

Gig Working Relationships:  
A Grounded Theory Study on the Dynamics between Gig Workers and Digital  
Platforms in the U.S.

A DISSERTATION  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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May 2024

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## Acknowledgements

Like many others, my Ph.D. journey was filled with moments of satisfaction, surprises, and inevitably, periods of anxiety and despair. Fortunately, I was never alone in this journey. The support from many has provided me with invaluable encouragement and guidance, helping me to persevere and stay true to my interests.

First, I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Alexandre Ardichvili, who has been both a mentor and role model to me. Meeting him during my master's was a decisive factor in my decision to continue in the same program for my doctoral studies. Under his guidance, I have come to understand what real research entails and the qualities that embody a persistent, rigorous, responsible, ethical and open-minded researcher.

Next, I must thank Dr. David Christensen, who was an essential member of my dissertation committee. Though Dr. Dave is no longer with us, his invaluable guidance and support have left a lasting impact on this research.

Additionally, I am thankful to the other members of my dissertation committee: Dr. Joshua Collins, Dr. Nicole Dillard, and Dr. Louis Quast. Their insightful feedback, along with their continuous encouragement and support, were crucial throughout this journey. I am especially grateful for the opportunity to collaborate with Dr. Collins and Dr. Dillard on several research projects. Their critical perspectives not only helped me broaden my research agenda, but both were exceptionally supportive during my job search.

I also want to express my gratitude to all the gig workers who, particularly during the pandemic, performed frontline services that were essential to helping

millions overcome the constraints of quarantine. A special thank you goes to all the gig workers who shared their experiences and perspectives for this research.

Lastly, I extend my deepest thanks to my parents for their boundless support and for always being proud of me. To my husband, Dr. Ji Wu, thank you for being my best friend. You've not only provided continuous support throughout this journey but also enriched my topics and perspectives with your experienced insights as a researcher. I am grateful to have such an incredible partner in my life. Love to you all.

## Abstract

As the gig economy continues to grow, the relationships between gig workers and digital platforms become increasingly complex. Acknowledging a gap in our understanding of these dynamics, this dissertation aims to develop a theoretical framework of the psychological mechanisms underpinning gig working relationships in the U.S. context. By adopting a grounded theory method, this study conducted interviews with 19 gig workers across various sectors to explore their work experiences and perceptions of their psychological contracts and relationships with their platforms. Based on the findings, this study introduces a theoretical framework that delineates the establishment and ongoing refinement of gig working relationships, driven by the interplay of reciprocity mechanisms and power relations. This framework outlines how gig workers navigate power imbalances and accept the authority of digital platforms in the formation of their working relationships. A critical finding is the shift in gig workers' perceptions regarding their non-employee status. Initially perceived as an entry cost, this status gradually becomes recognized as a potential source of exclusion, which marks a profound transition in gig workers' understanding of their position in the gig economy's power structure. This study advocates for increased human resource development (HRD) focus on creating training and development programs tailored for gig workers, as well as on refining algorithmic management practices, with the goal of systematically developing the gig workforce and fostering sustainable growth of the gig economy.

**Keywords:** gig workers, gig working relationships, gig economy, human resource development, psychological contracts

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The gig workers population has seen a significant increase in recent years. This growth was particularly pronounced after March 2020, following the declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (CDC, 2022). A digital platform, Talkdesk, witnessed a surge of 10,000 new gig job applicants within just 10 days in late April 2020. Another platform, Upwork, reported a 50% increase in sign-ups for gig-related positions since the pandemic began (Semuels, 2020). The rise of the gig economy can be traced back to the global financial crisis in 2007. During this time, many workers shifted to freelance or self-employed work as a means to survive the financial downturn (Pek, 2021). The pandemic further intensified workers' dissatisfaction with wages and working conditions (Rosenberg et al., 2021). Notably, three percent of the American workforce resigned from their jobs in a single month in 2021, with two-thirds of U.S. workers actively seeking gig jobs due to low wages and a lack of protection and appreciation from their current employers (Dayen, 2021).

