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Article

Detached Digital Automated Side Hustle (D-DASH)—A New Form of Digital Business?

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Abstract

This paper introduces the *Detached Digital Automated Side Hustle (D-DASH)* as a novel form of digital entrepreneurship that departs fundamentally from traditional side-hustle models. Using Job Characteristics Theory and a netnographic approach, we examine how automation, outsourcing, and platform-based systems reshape key dimensions of side hustles. Unlike conventional models centered on personal involvement and skill development, D-DASH emphasizes minimal input, faceless operation, and passive income generation. Our analysis reveals shifts in five core work characteristics: autonomy becomes strategic detachment, task significance and task identity diminish, skill variety decreases, and feedback is mediated through metrics. These changes reflect a broader reconfiguration of business models in the platform economy, wherein side hustlers transition from labor-intensive micro-entrepreneurs to orchestrators of automated systems. We contribute to the literature on gig-economy business models by identifying D-DASH as a distinct archetype characterized by reduced input requirements, high scalability, and a transformed experience of autonomy and meaning.

Keywords: D-DASH; side hustles; business models; gig economy
JEL: D24, M54, O14, O17

1. Introduction

Emma never met a single customer, never handled a product, and never worried about shipping delays. She spent one weekend setting up an online store with Artificial Intelligence (AI)-generated T-shirt designs, linked it to a print-on-demand service, and let automation take care of everything. Months later, while focusing on her full-time job, she still earned passive income—without ever touching inventory, answering inquiries, or actively managing the business. (Fictional anecdote for illustrative purposes)

Traditionally, a side hustle is an additional job or income stream pursued alongside full-time employment, often requiring active effort, personal involvement, and direct customer interaction—such as freelancing, selling handmade crafts, or offering consulting services (Sessions et al., 2021). Emma's approach in the fictional anecdote, however, differs fundamentally and illustrates a broader transformation in how side hustles are conceived today. Unlike a classic side hustle, her business is detached, digital, and automated—requiring no direct engagement with customers, no manual handling of products, and minimal ongoing effort. While traditional side hustles rely on individual skills or service-based work, this new model leverages automation and digital platforms to generate passive income with little expertise or time investment. Because of these unique characteristics, Emma's approach represents a new phenomenon which we label the *Detached Digital Automated Side Hustle (D-DASH)*, a model that prioritizes scalability, faceless operation, and efficiency over hands-on involvement.

The rise of such models is closely linked to broader changes in the nature of work and entrepreneurship. Side hustles have become an increasingly popular way for individuals to supplement their primary income while maintaining the security of full-time employment (Ashford et al., 2018; Dokko et al., 2015; Sessions et al., 2021). Unlike traditional second jobs, side hustles offer flexibility and autonomy, allowing workers to choose when, where, and how they engage in income-generating activities. The rise of the gig economy has played a crucial role in enabling this shift, providing digital platforms that make it easier than ever to access short-term, independent work (Mazzella et al., 2016; Vallas and Schor, 2020). Initially focused on short-term and flexible jobs, gig work has evolved to integrate into traditional employment structures, allowing full-time employees to engage in side hustles without leaving their primary careers. This evolution has positioned side hustles as a distinct and structured subset of the gig economy, offering a balance between financial stability and entrepreneurial ambition (Sessions et al., 2021).

Against this background, we introduce the *Detached Digital Automated Side Hustle (D-DASH)* as a distinct and emerging business model that diverges significantly from traditional side hustles. As the introductory anecdote illustrates, in contrast to conventional side hustles which require continuous effort, personal involvement, and skill de-

velopment, D-DASH is passive, scalable, and fully automated. D-DASHers remain detached from both product and customer, outsourcing production, logistics, and support while leveraging digital tools, dropshipping, and algorithm-driven platforms (Kale, 2020). With automation replacing hands-on labor, D-DASH eliminates the need for direct expertise or customer interaction. We therefore ask: "How can *Detached Digital Automated Side Hustle (D-DASH)* be conceptualized as a distinct business model, and how do they differ from traditional side hustles along key work characteristics?" In this paper, we systematically analyze the structural, operational, and economic differences between these two models, highlighting how automation and detachment reshape the landscape of supplemental income generation.

Given that the D-DASH phenomenon primarily unfolds in digital environments, we adopted a *netnographic approach* (Beckman and Langer, 2005; Kozinets, 2002). Following this approach, we searched for specific keywords to reflect the defining features of the new phenomenon and explicitly excluded content that aligned with traditional side hustle characteristics, allowing us to isolate a specific and novel subset of digital business activity that deviates structurally and operationally from classical side hustles.

We approach our data through the lens of the Job Characteristics Theory (Hackman and Oldham, 1976), which has been applied to study traditional side hustles by prior research (Sessions et al., 2021). Our data analysis shows substantial changes in the core dimensions of task autonomy, task significance, task identity, skill variety, and task feedback. Autonomy shifts from control over meaningful tasks to a form of strategic autonomy; D-DASHers gain freedom from labor rather than within it, which simultaneously disconnects them from purpose, feedback, and identity. In terms of task significance, our data analysis shows that as task structures prioritize automation, delegation, and faceless output, the perceived social impact of work diminishes. Task identity changes because of high fragmentation: tasks are neither completed manually nor attributed directly to the D-DASHer, undermining any sense of ownership or process continuity. Perhaps most strikingly, in terms of skill variety, our data shows that the D-DASHer does not substantially need to bring or develop different skills or talents. Finally, although D-DASHers typically have access to clear and measurable indicators of success, they do so through indirect, depersonalized channels. That is, task feedback is no longer received as social reinforcement or qualitative assessment.

