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Identity Threat and Its Underlying Causes in a Remote Work Environment

Kate Yue Zhang

Associate Professor of Management

Department of Economics and Management, The American University of Paris

Email Address: kzhang@aup.edu

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Abstract

Remote work has become a global phenomenon since the pandemic of Covid-19 started. The pandemic provided an experimental field for organizations to implement a broad range of remote work arrangements and the trend is likely to become a permanent fixture of industry practices to stay (Barrero, Bloom, & Davis, 2020). While some organizations have announced policies that allow employees to work remotely after the Covid-19 crisis (e.g. Google, Airbnb) or even will shut all their office space (e.g. Yelp, worker-for-hire app TaskRabbit), other companies are less enthusiastic about remote work and have required employees to return to the office (e.g., Tesla, Apple, Netflix). With differing attitudes and practices, the impact of remote work has remained an important subject to be debated for academia and industry.

In a remote work environment, home replaces the office to be the dominant physical location of work. Previous studies suggest that place and identity are so intertwined that there is no place without identity and no identity without place (Casey, 2001). Home has a complex nature as the place for identity formation. On the one hand, home is the root and extension of identities (Mallett, 2004). On the other hand, home is regarded as the most challenging location to enact work-related identities (Richardson, 2018). The "multiple, fluid, and fractured" nature of identities further complicates the context of remote work with work identities and personal identities blurring (Brown, 2021; Ramarajan, 2014).

Although remote work arrangements are executed at an unprecedented scale in today's world, there is a notably absence of study in exploring the impact of remote work on identity. In the present study, I use grounded theory approaches to investigate the differences in the impact of remote work on individuals' work identities. I conducted fifty-one semi-structured interviews with the informants based in France, Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The informants were from a wide range of industries and occupied varied organizational positions. All of the informants were in the process of transiting to remote work at the time when the interviews were conducted. The findings show that who individuals feel they are is indeed changing when work enters home. In particular, remote work may trigger identity threat that occurs when the consistency of the assuming identity roles is disrupted in the form of limited identity enactment and meaning loss. The tentative findings also shed light on the determinant factors that cause identity threat on the individual, organizational, and occupational level. The study makes contribution to identity literature with a focus on remote work. I propose a theoretical framework and give practical implications at the end of the paper.

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