Despite the increasing number of gig workers across various industries, tensions between these workers and their platforms are escalating. On March 30, 2020, Instacart shoppers, along with thousands of gig workers from other digital platforms such as DoorDash, Amazon, Uber, and Lyft, organized a nationwide strike. They demanded essential protections and additional compensation amid the spread of the coronavirus (Dickey, 2020). However, it is important to acknowledge a key underlying factor: in most countries, gig workers are classified as independent contractors rather than employees. This classification means that digital platforms are not legally required to provide these workers with standard employee benefits,

including minimum wage, paid time off, and unemployment insurance (Grensing-Pophal, 2021; Rosenblat, 2020).

Building on these emerging issues in the gig economy, particularly regarding worker classification and benefits, the development of the gig workers raises novel questions.

Practices for addressing these challenges vary markedly across different countries.

The European Commission announced a proposal, at the end of 2021, to reclassify particular gig workers as employees (Shepherd, 2022). While this proposal is subject to a lengthy legislative process before becoming law, the European Union has already initiated efforts to enhance gig workers' working conditions and social protections. In Asia, governments of specific countries, such as China and India, are increasingly recognizing the necessity of improving conditions for gig workers. Chinese regulators have mandated that gig platforms pay workers above the minimum wage and provide insurance benefits (Chandran, 2021). Additionally, in June 2022, the Indian government released a report suggesting amendments to existing labor laws to extend statutory benefits to gig workers (Sridharan & Misra, 2022).

In stark contrast to the proactive measures taken by European and Asian governments, the U.S. government has yet to implement significant steps to bolster worker protections in the gig economy (Bose, 2021). Instead, leading U.S. digital platforms, including Uber and Lyft, have invested over \$200 million in campaigning for California's Proposition 22. This initiative aimed to prevent the reclassification of gig workers as formal employees (O'Brien, 2020). In November 2020, the proposition was successfully passed. Robert Reich, former U.S. secretary of labor, critiqued that the proposition "is great for employers, but it's a huge loss for workers. This will

encourage other companies to reclassify their work force as independent contractors, and once they do, over a century of labor protections vanishes overnight” (Bensinger, 2020).

The expanding gig workforce, coupled with the novel challenges in managing and developing this sector, necessitates a reevaluation of traditional organizational practices, workforce development and employment relationships. Recent years have seen a surge in studies across various fields addressing these topics. For example, research focusing on gig economy relationships has argued against using the term “employment” in the gig work context. This is because gig workers are compensated for their labor without a comprehensive range of rights and responsibilities that are typically granted under employment law (Acevedo, 2016). While a number of studies have explored these relationships within the framework of employment, they have also recognized the distinct short-term and at-will nature of gig “employment” (Friedman, 2014; Kuhn, 2016). Additionally, scholars have critiqued the dehumanized monitoring and control characteristic of algorithmic management, which significantly shapes gig working relationships (Ahsan, 2020; Kuhn & Maleki, 2017). Moreover, it has been reported that gig workers tend to prioritize the meaning of the work itself in their expectations of relationships with gig platforms (Wallenstein et al., 2019). These evolving dynamics underscore the critical need for both practitioners and researchers to deepen their understanding of gig workers and their unique work environment.

## **Problem Statement**

### ***The Understanding Gap: Gig Workers and Gig Working Relationships***

In practice, the distinctions between gig workers and traditional employees primarily revolve around the nature of their work, legal classification, and tax status

(Newburn, 2021). Academically, while it has been emphasized that the psychological constructs used to understand employee-employer relationships may not directly apply to gig workers (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017), the specific psychological constructs unique to gig working relationships remain underexplored. This gap in understanding has led to minimal efforts in addressing the concerns and needs of gig workers within organizational human resource practices. Given the contractual status of gig workers, as opposed to traditional employment, digital platforms often use this classification as a rationale for not extending benefits to these workers (Grensing-Pophal, 2021).

