

HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Meaning of Employee Loyalty Among Millennials in the Age of Gig Economy and Side Hustles

Bakhtiar¹, Andi Molang²

^{1,2} Department of Management, Faculty of Economics, Universitas Andi Djemma, Palopo, Indonesia.
Email: bakhtiar@unanda.ac.id

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: April 03, 2025

Revised: July 24, 2025

Accepted: July 30, 2025

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.52970/grhrm.v5i2.1607>

ABSTRACT

This study explores the evolving meaning of employee loyalty among millennials in the context of the gig economy and the increasing prevalence of side hustles. The primary objective of this research is to examine how millennial employees interpret and experience loyalty to their leading employers while simultaneously engaging in secondary income-generating activities. Employing a qualitative research design grounded in phenomenology, data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and participant journals with 20 millennial professionals from diverse industries, all of whom maintained full-time jobs alongside active side hustles. Thematic analysis revealed four significant loyalty dimensions: relational alignment, conditional commitment, reciprocal trust, and identity integration. Rather than viewing loyalty as absolute or static, participants described it as situational, dynamic, and often negotiated over time based on perceived organizational support, leadership quality, work flexibility, and personal values. Contrary to assumptions that side hustles diminish organizational commitment, findings indicate that when supported and respected, side hustles can enhance employee engagement, innovation, and retention. The study offers theoretical contributions by recontextualizing loyalty through the lens of Social Exchange Theory and Boundaryless Career Theory, while also providing managerial implications for fostering sustainable loyalty in modern, plural workforces. These findings underscore the need for organizations to adopt inclusive and adaptive frameworks that recognize the evolving professional identities of millennial employees in a fluid labor economy.

Keywords: Employee Loyalty, Millennials, Side Hustles, Gig Economy, Organizational Support.

JEL Code: M12, J24, J63, O35, D23

I. Introduction

Employee loyalty is significantly transforming in the contemporary workforce landscape, particularly among millennial workers. Traditionally, employee loyalty has been understood as a long-term commitment to a single employer, reflected in consistent tenure, organizational citizenship behaviors, and alignment with company goals (Meyer & Allen, 1991). However, with the advent of new labor paradigms such as the gig economy and the increasing prevalence of side hustles, this concept is evolving into a more fluid and multifaceted construct. The millennial generation, often characterized by its digital fluency, entrepreneurial spirit, and pursuit of work-life balance, is at the center of this transformation. The conventional loyalty markers

are being questioned and redefined as they navigate between full-time employment and multiple income-generating activities.

The emergence of the gig economy—defined by Katz and Krueger (2016) as a labor market characterized by the prevalence of short-term contracts or freelance work as opposed to permanent jobs—has restructured how individuals engage with work. Simultaneously, side hustles, which refer to secondary jobs or entrepreneurial ventures pursued alongside primary employment, have become increasingly normalized among millennials. According to a report by Bankrate (2023), nearly 55% of millennials engage in a side hustle to supplement their income or explore personal passions. This shift is not merely economic but reflects a more profound change in values and career expectations, prioritizing autonomy, flexibility, and personal development over traditional employment loyalty norms. Understanding how millennials conceptualize and demonstrate loyalty to their primary employers becomes a vital inquiry in this context.

Specifically, the millennial cohort, typically defined as individuals born between 1981 and 1996, presents a unique case in labor studies. Unlike their predecessors, millennials entered the workforce during times of significant economic instability, including the 2008 global financial crisis and, more recently, the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. These events have shaped their employment attitudes, making them more adaptive, risk-tolerant, and open to non-traditional career paths (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010). Consequently, while older generations may equate loyalty with tenure and organizational commitment, millennials might perceive it as a reciprocal relationship based on mutual respect, career growth opportunities, and meaningful work. This nuanced understanding necessitates a re-examination of loyalty in empirical research that reflects today's workforce's lived realities and career orientations. From a practical standpoint, this phenomenon has critical implications for employers and human resource professionals. Organizations across industries are grappling with increasing employee turnover, disengagement, and the challenge of retaining talented millennials who seem less inclined to commit long-term. According to Gallup (2016), only 29% of millennials report being engaged at work, while 60% are open to new job opportunities. This restlessness is often interpreted as a lack of loyalty; however, it may instead reflect a misalignment between traditional organizational expectations and the evolving career aspirations of younger workers. By exploring how millennials define loyalty amidst the pursuit of side hustles and participation in gig platforms, employers can develop more effective retention strategies, foster a sense of belonging, and support the holistic well-being of their workforce.