These findings generated from our use of a netnographic approach represent important insights that contribute to the literature on business models (e.g., Klang et al., 2014), specifically to the stream of research on the business model of the side hustler within the gig economy (e.g., Ashford et al., 2018; Eichhorst et al., 2017; Walsh and Stephens, 2022). Prior work in this literature suggests that side hustles can be empowering forms of gig work characterized by task ownership, customer engagement, and skill development (Sessions et al., 2021). The D-DASH model, however, substantially departs from this paradigm by prioritizing automation, minimal involvement, and structural detachment. Whereas traditional side hustlers derive value from the direct engagement with value creation and delivery processes (Ashford et al., 2018; Petriglieri et al., 2019), D-DASHers externalize or automate nearly all such business functions. In identifying and systematically differentiating this form of side hustle, we extend this timely and growing stream of literature (e.g., Sessions et al., 2021; Walsh and Stephens, 2022) by showing how side hustles can be performed as an arm's-length, passive income practice enabled by digital platforms. In doing so, we highlight the implications D-DASH has on the side hustler's business model, particularly regarding value creation, labor detachment, and worker autonomy.

2. Theoretical Background: Business Models and the Emergence of Detached Digital Automated Side Hustle

2.1 Background: Business Models and the Gig Economy

At a general level, a business model describes how an organization creates, delivers, and captures value (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2012). While this definition has become widely accepted, management scholars have emphasized that business models are complex, multidimensional constructs rather than simple descriptions of firm activities (e.g., Klang et al., 2014; Massa et al., 2017). Across these debates, however, there is broad agreement that business models typically emphasize three core aspects: (1) the configuration of activities and linkages between partners, suppliers, and customers; (2) the mechanisms of value creation, delivery, and capture; and (3) a systemic or holistic perspective on how these elements interact. In this sense, business models can be understood as both real configurations of practices and as conceptual tools to describe the underlying logic of how economic value is generated.

In this study, we define and use the concept of a business model as the specific configuration of tasks, technologies, and relationships through which individuals or organizations create and capture value. This definition deliberately emphasizes the task dimension of business models, as it allows us to analyze not only how value is produced and delivered, but also how the performance of work itself—its autonomy, significance, and feedback—becomes structured through digital platforms and automation. In this way, the business model serves as a bridge between organizational structure and individual work experience, linking value creation and capture to the characteristics of the tasks that constitute the model.

Our definition already highlights our focus on the *individual* within the business model. To further conceptualize the D-DASH, we thus adopt Job Characteristics The-

ory (Hackman and Oldham, 1976; Oldham and Hackman, 2010) as a complementary framework because it offers a well-established lens for examining how task structures shape individual experiences of work (see also Sessions et al., 2021). Its core dimensions—autonomy, task significance, task identity, skill variety, and feedback—provide analytical categories that align closely with the activity configurations that define a business model. By integrating these perspectives, we are able to connect the design of a business model (as a system of value creation and delivery) with the experience of the individual performing within it, thereby grounding our analysis of the D-DASH phenomenon in both organizational and psychological theory.

Lately, an increased attention to business models has been driven by the growth of *digital technologies* and new *gig economic* paradigms. Digital *platforms* in particular have challenged traditional models by enabling new forms of exchange and coordination that rely less on physical assets and more on algorithms, data, and user participation (Chesbrough, 2007; Mazzella et al., 2016; Vallas and Schor, 2020). Firms such as Amazon, eBay, or Uber illustrate how digital infrastructures can redefine value creation and capture by connecting dispersed users and minimizing transaction costs. These developments form the foundation for the type of value creation central to the business model of the D-DASHer, which we introduce below.

2.2 The Business Model of the Side Hustler

To translate these broader conceptualizations of business models into the lived realities of digital entrepreneurship, it is essential to examine how such value-creating activity systems manifest at the individual level, where 'side hustlers' configure and enact their own micro-scale business models alongside full-time work. This already indicates that workers in the gig economy often engage in multiple 'gigs', and these often represent so-called side hustles. This term is not exclusively linked to the gig economy and digital platforms. A side hustle refers to any supplementary, income-generating activity or small business venture undertaken by an individual in addition to his/her primary occupation or source of income (Sessions et al., 2021). The activities are typically performed outside of regular working hours. Examples are part-time tutoring or freelance manual labor, but also offering rides via Uber (i.e., leveraging a platform). From a business model perspective, side hustles can be seen as micro-level activity systems through which individuals configure how they create and capture value in parallel to their primary employment. A side hustle can thus be understood as a scaled-down venture that individuals run concurrently with their primary job, thereby combining elements of entrepreneurship with the security of regular employment (Walsh and Stephens, 2022). Like any venture, side hustles have basic business model components—value propositions, target customers, and revenue logic—yet are often pursued with minimal overhead and a focus on flexibility rather than traditional organizational structure. At the same time, side hustlers often rely heavily on personal networks, direct customer relationships, and the individual's own resources to experiment with new services or niche offerings while retaining their full-time jobs (Sessions et al., 2021).

