, talents, and qualities to excel in their chosen field. Finally, career success often contributes to a sense of meaning and purpose, as individuals find fulfilment in contributing to their profession, society, or pursuing goals aligned with their values and aspirations.

The job could assure the worker different kinds of success. Šverko (1991) describes four different types of functions work has for the worker: an economic one, a social one, a source of social status and prestige, and a psychological one. While the economic function of work provides the worker with resources, the other three are less material. For the aims of the paper, the latter is relevant. Šverko (1991) explains work has a psychological function because it can be an important source of self-validation, respect and actualization. In addition, Šverko (1991) points out that for some, work can help in achieving self-actualization, which he defines as a state in which the person has reached a harmonious fulfilment or actualization of his creative potential and therefore his personality. Perhaps, some think their careers will lead them to this elevated, serene state of being, so they decide to work as much as possible. It appears that for the *hustling* individuals work represents a crucial element in constructing their self-image. Aziz et al. (2018) tested the relationships among self-esteem, workaholism, and work stress on 414 faculty and staff members at a large American university and a large manufacturing organization. Their results showed a negative correlation between self-esteem and workaholism which they interpreted as people with low self-esteem often immersing themselves in work, aiming to achieve success in areas where they believe they have more influence and control (Aziz et al, 2018). Furthermore, Aziz et al. (2018) explain how it is possible that when people feel inadequate in their personal lives but competent in their professional duties, they often become deeply engrossed in their work as a way to boost their self-esteem.

Aside from personal significance, hustle culture is also upkept by societal changes. Culture develops as people adapt to changing lifestyles, competing for economic progress, and seeking to improve their social standing in the field of their work (Yuningsih et al., 2023). Some big lifestyle changes recently have happened due to the COVID-19 pandemic which sent most workers home and introduced them to remote working. For instance, Silver (2023) has reported

that in the 2000 census, nearly 4.2 million, or 3.2% of American workers, worked from home and by 2021 the estimate increased to 27.6 million people primarily working from home or 17.9% of all employees. It is highly possible that this way of working blurred the lines between people's personal and work lives even more. For example, Bellmann and Hubler (2020) found a negative correlation between remote work and work–life balance. In addition, the pandemic had also caused a worldwide financial crisis that skyrocketed the average prices of goods and services in 2021. O'Neill (2023) reported of an 8.7% inflation rate in 2021 compared to 2020. In comparison, the Great Recession of 2008 had an inflation rate of 6.3% and before that, the 1980s and 1990s had witnessed a substantial worldwide inflation, as well (O'Neill, 2023). These relatively frequent and drastic changes in the economy seem scary. It is possible that this fear prompted workers to work even harder to assure the persistence of their comfortable lives.

Tank (2018) mentions how the idea of the hustle culture is also fuelled by impression management wherein individuals consciously or subconsciously strive to shape how others perceive them. The continuous stream of social media posts that showcase intense work efforts has created a perception within entrepreneurs that they should be engaged in constant work as well (Bregman, 2019). Moreover, this mentality has become so prevalent that it has standardised in the workforce for entrepreneurs (Bregman, 2019). Bregman (2019) adds that most employees do not see a problem in staying longer hours or showing up earlier. Therefore, the ones who draw the line and only do the work they are assigned now seem as they are not doing enough. Employers, such as Jeff Bezos, then value the ones who give more than 100%, making the rest feel disposable.

Within the frame of cognitive psychology, the widespread of hustle culture could be explained through heuristics or mental shortcuts that allow people to make fast decisions without spending time researching and analysing information (Dale, 2015). Particularly, the *belief in a just world* heuristic which was first introduced in 1965 by Lerner (as cited in Furnham, 2002). According to Furnham (2002), this heuristic asserts that good things tend to happen to good people and bad things to bad people. This logic can be interpreted in a sense that success (a good thing) will happen to those who work hard or hustle (good people).

The relationship between hustle culture and mental health

In 2016, Joseph Thomas, an engineer at Uber, tragically took his own life (Said, 2017). In the weeks preceding his death, he had disclosed experiencing panic attacks, concentration difficulties, and persistent anxiety. Following this heart-breaking incident, Thomas' widow and father shared with the *San Francisco Chronicle* their belief that work-related stress and an exceptionally demanding professional environment contributed to Thomas' suicide (Said, 2017). In 2011, Ilya Zhitomirsky, the CEO of Diaspora, tragically died by suicide (Vitello, 2011). Subsequently, in 2013, there were similar incidents involving Aaron Swartz (developer of Reddit), Jody Sherman (founder of Ecomom), and Ovik Banerjee (Sherman's colleague) (Bregman, 2019). In 2015, Austen Heintz, the CEO of Cambrian Genomics, and Faigy Meyer, the CEO of Appton, also took their own lives (Bregman, 2019). Despite being extreme cases, these tragedies illustrate how important it is to research the effects of hustle culture on one's psychological state. It has become obvious that hustling is more likely to drive people to burnout, stress, depression and, as seen, in some cases even to suicide (Bregman, 2019); and that great success as promised by its advocates is the less likely outcome.