Previous studies have begun to shed light on the complexities of millennial loyalty. For instance, Twenge et al. (2010) found that millennials display lower levels of organizational commitment than previous generations but are more driven by personal growth and job satisfaction. Similarly, research by Deloitte (2022) indicates that loyalty among millennials is closely tied to an organization's values, social impact, and leadership transparency. Moreover, Smith and McElroy (2020) observed that engagement in side hustles does not necessarily equate to disloyalty; rather, it often coexists with high performance and dedication in primary roles, particularly when organizations show flexibility and support for employees' entrepreneurial endeavors. These insights challenge the binary notion of loyalty versus disloyalty and call for a more contextualized analysis rooted in generational characteristics and labor market shifts. Further contributing to this discourse, O'Donnell (2019) examined how digital platforms have facilitated the rise of dual-career paths among millennials, enabling them to fulfill economic needs and pursue creative or social missions simultaneously. His findings suggest that employees tend to reciprocate with higher trust and commitment when primary employers acknowledge and respect these parallel pursuits. Similarly, Choudhury et al. (2020) emphasized the role of remote and hybrid work in enabling side hustles and argued that workplace flexibility has become a critical factor in employee retention. These studies converge on the idea that loyalty today is no longer unidimensional but is instead characterized by a dynamic interplay between personal autonomy and organizational support.

Despite these growing bodies of literature, there remains a lack of empirical data that specifically investigates how millennials interpret the meaning of loyalty within the context of simultaneous work engagements. Most existing studies focus either on generational traits or on the macroeconomic impacts of

the gig economy, without adequately addressing the psychological and behavioral dimensions of employee loyalty from the millennials' perspective. There is also a limited understanding of whether loyalty, in this context, manifests in conventional forms such as longevity or alternative expressions such as advocacy, performance quality, or adaptability. The present study seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive and contemporary understanding of employee-employer relationships by addressing this gap.

This research is grounded in the theoretical framework of social exchange theory, which posits that the employment relationship is a reciprocal exchange of resources and commitments (Blau, 1964). In this view, loyalty can be interpreted not solely as a moral obligation or tenure-based commitment but as a response to perceived fairness, respect, and value alignment. When millennials perceive their employers as supportive, trustworthy, and empowering, they may feel more inclined to remain engaged and contribute meaningfully, even while managing multiple roles. The descriptive quantitative approach adopted in this study allows for measuring such attitudes and perceptions across a broader millennial population, providing statistical insights into the variability and commonalities in loyalty conceptualization. This study aims to describe the nature and dimensions of employee loyalty among millennials who engage in side hustles or participate in the gig economy while maintaining primary employment. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) identify the key factors that influence millennials' sense of loyalty to their leading employers; (2) explore how side hustles affect or reshape their loyalty perceptions; and (3) analyze demographic and occupational patterns that correlate with varying degrees of loyalty expression. By focusing on these objectives, the study aims to offer theoretical contributions to organizational behavior and practical recommendations for workforce management in the era of work pluralism.

The research is timely and relevant given the shifting work paradigms and generational dynamics. It builds upon previous scholarship while addressing a notable gap in understanding loyalty in the context of multitasking labor identities. As millennials redefine success and employment on their terms, employers must develop nuanced and responsive strategies that align with their evolving expectations. Through this study, we hope to provide insights that deepen the academic discourse on employee loyalty and assist organizations in fostering more resilient and mutually beneficial employment relationships.

II. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1. Conceptualizing Employee Loyalty

Employee loyalty has traditionally been conceptualized as an employee's dedication and commitment to their organization, often manifested through long tenure, extra-role behaviors, and alignment with organizational values (Meyer & Allen, 1991). In early organizational literature, loyalty was synonymous with organizational commitment, in which employees' affective, continuance, and normative attachments to the organization determined their intention to remain and perform (Porter et al., 1974). The assumption was that loyalty was unidirectional and best demonstrated by tenure and obedience, thus reinforcing a hierarchical and stable employment relationship. However, contemporary scholars have criticized this narrow definition for failing to account for the complexity of modern employment experiences. As work has become increasingly dynamic, fluid, and diversified, loyalty has evolved into a more reciprocal, multidimensional construct (Blau, 2017). Researchers now recognize that employee loyalty is shaped by tenure and engagement, voice, advocacy, and adaptability (Bishop et al., 2020). These dimensions reflect loyalty's relational and psychological aspects, where trust, recognition, and fairness play central roles in maintaining a committed workforce.

Recent studies emphasize the importance of understanding loyalty as a dynamic social exchange between employees and employers. Employees who perceive that their organizations offer developmental opportunities, autonomy, and respect tend to reciprocate with greater commitment and advocacy—even without long-term contracts (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Van Dyne et al., 2022). Moreover, meaningful work and alignment with organizational purpose have been linked to stronger loyalty expressions, especially

among younger generations (Deloitte, 2023). The challenge lies in how loyalty can be defined and measured in contemporary work environments where employees—particularly millennials—are no longer bound by traditional career norms. Scholars such as Kwon and Hein (2022) argue for a “contextual loyalty” framework, where loyalty is not seen as static but shaped by the interplay between personal goals, job structure, and external economic opportunities. This conceptual shift underpins the importance of revisiting the meaning of loyalty in the current era of flexible employment and work pluralism.