In an earlier seminal contribution, Sessions et al. (2021) use Job Characteristics Theory (Hackman and Oldham, 1976) to show how side hustles differ from traditional business models. They show that typical side hustles already stand in sharp contrast to other entrepreneurial or contractual work across its core dimensions. Going one step further, linking Job Characteristics Theory to the business model lens allows us to conceptualize these dimensions not merely as psychological experiences, but as integral mechanisms through which value is created and captured by the side hustler, and in particular the D-DASHer. In this sense, autonomy, task significance, skill variety, and feedback are not only attributes of a job—they are also structural elements that shape how the individual's business model functions. In general, Job Characteristics Theory provides a framework for understanding the impacts of a business model on the individual that performs a job within a business model and distinguishes between five core dimensions (cf. Oldham and Hackman, 2010). First, each business model allows the individual that performs it a certain level of *task autonomy* in how to perform the tasks it entails, and this autonomy has typically been linked to an individual's felt responsibility and motivation (Hackman and Oldham, 1976). In the business model of the side hustler, autonomy also serves as a central mechanism of value creation, as the individual decides when and how to allocate time, effort, and resources to optimize both personal satisfaction and economic return. This is particularly evident in side hustles, which, by operating beyond formal organizational structures and supervisory oversight, inherently grant individuals substantial discretion over when, where, and how to conduct their work—thereby exemplifying high levels of task autonomy (Sessions et al., 2021).

The individual's felt responsibility and motivation are also, according to the theory, likely to be affected by the perceived *task significance*, typically understood as the extent to which the performed tasks have an impact on others or society as a whole. A high level of task significance is usually also linked to a high perceived meaningfulness of a job (Hackman and Oldham, 1976). At the business-model level, this dimension aligns with the logic of value creation, since direct customer interaction provides both economic feedback and a sense of purpose. In the context of side hustles, this perceived task significance is often amplified by the direct and personal interaction with clients or end-users, as such work frequently occurs in customer-facing settings where the immediate impact on others is both visible and tangible (Sessions et al., 2021).

Within the *task identity* dimension, the theory refers to the degree to which a job involves completing a whole, identifiable piece of work, with high levels usually fostering perceived ownership (Hackman and Oldham, 1976). Viewed through a business model lens, task identity enhances value capture: the clearer the ownership of the process, the stronger the individual's ability to appropriate returns from the activity. In the case of side hustles, this sense of task identity is often reinforced by the end-to-end responsibility individuals hold for delivering discrete, self-contained services or products, typically within a short timeframe and with minimal external dependencies (Sessions et al., 2021). High task identity is oftentimes also accompanied by high *skill variety*. It represents the fourth dimension and describes the extent to which a job requires a range of different activities and skills (Hackman and Oldham, 1976). Skill variety thus corresponds to a form of dynamic capability at the individual level, enabling side hustlers to adapt their business model by experimenting across multiple activities. In side hustles, skill variety tends to be pronounced, as individuals frequently manage the entire workflow independently, requiring them to draw on a diverse set of competencies—from technical execution to customer interaction—outside the constraints of hierarchical structures (Sessions et al., 2021).

Finally, the *task feedback* dimension refers to the extent to which the individual worker is provided with direct and clear information on his or her performance (Hackman and Oldham, 1976). Task feedback, from a business model perspective, represents a mechanism of learning and refinement—through which value propositions are adjusted and performance is optimized. In side hustles, task feedback is often immediate and unmediated, as individuals are closely connected to the outcomes of their work and typically receive direct signals about performance—such as client reviews or platform ratings—further amplified by the transparency and responsiveness of digital technologies (Sessions et al., 2021).

Taken together, these dimensions not only capture the structural characteristics of side-hustle work but also represent the very architecture through which individual business models operate. They illustrate how side hustles combine high autonomy, personal significance, ownership, diverse skill use, and direct feedback into compact but complete systems of value creation and capture. In what follows, however, we describe the emergence of a newer and more specific form of side hustles—the business model of the D-DASHer. We analyze it along the same dimensions for better comparison.

3. Method

The initial impulse for this study emerged from a growing curiosity about a new type of business opportunity repeatedly promoted by influencers on social media platforms. As we began our exploration, we observed a recurring set of claims and characteristics: individuals advertised digital income streams that promised to be low-effort, low-investment, and highly automatable. These ventures could allegedly be operated "facelessly", required minimal expertise, and offered long-term passive income—all while being run alongside a primary job. This combination of features, while not revolutionary in isolation, appeared to be novel in their specific convergence.

3.1 Data Collection

To investigate this phenomenon systematically, we began by identifying and observing relevant content across social media platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and Udemy (see Table 1). Over several months, we monitored accounts promoting so-called "side hustles" and collected qualitative data from videos, posts, and user comments. Given that the phenomenon under scrutiny primarily unfolds in these native digital environments, we adopted a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2002; Beckman and Langer, 2005). Netnography, as a form of digital ethnography, enabled us to observe and interpret emerging online cultures and narratives surrounding passive income and digital entrepreneurship. By engaging with publicly accessible content *in situ*, we were able to analyze the discursive construction of what we define as *Detached Digital Automated Side Hustle (D-DASH)* and gain insights into the values, promises, and structural features promoted within these virtual communities.

The selected platforms (TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Udemy) represent key digital arenas in which narratives about online side hustles are produced, circulated, and monetized (for our study D-DASH). Each platform serves a distinct function within the broader digital entrepreneurship ecosystem: short-form and highly viral content on TikTok and Instagram shapes public awareness and aspiration, while longer instructional formats on YouTube and course-based platforms like Udemy translate these narratives into teachable and marketable "systems". By combining these spaces, we aimed to capture a cross-section of both the promotional and instructional dimensions of the D-DASH phenomenon.