Hustle culture represents an extremely intense work ethic, usually characterised by extended working hours. One meta-analysis (Wong et al., 2019) showed that prolonged working hours negatively correlate with mental health, operationalized as a subjective assessment of one's ability to deal with stress. They were also positively correlated with symptoms of anxiety and depression. In other words, the more hours employees put in, the worse they assessed their mental health. Additionally, extended weekly work hours have been linked to reduced sleep duration and an increase in sleep disturbances (Yuningsih et al., 2023). Kumar (2022) believes that continued hustling puts workers in a *go hard or go home* mentality, inducing a constant fight or flight state. This perpetual stress triggers a prolonged release of cortisol which can be harmful to mental and physical well-being. Mayo Clinic Staff (2023) reports that persistent activation of the stress response system and extended exposure to stress hormones, particularly cortisol, can impact various aspects of health like induce anxiety and depression, digestive problems, headaches, muscle tension and pain. Furthermore, there is an increased susceptibility to cardiovascular issues such as heart disease, heart attack, high blood pressure, and stroke. One meta-analysis of correlates and outcomes of workaholism found positive correlations with overall burnout, as well as negative correlations with physical

health, life satisfaction, and emotional/mental health (Clark et al., 2016). People whose excessive need for work creates noticeable disturbance or interference with their personal life are more likely to experience burnout, as well as lower physical and mental health.

On the other hand, one study of Japanese workers (Kuroda and Yamamoto, 2019) revealed that job satisfaction (represented by the proxy variable “How satisfied are you with job promotion?”) tends to rise when individuals work more than 55 hours per week. However, they also found a direct correlation between the amount of time spent working and the mental health of workers. The more participants worked, the more their mental health deteriorated. These results suggest that individuals who prioritise job satisfaction may inadvertently engage in excessive working hours, thereby negatively impacting their mental well-being (Kuroda and Yamamoto, 2019).

On the other hand, McMillan & O’Driscoll (2004) found that workaholics both psychological and physical health levels were equal to, or in some places, even better than non-workaholics health levels. Their study was conducted on a sample of 100 workaholics from five different organisations in New Zealand whose mental and physical health status was measured using the Rand Short Form-36 (SF-36), a multifaceted 36-item measure that assesses generic health difficulties. Apart from methodological and statistical possibilities that could have led to these rather surprising results, the authors proposed the effects of drive and enjoyment in work. From this perspective, it’s plausible to suggest that drive might be the harmful component in workaholism, while enjoyment could act as a protective factor, mitigating the impact of drive (McMillan & O’Driscoll, 2004). To support their theory, they mentioned how the previous studies linking workaholism to adverse health effects have defined workaholism in terms of low enjoyment (McMillan & O’Driscoll, 2004). Enjoyment is associated with positive factors like job satisfaction, life satisfaction, a sense of purpose, and positive team-oriented beliefs (McMillan & O’Driscoll, 2004). In contrast, drive is more strongly linked to negative outcomes such as impatience-irritability (linked to poor cardiac health) and obsessive-compulsiveness (associated with anxiety and stress) (McMillan & O’Driscoll, 2004). Additionally, as proposed by Spence and Robbins (1992, according to McMillan & O’Driscoll, 2004) it’s possible that it’s the combination of high drive and low enjoyment that poses a problem, rather than extremes of either aspect alone.

The relationship between hustle culture, productivity

Shepard and Clifton's (2000, as cited in Golden, 2012) aggregated data from 18 manufacturing industries in the US indicated that the use of overtime hours tends to decrease average productivity, measured as output per worker hour, for most industries in the sample. Subsequently, Golden (2012) states that overworking can undermine the productivity rate not only of the worker, but the firm as well. For example, Ricci et al. (2007) reported that fatigued workers cost the US economy 136.4 billion USD per year in health-related lost production time. Furthermore, Clark et al. (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of the correlates and outcomes of workaholism which led them to the conclusion that workaholism shares a positive relation with counterproductive work behaviours. Counterproductive work behaviour is defined as behaviour intended to harm organizations and their members (Fox et al., 2001). This can encompass overt actions like aggression and theft, as well as more subtle behaviours such as deliberately ignoring instructions or performing tasks incorrectly (Fox et al., 2001). For example, Clark et al. (2016) report that workaholics tend to have more negative workplace interactions with co-workers, specifically more distrust of co-workers possibly because of their own perfectionist tendencies and unrealistic standards. Workaholics do not appear to be productive workers; to the contrary, workaholics may indeed end up costing organizations more money through decreased health and well-being or increased counterproductive work behaviours (Clark et al., 2016).