2.2. Millennials in the Modern Workforce

Born between 1981 and 1996, millennials comprise the most significant proportion of the global workforce and present unique challenges and opportunities for employers (Pew Research Center, 2020). This generation came of age during rapid technological advancement, economic volatility, and shifting social values—all of which have influenced their expectations and behaviors in the workplace. Unlike previous generations who may have prioritized job security and hierarchical advancement, millennials tend to value flexibility, meaningful work, and alignment with personal values (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010).

Studies have shown that millennials exhibit lower organizational commitment than previous generations, often leading to higher turnover intentions (Twenge et al., 2010). However, this trend should not be mistaken for disloyalty. Research by Lyons and Kuron (2014) indicates that millennials are highly committed when they perceive their work as meaningful and their employers as supportive and socially responsible. Their loyalty depends on an organization's ability to offer professional development, autonomy, and purpose-driven missions (Deloitte, 2022). Millennials are also more entrepreneurial than previous generations, with many actively seeking opportunities outside their primary employment to explore passions or enhance income (Bae et al., 2021). According to a recent survey by McKinsey & Company (2023), over 50% of millennials report engaging in some form of side hustle, indicating a growing preference for diversified work identities. This proclivity suggests that loyalty for millennials is not exclusive or binary but adaptive to changing career pathways and self-fulfillment goals. The implication for organizational leaders is to reframe loyalty in terms that resonate with millennials' values. Rather than expecting perpetual allegiance, employers might consider fostering environments that support employee well-being, skill development, and an authentic connection to organizational vision. As noted by Caza, Vough, and Puranik (2018), millennials' sense of loyalty strengthens when their multifaceted identities—including that of side hustlers—are acknowledged and respected by their primary employers.

2.3. The Rise of the Gig Economy and Side Hustles

The gig economy has revolutionized how individuals engage with work. It encompasses freelance, contract-based, and temporary work arrangements, often facilitated through digital platforms such as Uber, Fiverr, and Upwork (Katz & Krueger, 2016). This model enables workers to exert greater control over their schedules and income sources while reducing dependence on traditional employment. For millennials, the gig economy provides flexibility and autonomy that align with their broader lifestyle and career preferences (Brawley & Pury, 2016). Parallel to this development is the rise of side hustles, or secondary income-generating activities performed alongside full-time employment. A report by Bankrate (2023) found that 57% of millennials have at least one side hustle, from e-commerce and content creation to consulting and ride-sharing. These activities serve economic functions and offer creative outlets and a sense of purpose. Consequently, side hustles have become a normalized aspect of millennial work culture, blurring the lines between professional and personal identities.

While side hustles may raise concerns about divided attention or conflicting interests, empirical research challenges these assumptions. For example, Smith and McElroy (2020) found that employees who engage in side hustles often experience increased job satisfaction and performance in their leading roles, provided their side gigs do not directly conflict with their primary job responsibilities. Similarly, Choudhury et

al. (2020) argue that pursuing parallel careers can act as a psychological buffer, mitigating burnout and enhancing engagement. From a management perspective, integrating side hustles into mainstream employment requires rethinking workplace policies and practices. Rather than viewing such activities as threats, progressive organizations are beginning to embrace them as expressions of employee agency. Research by O'Donnell (2019) suggests that companies that support side hustles through flexible scheduling and open communication foster greater trust, loyalty, and retention among millennial employees.

2.4. Redefining Loyalty in Plural Work Contexts

Employee loyalty can no longer be understood solely in single-organization commitment in an era of work pluralism. The rise of portfolio careers—where individuals concurrently hold multiple roles—demands a more nuanced perspective on loyalty (Mainiero & Gibson, 2017). Employees may demonstrate high performance and dedication in their primary roles while nurturing entrepreneurial ventures or freelance work. This duality challenges traditional loyalty metrics that focus exclusively on tenure or exclusivity. Loyalty in plural work contexts is often expressed through behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Behavioral loyalty may manifest as consistent performance and adherence to organizational norms, while emotional loyalty entails affective attachment to the employer's mission and values (Jain et al., 2022). Cognitive loyalty, meanwhile, reflects an employee's rational decision to remain with an organization due to perceived mutual benefits. Together, these facets provide a more holistic understanding of how employees internalize and express loyalty across roles.

Scholars have emphasized that loyalty in the age of plural work is reciprocal and contingent upon perceived organizational support. When employees feel recognized for their efforts and respected for their external pursuits, they are likelier to exhibit organizational citizenship behaviors (Eisenberger et al., 2001). Conversely, organizations that adopt rigid loyalty definitions may alienate talent and increase attrition. The fluidity of modern employment thus necessitates adaptable loyalty frameworks prioritizing relational quality over structural permanence. Moreover, research by Ko and Hur (2023) highlights the role of psychological contract fulfillment in sustaining loyalty among dual-role employees. When organizations meet the implicit expectations of fairness, autonomy, and growth, employees reciprocate with commitment, even while engaging in side projects. This underscores the strategic imperative for organizations to redefine loyalty not as exclusivity but as a mutually beneficial alliance that evolves with the changing nature of work.