We acknowledge that this focus on influencer-generated content introduces an inherent bias toward aspirational and "get-rich-quick" framings, which may overemphasize the degree of detachment and automation portrayed. However, rather than a methodological weakness, we consider this bias an integral part of the phenomenon itself: D-DASH is largely constituted through such idealized representations, which function as both discursive and performative devices in the creation of perceived opportunity. Our approach thus prioritizes *theoretical* rather than *statistical* representativeness (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), aiming to map the contours of an emerging online business logic as it is articulated and legitimized within its native media environments.

Table 1. Data collection.

Source	Amount of content	Average duration	Average resonance
TikTok	41 (Short Videos)	56 s	44,472 (Likes)
YouTube	42 (Long & Short Videos)	12 m	30,456 (Likes)
Instagram	25 (Short Videos & Image/Text Posts)	<3 m (Reel)/8 Pages (Post)	8884 (Likes)
Udemy	26 (Online Courses)	5 h 13 m	3874 (Participants)

Note: Udemy is reported using "Participants" because engagement on the platform is primarily reflected by course enrollments or learners reached, whereas TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram are reported using "Likes" as the most comparable publicly visible engagement metric across those social media platforms.

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for identifying D-DASH models.

Inclusion criteria (D-DASH)	Exclusion criteria (traditional side hustles)	Job characteristics theory
Minimal ongoing time investment	Manual labor or active, continuous involvement	Task autonomy
Highly automatable and scalable processes	Limited scalability or automation	
No direct interaction with customers	Direct customer service or personalized client interaction	Task significance
Faceless operation (no personal branding necessary)	Public persona or face-to-camera marketing required	Task identity
Minimal prior expertise or specialized knowledge	Dependence on specific skills, craftsmanship, or consulting	Skill variety
Little to no upfront capital required Potential for long-term passive income	High time or capital investment Income dependent on constant effort	These criteria relate indirectly to autonomy and task significance

D-DASH, Detached Digital Automated Side Hustle.

Central to our data collection was the presence of specific keywords and descriptions, such as "*passive income*", "*low time investment*", "*faceless business*", and "*automated online store*". These descriptors formed the basis of our inclusion criteria, which were intentionally designed to reflect the defining features of the new phenomenon we term *Detached Digital Automated Side Hustle (D-DASH)*. In contrast, we explicitly excluded content that aligned with traditional side hustle characteristics (for an overview see Table 2). By using these criteria, we aimed to isolate a specific and novel subset of digital business activity that deviates structurally and operationally from classical side hustles. This deliberate framing allowed us to differentiate between what we consider conventional entrepreneurial side projects and the emerging, platform-enabled business models that function with a high degree of detachment and automation.

To enhance the theoretical grounding of our inclusion and exclusion criteria, we clustered them according to the core dimensions of Job Characteristics Theory (Hackman and Oldham, 1976). While the criteria were originally derived inductively to identify relevant cases, they align closely with established work design constructs. As shown in Table 2, D-DASH models differ from traditional side hustles primarily in terms of task autonomy, task significance, task identity and skill variety, reflecting the shift from personally executed to digitally automated work. This mapping underscores that our empirical categorization is theoretically consistent with established models of job design, while still preserving the exploratory nature of our case identification.

3.2 Data Analysis

In the analytical phase of our research, we followed a systematic and comparative approach to clearly differentiate D-DASH models from conventional side hustles. We considered the phenomenon of side hustles through the lens of Job Characteristics Theory (Hackman and Oldham, 1976), which "remains the dominant model of job design today" (Grant et al., 2011: 421), and has been effectively applied to side hustle research by Sessions et al. (2021). This theoretical perspective provides a robust framework for understanding key dimensions of work. Hence, in the first step of our analysis, we mapped the core work characteristics of traditional side hustles based on existing literature and our empirical observations. We then applied the same dimensions to D-DASH, analyzing how each characteristic manifests within this emerging model.

By systematically assessing both models across this set of criteria, we were able to highlight the most significant structural and functional differences. Table 3 provides an overview of the comparative framework and outlines the

Table 3. Comparison of side-hustle vs. D-DASH based on work characteristics.

Work characteristic	Side-hustle	D-DASH	Key differences
Task autonomy	High autonomy in choosing when, where, and how to work.	Even higher autonomy due to automation and outsourcing—minimal ongoing involvement.	D-DASH minimizes manual labor by leveraging digital tools and third-party services.
Task significance	Work often has a direct impact on customers, especially in service-based side hustles (e.g., Uber, freelance work).	Little personal connection to the product—focuses on maximizing profit with minimal effort.	Side hustles often involve direct service, while D-DASH removes personal involvement.
Task identity	Side hustlers typically complete full work cycles (e.g., from start to finish, such as crafting a product or delivering a service).	Highly fragmented work—D-DASHers create systems rather than directly performing tasks.	Side hustlers complete entire projects, while D-DASHers set up and automate processes.
Skill variety	Requires a broad skill set (e.g., marketing, customer service, production).	Requires low expertise—main skills involve system management and automation.	Side hustles require hands-on skills, while D-DASH optimizes scalability over expertise.
Task feedback	Direct feedback from customers or clients (e.g., ratings on Uber, reviews on Fiverr).	Indirect feedback—performance is measured through sales and analytics, not personal interaction.	D-DASH focuses on market optimization, while traditional side hustles involve customer engagement.

analytical steps that informed our differentiation between D-DASH and traditional side hustles. We elaborate on these steps more in-depth below.