The potential alternative to hustle culture

A possible reason for the mentioned literature gap on hustle culture could be that the trend is fading and people are turning to more sustainable ways of staying productive and reaching their full potential. For example, Yin and Xuan (2023) reported that a significant number of young Singaporean millennials are opposed to the hustle culture. One of the reasons for their aversion was attributed to hustle culture's impact on health by affecting life outside of work, causing burnout and breeding an overly competitive society which all led many of them to actively distance themselves from this phenomenon. In addition, a blog post by Robinson (2019) mentioned how (not referenced) research indicates that by being part of the hustle culture people might be compromising the longevity of their career, gradually deteriorating their mental and physical

well-being, and negatively affecting their relationships. This article differentiates two states of being: *driven and drawn* (Robinson, 2019).. The first would be a synonym for hustle culture, a state in which individuals give up personal control, facing internal and external pressures that drive a frantic, thoughtless pursuit of productivity in their professional lives. This leads to increased stress, burnout, and a disconnection from the present moment (Robinson, 2019). The latter would represent an alternative that embraces a centred, calm state that fosters a mindful lifestyle through compassionate self-talk.

Similarly, a blog post by Test Gorilla (n.d.) explained how, despite its initial message about hard work, hustle culture has turned into a set of beliefs that hurt workers' health, damage company's culture, and upset the balance between work and personal life. To counter these negative effects, it is crucial to build an inclusive company culture that values long-term success over short-term gains. By supporting employees to work in ways that suit them, companies can achieve better results and reduce burnout (Test Gorilla, n.d.). This support includes providing flexibility in work hours and locations when possible, offering opportunities for skill development, and addressing employees' health and well-being needs. A long-term-focused culture also allows neurodiverse employees to contribute in ways that fit their unique needs and helps workers with family commitments balance their professional and personal lives effectively (Test Gorilla, n.d.). Test Gorilla (n.d.) offered some helpful directions to achieving this. Some preventative methods include setting healthy workplace boundaries and building a psychologically safe environment that will stamp out toxic workplace behaviours. Establishing clear expectations of employees prevents a hustle mindset from escalating unchecked in the workplace. An example of that would be encouraging workers to take breaks, such as lunch breaks away from their desks, or regular micro-breaks. In a psychologically safe workplace, mistakes are accepted, and employees don't have to endure challenges silently, which is the opposite of the environment promoted by hustle culture. Finally, hustle culture leads to employee burnout because it treats them merely as profit generators, neglecting their human needs. This can be counteracted by prioritizing people over profit. For instance, Graveling et al. (2008) have found that psychosocial intervention courses along with stress management training and health promotion interventions have a positive impact on mental well-being. Addressing mental health in the workplace and setting boundaries between work and personal life seems like a good place to start in changing hustle culture to a more sustainable work culture.

Conclusion

Hustle culture is a culture that encourages non-stop, intense work to achieve success or make money. Unfortunately, this is often at the cost of one's personal mental and physical health. The consequences vary from some short-term ones such as burnout, to long term ones, like chronic stress and heart problems. Some evidence points to extreme outcomes such as suicide. Not only does this have negative effects on workers individually, but on companies, as well, since research has proved that the use of overtime hours tends to decrease a worker's average productivity. Since hustle culture is posited around the belief that the more effort a person puts in, the better their reward will be, it gained attention and stuck on. Even though this idea is logical and gives hope to many, it is necessary to alternate the culture. This can be achieved by granting flexibility in both working hours and locations, whenever feasible, providing chances for skill enhancement, and attending to the health and well-being needs of employees.

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Sažetak

U posljednje vrijeme čini se da je produktivnost postala prevladavajuća vrlina našeg vremena. Posljedično, pojavio se novi trend u percepciji rada. Zove se *hustle*-kultura i nalikuje nekim već postojećim trendovima, poput *rise and grind* mentaliteta, toksične produktivnosti i mukotrpnog glamura. To je način razmišljanja koji potiče neumoljiv trud u potrazi za uspjehom ili financijskim dobitkom, često po cijenu vlastite dobrobiti. Postala je vrlo raširena i kod radnika i kod studenata diljem svijeta. Ipak, nije se puno govorilo o njenoj održivosti i utjecaju na produktivnost i dobrobit. Cilj je ovoga rada definirati *hustle*-kulturu uz objašnjenje kako je ona nastala i što osigurava njezinu postojanost. Osim toga, ovaj rad daje pregled postojeće literature kako bi se utvrdili njezini kratkoročni i dugoročni učinci na mentalno zdravlje. Konačno, raspravlja se o mogućim budućim alternativama koje bi bile održivije.

Ključne riječi: *hustle*-kultura, mentalno zdravlje, produktivnost