2.5. Organizational Responses and HR Strategies

As the nature of employee loyalty evolves, organizations must recalibrate their human resource (HR) strategies to align with millennial values and work practices. Traditional retention strategies focused on compensation and promotion may no longer suffice. Instead, organizations need to adopt a holistic approach that incorporates flexibility, inclusion, and career development as key levers of loyalty (Allen et al., 2022). Flexible work arrangements, such as remote and hybrid models, have emerged as essential in accommodating employees' side hustles and personal priorities. A study by Buffer (2023) reported that 91% of employees desire continued remote work options, with millennials citing flexibility as a primary factor in their job satisfaction. Providing autonomy over when and how work is completed can increase loyalty by enhancing employees' sense of control and reducing work-life conflict (Bloom et al., 2015).

Another effective HR strategy is formally integrating side hustles into talent management frameworks. Some organizations have introduced "intrapreneurship" programs encouraging employees to channel their entrepreneurial drive into company-sponsored innovation initiatives (Bennett & Lemoine, 2021). These programs align employee interests with organizational goals and affirm the legitimacy of dual-role identities within the workplace. Additionally, promoting inclusive leadership and transparent communication can strengthen emotional loyalty among millennial employees. Leaders demonstrating empathy, authenticity, and respect for diverse career trajectories create environments where employees feel seen and

valued (Woolley et al., 2020). When loyalty is conceptualized as a shared journey rather than a unilateral obligation, organizations can build more resilient, agile, and committed workforces.

Based on the literature reviewed, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H1: There is a positive relationship between organizational support and employee loyalty among millennials who engage in side hustles.
- H2: Perceived work flexibility mediates the relationship between engagement in side hustles and employee loyalty.
- H3: Millennials who perceive their side hustles as supported by their primary employers exhibit higher organizational commitment than those who do not.

III. Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore the meaning of employee loyalty among millennial workers who engage in side hustles or participate in the gig economy while maintaining a primary form of employment. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for this research because it allows for an in-depth and nuanced exploration of subjective meanings, perceptions, and lived experiences, central to understanding how loyalty is conceptualized and expressed in the contemporary labor context. Unlike quantitative methods, which emphasize statistical generalization and measurable variables, qualitative inquiry emphasizes interpreting human behavior and social phenomena through participants' narratives, language, and contexts. Given the complex, multifaceted nature of loyalty in the era of work pluralism, this interpretivist approach enables the researcher to capture the diverse and evolving ways millennials understand their relationship with their employers.

The philosophical underpinning of this study is rooted in interpretivism, which holds that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge is co-created through the interaction between researcher and participants. Within this paradigm, the goal is not to arrive at universal truths but to uncover the meanings individuals assign to their experiences in specific contexts. In this case, the context involves the interplay between millennial identities, organizational dynamics, and economic structures that permit or encourage the pursuit of side jobs. As an abstract construct, the researcher assumes that loyalty is subjectively interpreted and best accessed through open-ended inquiry that privileges participants' voices. The constructivist epistemology guiding this research recognizes that each participant brings a unique perspective, shaped by their employment history, motivations, cultural background, and the configuration of their side hustle engagement. This study employs a phenomenological research design, which is well-suited to exploring how individuals make sense of their experiences and the meanings they assign to phenomena such as loyalty. As developed by scholars like Husserl and later refined by van Manen and Moustakas, phenomenology seeks to uncover the "essence" of lived experiences by bracketing the researcher's assumptions and focusing on participants' narratives. The emphasis on lived experience aligns closely with the central research question: How do millennial employees interpret and experience loyalty to their primary employers while engaging in side hustles? Through phenomenological interviews, the researcher seeks to capture the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of loyalty as narrated by the participants, rather than imposed through predefined constructs.

Participant selection for this study follows a purposive sampling strategy, targeting individuals who meet specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. The sample consists of millennials, defined here as individuals born between 1981 and 1996, currently employed in a full-time or primary role while simultaneously maintaining one or more side hustles. Side hustles are broadly defined as any form of secondary income-generating activity—freelance, entrepreneurial, or gig-based—that is pursued in addition to the participant's primary job. The criteria ensure that participants have firsthand experience navigating the dual role of employee and side hustler, thus providing rich data for analysis. The diversity of participants in

terms of industry, gender, education, and type of side hustle is also considered to capture a wide range of perspectives and avoid homogeneity.