4. Findings: Work Characteristics in Detached Digital Automated Side Hustle

As indicated above, to understand how *Detached Digital Automated Side Hustle (D-DASH)* diverge from traditional side-hustle models, we analyze them through the lens of established work design theory, particularly drawing on the Job Characteristics Model (Oldham and Hackman, 2010). This model identifies five core dimensions—task autonomy, task significance, task identity, skill variety, and task feedback—as central to the psychological and structural nature of work. In what follows, we examine how each of these core characteristics is transformed in the context of D-DASH and what this implies for the evolving nature of digital work.

4.1 Task Autonomy and the Effects of Automation and Outsourcing

Task autonomy, defined as "the degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the individual in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out" (Oldham and Hackman, 2010: 464), has traditionally been linked to higher levels of engagement, responsibility, and intrinsic motivation. In roles characterized by high autonomy, outcomes are directly shaped by an individual's choices rather than managerial oversight or rigid procedural frameworks.

However, our findings indicate that this autonomy is being redefined through the integration of automation and the outsourcing of core functions. In many emerging work models, autonomy is paradoxically increased precisely because much of the operational work has been removed. As one source describes, "*you literally do nothing. So now that this is automated and you're earning passively…*" (Instagram Post, 04.02.2025). This suggests a shift from task execution autonomy to a form of strategic autonomy, where control is limited to the initiation and monitoring of processes rather than direct involvement.

Indeed, for some digital content creators, automation has virtually eliminated the need for day-to-day decision-making. One individual explains, "*the entire side hustle could be automated with literally just one click of a button*" (YouTube Video, 03.10.2023). Here, the individual's autonomy lies not in how the task is performed, but in whether they choose to activate a fully pre-structured system. A similar transformation is evident in business models where "*Printful is going to fulfill the order. They're gonna make the product, and then they're gonna ship the product, you literally do nothing*" (Instagram Post, 04.02.2025). In such cases, autonomy becomes a higher-order abstraction—freedom from the task itself rather than freedom within the task.

This decoupling of responsibility and execution complicates traditional understandings of autonomy. As one creator reflects, "*once you actually start making that money, that's when your business really has the opportunity to scale... without actually investing into it*" (YouTube Video, 01.05.2024). What emerges is a landscape where individuals maintain strategic oversight, bear outcome-related

responsibility, yet exercise minimal direct involvement. Thus, autonomy in the digital age is increasingly characterized not by the freedom to do, but by the freedom to delegate.

4.2 Task Significance and the Shift Toward Profit-First Automation

Task significance concerns "the degree to which the job has a substantial impact on the lives of other people, whether those people are in the immediate organization or the world at large" (Oldham and Hackman, 2010: 464), and is a central dimension in the psychological experience of meaningful work. Traditionally, high task significance fosters a strong sense of purpose, rooted in the awareness that one's work benefits others in meaningful ways. However, our findings point to a growing disconnection between workers and the social or human value of their output in emerging digital business models.

In several automated or outsourced work structures, the dominant focus is not on contributing to a broader social good, but rather on profit optimization through minimal input. As one participant openly states: "*you don't need to worry about creating a product or creating a website or worrying about customer complaints… this is not going to be dropshipping*" (YouTube Video, 01.05.2024). The core task is no longer embedded in a production process with human beneficiaries but is instead abstracted into platform-based monetization systems where personal involvement is minimized. This is further emphasized in another instance: "*Generate the video with AI, upload it on YouTube, and collect profits. Rinse and repeat and do it over and over again*" (Tiktok Video, 26.03.2025) The worker is functionally removed from the product lifecycle and, consequently, from any meaningful connection to those who consume it.

The implication is a form of task engagement where significance is deprioritized in favor of efficiency and earnings. In one example, the creator highlights: "*this strategy becomes a simple Snowball Effect... it's very easy to reinvest back into your business once you actually start making that initial income*" (YouTube Video, 01.05.2024). Here, the logic of scaling eclipses any orientation toward impact. The task is not evaluated by its effects on others, but by its capacity to generate passive revenue.

This lack of personal connection is not accidental—it is a feature of the system. "*You don't have to show your face… and you can start this with zero*" (YouTube Video, 01.04.2024), one participant states, underscoring the strategic removal of identity and relational labor from the process. Without interaction, responsibility, or visibility, the worker becomes invisible to the consumer, and the consumer becomes invisible to the worker. As a result, task significance is flattened; the social relevance of the job is replaced by the pursuit of algorithmic success.

In sum, our data reveals a fundamental tension between economic optimization and experiential meaning. As task structures prioritize automation, delegation, and faceless output, the perceived social impact of work diminishes. While such models may offer unprecedented flexibility and income potential, they do so at the cost of detaching individuals from the relational core of meaningful labor.

4.3 Task Identity and the Rise of Systemic Fragmentation

Task identity captures "the degree to which the job requires doing a whole and identifiable piece of work from beginning to end" (Oldham and Hackman, 2010: 464). High task identity is associated with holistic ownership over a process—seeing a task through from initiation to completion. However, our analysis suggests that emerging digital and automated work environments are increasingly characterized by low task identity. Rather than executing complete tasks, actors construct and maintain systems that function autonomously, removing them from direct involvement in the actual work process.

This fragmentation is particularly visible in the proliferation of automation tools and faceless content strategies. As one participant notes, "*This AI tool will create faceless [videos] for you in 3 steps… now just type whatever you wanna write a script about, and it will generate the entire script for you*" (Instagram Post, 09.05.2024). The worker's role is confined to initiating inputs—content prompts or automation settings—rather than engaging in the full cycle of content production, narration, editing, or dissemination. This delineates a task model where only the parameters are authored, not the task itself.