Moreover, most existing studies on gig working relationships have adopted a social exchange perspective, primarily focusing on the psychological processes of gig workers in these relationships. Gig economy companies, functioning as a neutral digital platform, match workers with customers directly, eliminating the need for intermediary agencies (Duggan et al., 2020). Due to the unique format of gig work, research has often concentrated on its most visible practices, such as algorithmic management, while potentially neglecting the underlying organizational norms and values that evolve alongside digitalization. Furthermore, although some studies have indicated that relational exchange significantly influences workers' perceptions of their relationships with platforms more than transactional exchange (Berger et al., 2019; Ravenelle, 2019), there has been limited exploration of deeper mechanisms. These include the power dynamics between platforms and workers in the exchange process. Consequently, there is still a lack of theoretical explanation for the fundamental shifts occurring in gig working relationships.

***Issue with Employing Comparison Method to Understand Gig Workers***

While previous research has shed light on the evolving working relationships in the gig economy, most studies have primarily provided insights by contrasting these relationships with traditional employment. However, the validity of using such comparative methods to fully comprehend the nuances of gig working relationships is debatable. In gig working relationships, the power dynamics differ significantly from those in traditional employment. Platforms exercise exclusive control over personnel selection and task assignment (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017), yet they frequently lack direct oversight over workers (Duggan et al., 2020). This imbalance in control and oversight can lead to a diminished sense of unity and shared purpose among gig workers. Consequently, it implies that the operational mechanisms effective for digital platforms may differ significantly from those traditionally employed by conventional businesses. However, in academia, the majority of studies have relied on classic employment relationships as a benchmark, providing only a partial understanding of gig working relationships. As a result, the diverse and unique aspects of these emerging relationships remain insufficiently understood.

### ***Problems of Gig Working Relationships in the U.S.***

The U.S. has experienced a significant surge in the gig economy over the past decade. A McKinsey Global Institute report highlights the rapid expansion of the nonstandard workforce, noting that one in every four U.S. workers is now engaged in gig work to some degree (Lund et al., 2019). Concurrently, an increasing number of U.S. workers have adapted to a remote work lifestyle. A Gallup report from February 2021, one year into the COVID-19 pandemic, revealed that 56% of U.S. workers prefer to continue working remotely even post-pandemic (Saad & Hickman, 2021).

While some countries have begun reclassifying gig workers, in the U.S., they continue to be treated as independent contractors. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) categorizes gig workers under this classification, defining them as individuals who provide services such as ride-hailing, delivery, property rental, and various creative and professional services through digital platforms (IRS, 2022b). To distinguish between employees and independent contractors, the IRS employs three criteria: (a) behavioral control, where a worker is considered an employee if the business has the right to direct the work performed; (b) financial control, with employees typically receiving a regular wage amount, whereas independent contractors are often paid a flat fee for the job and are more likely to have unreimbursed expenses; and (c) the nature of the relationship, with an employee-employer relationship often expected to continue indefinitely, unlike a contract-based relationship for a specific period or project (IRS, 2017).

Moreover, the U.S. workforce is increasingly diverse. As of 2020, Whites constituted 77% of the workforce, followed by Hispanic or Latino individuals (18%), Blacks (13%), and Asians (6%) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). While Whites form the majority in the overall U.S. workforce, minorities represent a larger proportion within the gig economy. A survey of 10,348 U.S. adults revealed that 30% of Hispanic or Latino individuals have engaged in gig work, compared to 20% of Blacks, 19% of Asians, and 12% of Whites (Gelles-Watnick & Anderson, 2021). Among gig workers in the U.S., financial reasons and the desire for flexibility are the primary motivations for pursuing gig work (M. Anderson et al., 2021).

Despite being one of the most developed countries globally, the U.S. has a longstanding issue with low wages for its workers. As of 2021, nearly a quarter of all

U.S. jobs were categorized as low-wage, a figure significantly higher than in countries like Japan (10.7%) and France (7.7%) (OECD, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic not only increased the demand for gig workers but also led to a widespread departure from the workforce. This widespread departure from traditional employment escalated into the phenomenon now referred to as the Great Resignation in 2021 (Fuller & Kerr, 2022). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that a record 4.4 million people, or three percent of the American workforce, resigned from their jobs in September 2021 (Rosenberg, 2021). As of June 2022, the trend of high resignation rates continued, with the number of people quitting their jobs each month consistently exceeding four million (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022).