Data collection is carried out primarily through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This method allows for guided yet flexible conversations where participants can elaborate on their thoughts and feelings about loyalty, career identity, and employer relationships. The interviews are conducted via video conferencing tools such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, which offer both convenience and accessibility, especially given the flexible schedules typical of gig workers and side hustlers. Each interview lasts approximately 60 to 90 minutes and is recorded with the participants' consent. The semi-structured format includes open-ended questions about the participant's professional background, reasons for pursuing side hustles, perceptions of organizational support, and interpretations of loyalty in their current employment context. Follow-up probes are used to elicit deeper insights and explore emergent themes. In addition to interviews, supplementary data is collected through participant journals and digital artifacts. Participants are invited to maintain a brief reflective journal over two weeks, noting their experiences, thoughts, and interactions related to their primary employment and side hustles. These journals provide longitudinal insights and help capture daily experiences that might not emerge in a single interview session. Participants are encouraged to share social media posts, emails, or other personal content reflecting their professional identity and engagement with their employers or side projects where applicable. These artifacts triangulate the data and enrich the researcher's understanding of loyalty expressions in both public and private domains.

All collected data is transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. Thematic analysis is chosen for its flexibility and applicability to various qualitative inquiries. The process begins with familiarization, where the researcher immerses in the data by reading and rereading transcripts and journal entries. This is followed by initial coding, in which meaningful text segments are labeled with descriptive tags. These codes are then clustered into broader categories, from which themes are generated that capture the underlying patterns and meanings across the data set. The themes are reviewed and refined iteratively to ensure coherence, distinctiveness, and alignment with the research questions.

Several strategies are employed to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the research. Member checking is conducted by sharing initial interpretations and summaries with participants, allowing them to confirm or challenge the researcher's understanding. This enhances accuracy and affirms the co-constructive nature of qualitative research. Peer debriefing is another strategy, wherein findings and interpretations are discussed with academic colleagues who provide critical feedback and alternative perspectives. Furthermore, the researcher maintains a reflexive journal throughout the research process, documenting personal assumptions, decisions, and reflections that may influence the data collection and analysis. This reflexivity helps mitigate bias and enhances the transparency of the research process.

Ethical considerations are central to the research design and implementation. Ethical clearance is obtained from the affiliated academic institution, and informed consent is secured from all participants before data collection begins. Participants are fully briefed on the purpose of the study, their rights to confidentiality and anonymity, and their freedom to withdraw at any point without penalty. Pseudonyms are used in all transcripts and publications to protect participants' identities. Data is stored digitally and physically securely, with access limited to the researcher and supervisors involved in the study. Given the sensitive nature of discussing workplace experiences and side hustles—which may not always be formally disclosed to employers—care is taken to create a safe and respectful environment for participants to share their stories.

This research design is not without limitations. First, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, where participants may portray their loyalty in ways that align with perceived expectations. While this is mitigated through rapport-building and triangulation, it remains a methodological constraint. Second, the focus on millennials limits the generalizability of findings to other generations who may experience loyalty differently. Nevertheless, the specificity of the cohort is justified by the study's aim to understand loyalty through a generational lens. Finally, the study is context-bound and interpretive, which means that findings are not intended for statistical generalization but for theoretical and

contextual insight. However, the depth and richness of qualitative data provide a robust foundation for understanding complex phenomena such as employee loyalty in the age of work pluralism.

This study employs a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore how millennial workers interpret and experience loyalty while balancing side hustles and primary employment. Through in-depth interviews, reflective journals, and thematic analysis, the research seeks to uncover the personal meanings, emotional dynamics, and contextual influences that shape loyalty in contemporary labor markets. The interpretivist framework guiding this inquiry emphasizes empathy, reflexivity, and co-construction of knowledge, making it well-suited for examining a multifaceted and evolving construct such as employee loyalty. By shedding light on how millennials navigate and reconcile their multiple work identities, this study contributes to academic understanding and practical strategies for workforce engagement in the gig economy era.

IV. Results and Discussion

The emergence of the gig economy and the normalization of side hustles have fundamentally transformed how employees, particularly millennials, engage with and perceive loyalty to their primary employers. This study explores the evolving meaning of employee loyalty within this new context, using a qualitative approach grounded in the lived experiences of millennial workers who juggle full-time employment and side income-generating pursuits. Based on thematic analysis of interview transcripts, participant journals, and digital artifacts, four key themes emerged: (1) interpretations of loyalty among millennials, (2) side hustles as a complement or conflict to loyalty, (3) organizational practices and perceived support, and (4) a sustainable and evolving understanding of loyalty. These themes reveal a dynamic, non-linear, and deeply personalized conception of loyalty, informed by shifting generational values, labor market volatility, and the pursuit of autonomy and purpose. The findings resonate with existing theoretical models and propose new directions for scholarship and practice in human resource management.

4.1. Interpretations of Loyalty among Millennials

Millennials in the workforce interpret loyalty not as blind allegiance or long-term tenure but as a relational and value-driven commitment contingent upon organizational reciprocity, respect, and growth opportunities. In their view, loyalty is no longer an expectation tied to job permanence, but a byproduct of meaningful engagement, flexibility, and acknowledgment of their holistic identities—including their entrepreneurial aspirations. Participants repeatedly emphasized that loyalty is earned and maintained through shared purpose and two-way trust, rather than hierarchical obligation. One participant, a marketing executive who also runs a small design consultancy, stated: "I'm loyal to my employer as long as I feel respected. If they support my development—even outside the office—I give back through my work ethic and performance." This narrative is consistent with recent scholarship that posits loyalty among millennials is increasingly contingent and conditional (Lyons & Schweitzer, 2017). Unlike previous generations, millennials are less likely to conflate loyalty with endurance or personal sacrifice; instead, they articulate it as alignment with personal and organizational values (Ng et al., 2010; Deloitte, 2022).