Moreover, this systemic mode of labor is frequently emphasized as a key advantage. One creator describes their process as: "*But what if you could create a source of income that works for you 24/7, without constantly having to trade your time for money*" (Udemy lecture, 03.2025). The jobholder does not complete an identifiable unit of work in a traditional sense; instead, they operate as system architects who build mechanisms that continuously perform microtasks without further human input. The task becomes less a completed object and more a recurring automated cycle.

Similarly, in affiliate-based Instagram business models, the emphasis is on creating frameworks that run independently. One user proudly states, "*I've even set up a particular product that you can use for your Instagram page… it's already done for you funnels*" (YouTube Video, 01.05.2024). Here, actors do not craft a product or marketing campaign from scratch but instead implement a modular system, delegating execution to prebuilt infrastructures.

This structure ultimately alters how task identity is experienced. Individuals become facilitators of self-sustaining processes rather than craftsmen of discrete outputs. The result is a fragmented engagement with work: tasks are neither completed manually nor attributed directly to the worker, undermining any sense of ownership or process continuity. As such, the shift toward system creation over task execution reflects a radical departure from traditional conceptions of meaningful, identifiable work.

4.4 Skill Variety and the Rise of Low-Expertise, System-Oriented Work

Skill variety refers to "the degree to which the job requires a variety of different activities in carrying out the work, involving the use of a number of different skills and talents of the person" (Oldham and Hackman, 2010: 464). In high-skill-variety jobs, individuals are challenged to draw upon a diverse range of competencies—technical, interpersonal, creative, and cognitive. However, our findings indicate that a growing segment of digital work models is characterized by *low* skill variety, with core tasks centered around simple system configuration, automation setup, and repetition.

Participants frequently emphasized that the work demands minimal prior expertise or training. As one actor described, "*It is literally so crazy that the AI made this video this fast… and you can do everything that we just did today through the app*" (YouTube Video, 01.04.2024). The task described here—automated video creation—illustrates a process in which traditional content production skills (writing, editing, voiceover, design) are replaced by a single act of initiating software operations. This shift radically simplifies the task profile.

The reduction in skill complexity is actively promoted as a benefit. In one instance, it is claimed: "*You don't need any followers, and it's so easy. I literally do this while I'm sleeping*" (Tiktok Video, 01.01.2024). This quote reinforces the notion that neither social capital nor specialized knowledge are prerequisites. The job does not demand multiple skill domains, but rather focuses on the repetitive application of a single strategy within pre-automated frameworks.

In another case, the only required activities are described as follows: "*All you have to do is create a video, choose your background. Then select font style, language, tone… and it will generate the entire script for you*" (Instagram Post, 09.05.2024). This illustrates that the main competencies involved revolve around selecting from menus, inputting prompts, and managing interface settings. The result is not the development of multi-skilled proficiency, but rather learning to navigate a small set of system tools.

Consequently, while the efficiency and accessibility of these roles may increase, the work itself is structurally limited in scope. There is little demand for learning, creativity, or adaptive problem-solving—hallmarks of high skill variety. Instead, the model depends on repeatability, consistency, and technical delegation. As one participant succinctly put it, "*You can start this with zero*" (YouTube Video, 01.04.2024); a reflection not of inclusivity alone, but of the profound deskilling embedded in these task designs.

4.5 Task Feedback and the Mediation of Performance Through Metrics

Task feedback denotes "the degree to which carrying out the work activities required by the job provides the individual with direct and clear information about the effectiveness of his or her performance" (Oldham and Hackman, 2010: 464). Traditionally, such feedback is immediate and qualitative, often emerging from personal interaction with colleagues, clients, or the work output itself. However, in the systematized digital work models analyzed in this study, performance feedback is largely indirect, abstracted through numerical indicators such as sales, engagement rates, and algorithmic analytics.

This shift is reflected in the way success is measured. One participant notes, "*One simple change… is triggering the algorithm to start pushing your video*" (YouTube Video, 01.05.2024). In this case, the worker receives performance feedback not from a human evaluation of content quality, but from the platform's automated decision to amplify reach based on hidden engagement metrics. Effectiveness is thus communicated via algorithmic response, not interpersonal recognition.

Further evidence of this feedback model can be found in the repeated emphasis on dashboard data. "*This simple 4-second video… generated this page over $220,000 on sales through their affiliate program*" (YouTube Video, 01.05.2024), one user explains, citing a screenshot as proof of value. The impact of the work is assessed retrospectively via numerical outputs, often monetized, rather than in-process validation or dialogue. Performance becomes legible only through analytics dashboards, sales graphs, or click-through rates.

This data-mediated feedback loop often detaches the individual from the underlying human impact of their work. As another participant puts it, "*You're making $8,000 profit at the end of the day… of a product you've never even created or touched and that you don't even need to handle*" (YouTube Video, 01.05.2024). Such detachment implies that the effectiveness of one's performance is no longer linked to experiential or social confirmation, but to transactional outcomes that may unfold asynchronously and impersonally.

Moreover, the logic of automation further separates task execution from feedback experience. One user describes, "*Here is a free training video… on how one of my students started generating over $176 per day using free traffic methods*" (YouTube Video, 01.05.2024). Feedback in this context is not a reflection on one's own labor per se, but an inferred metric drawn from the replication of systems and strategies—validated by revenue, not reflection.