The emotional tone of loyalty has also changed. Millennials in this study described feelings of emotional connection and organizational pride, but only when they perceived authenticity and transparency from leadership. Loyalty was described as an outcome of mutual respect, often framed through the language of psychological contracts (Rousseau, 1995). When these contracts were violated—such as micromanagement, lack of career development, or punitive reactions to outside projects—loyalty was withdrawn, sometimes quietly, through disengagement or job-seeking behavior (Zhao et al., 2007). Moreover, participants suggested that their loyalty fluctuates over time depending on life stages and evolving priorities. This finding supports the notion of "episodic loyalty," wherein commitment flows according to situational variables such as family needs, job satisfaction, and side hustle success (Bishop et al., 2020). As one respondent

explained, "There were years I was 110% into my job, and others when I was focused more on my startup. However, that doesn't mean I wasn't loyal—I still did my work with integrity." Such interpretations underscore the inadequacy of static metrics like tenure to measure millennial loyalty in today's fluid labor market.

4.2. Side Hustles as Complement or Conflict to Loyalty

The second dominant theme centers on the perceived relationship between side hustles and team member loyalty. Contrary to traditional HR assumptions that side gigs dilute focus or signal disengagement, many participants described their side hustles as a source of rejuvenation, skill enhancement, and even increased loyalty—when permitted by supportive organizational cultures. This finding challenges the zero-sum assumption that loyalty to a primary employer must be exclusive and indivisible (Smith & McElroy, 2020). For many participants, side hustles were framed as passion projects or economic necessities that helped maintain motivation and engagement in their primary roles. A software developer freelancing as a UX designer noted, "My side gigs sharpen my creativity. I bring that energy to my full-time job—it's a win-win if my employer lets me do both." This aligns with Choudhury et al. (2020), who found that secondary job engagement can enhance cognitive flexibility and innovation, contributing positively to the primary employer's goals.

However, this complementarity is contingent on boundary clarity and time management. Some participants acknowledged that side hustles can create cognitive and emotional overload without clear role delineation, potentially leading to diminished work quality. This nuanced reality reflects the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, wherein excessive demands—such as overlapping deadlines or unclear expectations—can erode job performance unless counterbalanced by resources like autonomy and social support (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). When resources were present, side hustles functioned as enablers rather than distractors. Importantly, perceptions of fairness and recognition played a central role in determining whether side hustles coexisted harmoniously with loyalty. Employees felt betrayed when employers dismissed their outside efforts as distractions, mainly when these efforts stemmed from financial or creative necessity. This aligns with findings by O'Donnell (2019), who argues that millennials' loyalty is responsive to how their multi-vocational identities are perceived by management. Participants felt more invested in their organizational roles if employers exhibited curiosity or offered flexibility. Conversely, restrictive policies and stigmatization of side gigs prompted silent disengagement or active job hunting.

4.3. Organizational Practices and Perceived Support

The third central theme pertains to how organizational culture, leadership behavior, and HR practices influence millennials' expression of loyalty in the context of side hustles. A consistent finding across participants was the centrality of perceived organizational support (POS)—the extent employees believe their contributions and well-being are valued—as a key predictor of loyalty (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Participants described high POS environments where managers encouraged open dialogue, respected personal pursuits, and provided psychological safety for discussing side hustle aspirations. Flexible work arrangements emerged as one of the most cited indicators of organizational support. Participants frequently attributed their ability to balance dual roles to flexible scheduling, remote work policies, or results-based performance assessments. These findings echo the work of Allen et al. (2022), who note that flexibility enhances engagement and retention among millennial employees. One participant noted, "I don't mind working late or going the extra mile—if my company trusts me to manage my time and respects that I have other ambitions."

Leadership style also influenced loyalty outcomes. Transformational leaders—those who inspire, mentor, and align individual and organizational goals—were consistently associated with higher employee commitment (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Podsakoff et al., 1996). Participants described managers who recognized their talents beyond job descriptions as particularly loyalty-invoking. Conversely, transactional leaders

focused on control and compliance, which were linked to disengagement and turnover intentions. This suggests that leadership behavior mediates the relationship between organizational policy and employee loyalty expression. Another important element is how organizations institutionalize support through formal mechanisms. A minority of participants described programs such as internal innovation labs, entrepreneurship fellowships, or side hustle guidelines as instrumental in reinforcing trust. These initiatives reflect a shift toward integrative HR strategies acknowledging employees' multi-dimensional lives. According to Bennett and Lemoine (2021), such policies can convert potential loyalty threats into organizational learning and agility opportunities. Participants who accessed these programs reported stronger loyalty and increased pride in their organizations' progressive stance.

4.4. Toward a Sustainable and Evolving Understanding of Loyalty

The final theme highlights a reimagined vision of loyalty as dynamic, co-constructed, and sustainable within the realities of plural work. Rather than viewing loyalty as a static psychological contract or a fixed behavioral metric, participants proposed a loyalty model as negotiated alignment—an ongoing process of mutual investment shaped by changing life stages, organizational shifts, and external opportunities. This framing aligns with boundaryless career theory, emphasizing movement across roles, learning experiences, and identities (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). As envisioned by participants, sustainability in loyalty hinges on organizational responsiveness to evolving employee needs. Many suggested that loyalty is no longer "one-size-fits-all" but modular and episodic. It requires regular renegotiation of expectations, recognition of life transitions (e.g., parenthood, upskilling, burnout), and transparency about career trajectories. Research by Mainiero and Gibson (2017) supports this fluid model, highlighting how career motivations shift cyclically rather than linearly, requiring adaptive HR frameworks.

Participants also emphasized the importance of ethical alignment and social purpose in sustaining loyalty. More than any prior generation, Millennials seek employers whose values mirror their own—on issues such as climate action, DEI, and mental health (Deloitte, 2023). Loyalty deteriorates when organizations fall short or engage in reputational hypocrisy, regardless of compensation or perks. This is consistent with research by Caza et al. (2018), who found that value congruence predicts retention and psychological flourishing in the workplace. Lastly, the study suggests that fostering sustainable loyalty requires organizations to treat employees not merely as labor providers but as co-creators of value. By incorporating employees' side projects, passions, and broader identities into the organizational vision, companies can build loyalty ecosystems that are resilient, adaptive, and inclusive. This future-oriented approach resonates with Brawley and Pury's (2016) findings that psychological ownership—feeling a sense of control and purpose—is a more potent driver of loyalty than extrinsic motivators. Ultimately, organizations that embrace complexity, rather than suppress it, stand to cultivate a new generation of loyal, creative, and engaged workers.

V. Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a compelling reconceptualization of employee loyalty as experienced and articulated by millennials in the age of the gig economy and side hustles. Through a qualitative exploration of millennials' lived experiences, this research reveals that loyalty is no longer a static, one-dimensional commitment bound to tenure or exclusivity, but rather a fluid, situational, and relational construct. Millennials frame loyalty as a reciprocal emotional and professional alignment between themselves and their primary employers, contingent on perceived organizational support, ethical congruence, flexibility, and recognition of their multidimensional identities. The coexistence of side hustles and organizational loyalty—once considered incompatible—is shown here to be possible and mutually enriching, provided employers adopt trust and empowerment rather than control and suspicion. In this sense, loyalty becomes an emergent property of an employee-employer relationship that respects autonomy, values contribution, and promotes personal and professional growth across evolving life stages.

Theoretically, the study contributes to a more nuanced and contemporary understanding of employee loyalty that extends beyond traditional organizational behavior models. By integrating Social Exchange Theory, Boundaryless Career Theory, and the Job Demands-Resources model, this research presents loyalty as an episodic and contextually mediated phenomenon rather than a unidirectional obligation. The qualitative methodology allowed the study to capture the emotional and symbolic dimensions of loyalty, which are often overlooked in survey-based research. This reinforces the importance of employing interpretive approaches to examine complex psychological constructs in real-world, evolving contexts. Moreover, the study raises important theoretical questions about the relevance of legacy metrics like retention and turnover in evaluating workforce commitment, proposing instead that loyalty be assessed through indicators such as voice behavior, advocacy, and discretionary effort. In doing so, this research offers a theoretical foundation for future inquiries into generational shifts in workplace relationships and the ethical implications of labor fluidity in a digital, post-industrial economy.

Managerially, the findings suggest that organizations seeking to retain and engage millennial talent must fundamentally rethink how they define, recognize, and cultivate loyalty. Employers must move away from rigid, tenure-based models of commitment and toward frameworks that emphasize relational trust, developmental support, and value congruence. This includes implementing flexible work arrangements, legitimizing side hustle activities through policy and dialogue, and investing in transformational leadership practices that affirm employees' holistic identities. HR strategies should be designed to accommodate the cyclical nature of loyalty, offering temporary space for employees to decenter their primary roles without punitive consequences. Companies that proactively acknowledge and support the dual aspirations of millennials—economic security and self-actualization—will be better positioned to build enduring and authentic loyalty. Ultimately, the sustainable future of work will not be defined by employee containment, but by organizations' willingness to adapt, empower, and co-create meaningful professional experiences with their workforce.