In summary, while digital labor models offer clear and measurable indicators of success, they do so through indirect, depersonalized channels. Task feedback is delivered not through social reinforcement or qualitative assessment, but through the passive reception of algorithmic cues and sales performance—shaping a distinctly different experience of knowing how well one has done their work.

5. Discussion: The Novelty and Implications of D-DASH

The phenomenon we have labeled the *Detached Digital Automated Side Hustle (D-DASH)* represents a significant departure from previously documented forms of supplemental income generation. While traditional side hustles—grounded in personal initiative, skill application, and direct engagement—have been extensively analyzed in recent literature (Ashford et al., 2018; Dokko et al., 2015; Sessions et al., 2021; Walsh and Stephens, 2022), D-DASH introduces a distinct model. Our findings highlight a structural reconfiguration in the nature of work, in which digital platforms, automation, and strategic detachment converge to redefine both the input requirements and output potential of side hustles. In that sense, the D-DASH phenomenon can also be understood within the broader sociological transformations of digital work. As digital infrastructures and algorithmic management systems increasingly structure how tasks are allocated, monitored, and valued (Schank and Spindler, 2022), D-DASH emerges as a form of work enabled by these platform affordances. Its automation and detachment from traditional employment relations reflect how algorithmic coordination and data-driven feedback mechanisms substitute social and organizational control (Eichhorst et al., 2017). At the same time, D-DASH contributes to these developments by extending the logic of platform-mediated, individualized work into new domains—blurring the boundaries between entrepreneurship, employment, and digital servitude. In this sense, D-DASH not only exemplifies how digital affordances enable new micro-level business models but also illustrates how such models, in aggregate, reinforce the structural tendencies of the platform economy and the emerging neo-feudal order of the digital economy. We thereby contribute to the business model literature (e.g., Klang et al., 2014) by showing how side hustles contemporarily advance in multiple specific ways, as we will detail below.

5.1 Input Reduction: Time and Capital in D-DASH Models

A core novelty of D-DASH lies in its radical minimization of inputs, especially regarding time and human capital. Traditional side hustles, whether platform-mediated or independently operated, generally demand consistent time investment and personal labor and some capital investment. Freelancers must complete assignments, rideshare drivers must actively perform each ride, and Etsy sellers must often handcraft products and manage customer interactions. Prior work suggests that these models, while flexible, remain labor-intensive and bound to the individual's active involvement (Ashford et al., 2018; Dokko et al., 2015; Sessions et al., 2021).

Our findings extend this literature by demonstrating that D-DASH models fundamentally reconfigure the input logic of side hustles. Specifically, D-DASH substitutes manual labor with preconfigured systems and algorithmic processes, thereby introducing a qualitatively new form of work design. Participants in our study described workflows that involved little more than initiating automated tools (e.g., AI content generators, dropshipping platforms, affiliate funnels) and monitoring backend analytics. For instance, the task of producing videos—traditionally a time-consuming creative endeavor—is now performed through one-click AI tools that generate scripts, narration, and visuals with negligible user input. This finding adds a new nuance to side hustle research by showing that labor is externalized to algorithms rather than performed by individuals. The creator becomes a systems orchestrator rather than a producer, shifting the primary effort to the minimal initial setup phase (Gruber, 2025).

The capital barrier is similarly eroded. Several respondents emphasized that these businesses could be launched "with zero" due to free tools, no-inventory models (e.g., print-on-demand), and ad-revenue-based monetization. The absence of physical infrastructure, inventory costs, and direct marketing expenses also drastically reduces the financial risk and lowers the threshold for entry. This observation contributes to existing theory by challenging the assumption that even small-scale entrepreneurial ventures require upfront capital or skill-based investment (Sessions et al., 2021).

The result is a sharp decrease in necessary entrepreneurial skills and time investments. We therefore propose that D-DASH represents a new form of entrepreneurship defined by minimal human input and maximal algorithmic leverage. Unlike prior models that relied on the worker's time and skills as key input resources (Walsh and Stephens, 2022), D-DASH externalizes labor through automation and requires only upfront and intermittent active decision-making. This reconceptualization of input calls for an update to traditional business model typologies, which have historically focused on operational configurations grounded in value-creating activities (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2012; Zott et al., 2011).

5.2 Output Transformation: Scalability and Sustainability Reconsidered

The redefinition of input requirements comes with substantial changes in output expectations, particularly around scalability and sustainability. Our analysis reveals that scalability is a defining characteristic of the D-DASH model. Whereas traditional side hustles are inherently constrained by the entrepreneur's time and labor capacity (Sessions et al., 2021; Walsh and Stephens, 2022), D-DASH businesses are structurally designed for exponential scalability through automation and platform amplification. As our respondents noted, once an automated system is in place, whether a YouTube automation channel or a dropshipping storefront, incremental revenue generation is not tied to increased effort. Rather, success is algorithmically amplified: engagement triggers visibility, which feeds back

into reach and monetization. This "snowball effect", as one participant framed it, allows even small ventures to scale exponentially without the proportional scaling of work.

This finding directly extends prior research by showing that D-DASH achieves growth not through organizational expansion, but through systemic replication. Whereas conventional models rely on hiring, outsourcing, or team growth to scale (Sessions et al., 2021; Walsh and Stephens, 2022), D-DASH leverages digital infrastructure to replicate processes with near-zero marginal cost. In doing so, it introduces a new archetype of "algorithmic scalability", where growth is decoupled from human labor.