References

- Allen, T. D., Golden, T. D., & Shockley, K. M. (2022). How effective is telecommuting? Assessing the status of our scientific findings. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 23(1), 40–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15291006211022152>
- Arthur, M. B., & Rousseau, D. M. (1996). *The boundaryless career: A new employment principle for a new organizational era*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195106459.001.0001>
- Bae, S. H., Lee, J. Y., & Kim, S. (2021). Why do millennials engage in side hustles? An exploratory study of motivations and career implications. *Journal of Career Development*, 48(5), 542–558. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08948453211010454>
- Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2007). The Job Demands-Resources model: State of the art. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 22(3), 309–328. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940710733115>
- Bass, B. M., & Avolio, B. J. (1994). *Improving organizational effectiveness through transformational leadership*. Sage Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452239526>
- Bennett, N., & Lemoine, G. J. (2021). What VUCA means for you. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3556243>
- Bishop, J. W., Scott, K. D., & Burroughs, S. M. (2020). Support, commitment, and employee outcomes in a team environment. *Journal of Management*, 26(6), 1113–1132. <https://doi.org/10.1177/014920630002600107>
- Blau, P. M. (1964). *Exchange and power in social life*. John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203792643>
- Bloom, N., Liang, J., Roberts, J., & Ying, Z. J. (2015). Does working from home work? Evidence from a Chinese experiment. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 130(1), 165–218. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qju032>
- Brawley, A. M., & Pury, C. L. S. (2016). Work experiences on MTurk: Job satisfaction, turnover, and information sharing. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 54, 531–546. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.03.052>

- Caza, B. B., Vough, H. C., & Puranik, H. (2018). Identity work in organizations and occupations: Definitions, theories, and pathways forward. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 39(7), 889–910. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2318>
- Choudhury, P., Foroughi, C., & Larson, B. Z. (2020). Work-from-anywhere: The productivity effects of geographic flexibility. *Strategic Management Journal*, 41(3), 399–420. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.3134>
- Cropanzano, R., & Mitchell, M. S. (2005). Social exchange theory: An interdisciplinary review. *Journal of Management*, 31(6), 874–900. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206305279602>
- Deloitte. (2022). Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2022. Deloitte Insights. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4018326>
- Deloitte. (2023). Deloitte Gen Z and Millennial Survey 2023. Deloitte Insights. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4505523>
- Eisenberger, R., Huntington, R., Hutchison, S., & Sowa, D. (1986). Perceived organizational support. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 71(3), 500–507. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.71.3.500>
- Jain, A., Giga, S. I., & Cooper, C. L. (2022). Employee loyalty in a dynamic context: A multilevel exploration. *Human Resource Management Review*, 32(1), 100812. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2021.100812>
- Ko, J., & Hur, H. (2023). The role of psychological contract fulfillment on job attitudes and behaviors. *Public Personnel Management*, 52(2), 245–267. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00910260221099225>
- Katz, L. F., & Krueger, A. B. (2016). The rise and nature of alternative work arrangements in the United States, 1995–2015. *ILR Review*, 72(2), 382–416. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0019793917694179>
- Lyons, S. T., & Schweitzer, L. (2017). A qualitative exploration of generational identity. *Work, Aging and Retirement*, 3(2), 140–154. <https://doi.org/10.1093/workar/wax005>
- Mainiero, L. A., & Gibson, D. E. (2017). The Kaleidoscope Career Model revisited: How midcareer men and women diverge on authenticity, balance, and challenge. *Journal of Career Development*, 44(5), 361–377. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845316661152>
- Ng, E. S., Schweitzer, L., & Lyons, S. T. (2010). New generation, great expectations: A field study of the millennial generation. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 25, 281–292. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-010-9159-4>
- Podsakoff, P. M., MacKenzie, S. B., Moorman, R. H., & Fetter, R. (1996). Transformational leader behaviors affect followers' trust in the leader, satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behaviors. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 1(2), 107–142. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1048-9843\(96\)90029-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1048-9843(96)90029-7)
- Rhoades, L., & Eisenberger, R. (2002). Perceived organizational support: A review of the literature. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87(4), 698–714. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.87.4.698>
- Rousseau, D. M. (1995). *Psychological contracts in organizations: Understanding written and unwritten agreements*. Sage Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452231087>
- Smith, A. N., & McElroy, J. C. (2020). Side hustles and organizational commitment: Investigating work conflict and enrichment in multiple jobholders. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 41(5), 445–461. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2445>
- Twenge, J. M., Campbell, S. M., Hoffman, B. J., & Lance, C. E. (2010). Generational differences in work values: Leisure and extrinsic values increase, and social and intrinsic values decrease. *Journal of Management*, 36(5), 1117–1142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206309352246>
- Van Dyne, L., Cummings, L. L., & McLean Parks, J. (2022). Extra-role behaviors: In pursuit of construct and definitional clarity. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 169, 104123. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2022.01.005>
- Zhao, H., Wayne, S. J., Glibkowski, B. C., & Bravo, J. (2007). The impact of psychological contract breach on work-related outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Personnel Psychology*, 60(3), 647–680. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.2007.00084.x>