In contrast to scalability, sustainability in output is more complex. The disconnection from task significance, identity, and skill development (Oldham and Hackman, 2010) —as shown in our empirical data—raises questions about the long-term viability of such ventures for workers' engagement and resilience. On a purely financial level, D-DASH models may prove temporarily sustainable so long as platform rules, algorithms, and monetization systems remain stable. Yet this dependence on external infrastructure introduces a systemic fragility. Platform changes, content saturation, or shifts in algorithmic preferences can render these businesses obsolete or unprofitable almost overnight. This insight extends prior understandings of sustainability by emphasizing that, in D-DASH, vulnerability is structural rather than behavioral. Traditional side hustles, where skills and relationships often retain transferable value across contexts (Sessions et al., 2021).

Moreover, while D-DASH optimizes for efficiency, it may do so at the cost of entrepreneurial growth. As indicated above, because skill variety and task ownership are minimized, workers do not necessarily develop adaptive or creative capacities over time. We therefore argue that D-DASH trades learning for leverage—achieving efficiency at the expense of long-term adaptability. This flattening of the learning curve may limit their ability to pivot or evolve in response to market changes. In this sense, D-DASH prioritizes scalability over sustainability, adding an important tension to current theorizing on digital entrepreneurship.

5.3 Reframing Autonomy and Meaning in D-DASH Models

Beyond tangible inputs and outputs, D-DASH also transforms the psychological experience of work. Our findings contribute to job design theory by illustrating a shift from operational to strategic autonomy. Traditionally, automation has been associated with discretionary control over meaningful tasks (Oldham and Hackman, 2010). In D-DASH, however, autonomy is reimagined as freedom from labor rather than freedom within it. Our respondents valued the ability to disengage from daily operations while still generating income—what one called "freedom from the task itself". Yet this autonomy is paradoxical. It frees workers from tedious work but may also disconnect them from purpose, feedback, and identity.

This insight adds a psychological dimension to business model research by showing that automation transforms not only work processes but also the meaning of work itself. The flattening of task significance and task identity (Oldham and Hackman, 2010) in D-DASH suggests that while financial performance may be optimized, the subjective experience of meaningful work may be diminished. Respondents often emphasized the absence of personal contact, customer feedback, or holistic ownership, highlighting a shift from craftsmanship to administration of automated processes. This has implications for how we understand entrepreneurial engagement in a digital age: less as a creative endeavor, and more as an exercise in systems architecture and passive oversight.

Beyond the individual experience, these task characteristics also shape the underlying mechanisms of value creation and capture in the D-DASH business model. Strategic autonomy enables value creation through the delegation of operational control to algorithms, turning independence from labor into a productivity multiplier. Reduced skill variety shifts value capture from human expertise to the configuration of technological systems, while diminished task significance reflects the abstraction of work from direct social or customer impact toward platform-mediated metrics of performance. By linking these task characteristics to the structural dimensions of value creation and capture, we show that D-DASH is not only a psychological experience of detachment but also a new business model archetype built on algorithmic substitution and systemic leverage.

5.4 Expanded Practical Implications

For practitioners, the findings illustrate that D-DASH models fundamentally reshape work by minimizing inputs, reducing skill development, and shifting autonomy from meaningful task discretion toward strategic detachment. Managers who adopt such models should recognize that the very features enabling scalability—automation, outsourcing, and faceless operation—also create structural dependency on platform algorithms, as performance feedback is mediated almost exclusively through analytics rather than customer interaction. This means that income streams can scale quickly but remain fragile, since changes in platform rules or algorithmic visibility can undermine profitability with little warning. Platform designers can draw on the documented decline in task identity and significance to develop tools that offer clearer and more stable feedback channels, reducing creators' reliance on opaque engagement metrics. Finally, policy-makers can use these insights to anticipate emerging forms of digital vulnerability: because D-DASH requires neither skill variety nor human capital investment, it lowers barriers to entry but also limits workers' ability to build transferable capabilities. Supporting digital literacy, mandating more transparent algorithmic governance, or creating safety nets for platform-dependent

micro-entrepreneurs can help ensure that automated side hustles extend economic opportunity without amplifying precarity.

6. Conclusion

In sum, the Detached Digital Automated Side Hustle introduces a novel archetype of digital entrepreneurship characterized by low input thresholds, high scalability, and systemic abstraction. Our study extends existing theory by demonstrating that value creation in D-DASH models is driven less by human effort and more by the orchestration of automated systems. It reframes the business model not as a set of interlinked human activities, but as a modular, platform-based infrastructure that can be instantiated and scaled with minimal effort. This theoretical shift contributes to both the business model and gig economy literatures by identifying automation as a structural rather than auxiliary mechanism of value creation. While D-DASH creates economic opportunities for side hustlers, it also challenges traditional assumptions about autonomy, identity, and meaningful labor. We conclude that D-DASH embodies both the promise and paradox of automation-driven entrepreneurship: it enables income without engagement while amplifying dependency on algorithmic infrastructures. As such, D-DASH exemplifies the dual nature of digital transformation—offering freedom from work yet raising critical questions about sustainability, resilience, and human connection in the future of work.

Availability of Data and Materials

All data reported in this paper will be shared by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Author Contributions

SW, KAB, ADS and KZ designed the research study. SW performed the research. ADS analyzed the data. SW, KAB, ADS and KZ participated in the writeup of the manuscript. All authors contributed to editorial changes in the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. All authors have participated sufficiently in the work and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Declaration of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work the authors used ChatGPT in order to check spell and grammar. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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