Despite the U.S. being the birthplace of many leading gig economy companies like Uber, Lyft, Fiverr, and Instacart, and projections indicating a continued rise in the gig economy's popularity (Henderson, 2020), there is an increasing trend of grievances and dissatisfaction among gig workers (Browning & Scheiber, 2022). The escalating dissatisfaction among gig workers, occurring amidst pervasive low-wage issues, the significant workforce turnover known as the Great Resignation, and the evolving diversity within the U.S. workforce, highlights the imperative need for an in-depth examination of gig working relationships in the context of the broader dynamics of the U.S. labor market.

### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this dissertation is to develop a theoretical understanding of the psychological mechanisms underpinning gig working relationships, with a focus on the experiences of gig workers. By adopting a grounded theory approach, this study explores gig workers' psychological contracts to unravel these dynamics. To

achieve this, this study utilizes the concept of social exchange, drawing upon two major perspectives: Blau's (1986) exploration of reciprocal processes in exchange, and Homans's (1958) analysis of the psychological principles underlying exchange relations. Acknowledging the complexity of social interactions, which cannot always be encapsulated within the realm of exchange, this research further integrates the theory of power relations (Blau, 1986). This theoretical expansion is crucial for a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted power dynamics that transcend mere social exchange. Collectively, these theoretical lens from social exchange and power relations critically inform the investigation of the nuanced power structures and psychological mechanisms in gig working relationships, with a particular emphasis on the U.S. context.

Aligned with the objectives of this study, there is a deliberate shift away from narratives typically associated with traditional employment relationships. Instead, this research highlights the distinctive interests and challenges encountered by gig workers in the gig economy. In this context, I intentionally refrain from using the term "employment" to describe gig work in the U.S., given that gig workers are not legally classified as employees and therefore do not have a traditional employment relationship with platform organizations. However, I acknowledge that it is still valuable to take the nature of employment relationships into account, given the similarities shared between gig workers and traditional employees, such as the exchange nature of their work and the competencies required. Additionally, this study recognizes that gig workers in the gig economy typically establish working relationships with a variety of parties, including platforms, customers, and suppliers (Duggan et al., 2020). However, the primary focus of this dissertation is on exploring

the specific nature of the working relationships between gig workers and platform organizations.

To conduct this inquiry, this study delves into the experiences of gig workers. The rationale of focusing on gig workers, rather than on platforms or algorithmic management, is grounded in the fact that while gig workers constitute the majority of the workforce in various digital platforms, they are often marginalized in terms of organizational benefits and practices. From a theoretical standpoint, workers' acceptance of a superior's control is a decision enforced by the workers themselves, independent of any inducements or enforcement actions from the superior (Blau, 1986). This theoretical perspective underscores the importance of exploring gig workers' experiences. Exploring gig workers' experiences is vital not only for understanding their unique challenges but also for uncovering the psychological mechanisms and social norms that shape the formation and dynamics of gig working relationships.

### **Research Questions**

To explore the formation and dynamics in gig working relationships, with a particular emphasis on the psychological contracts between gig workers and digital platforms in the U.S. context, this study addresses the following three research questions:

- a) How do gig workers perceive their relationships with digital platforms?
- b) What are the key components of gig workers' psychological contracts?
- c) How do gig workers' psychological contracts enhance or impede their working relationships with platforms?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is poised to offer critical insights for practitioners in the development of gig workforce. The COVID-19 pandemic has catalyzed significant changes in the gig economy, leading many platform organizations to begin offering additional benefits to gig workers, such as unemployment assistance and paid sick leave (Cherry & Rutschman, 2020). However, a gap remains due to the limited understanding of the unique dynamics of gig working relationships. Currently, digital platforms tend to rely on existing organizational and workforce development practices, which are rooted in traditional employment models. Therefore, this study's development of new theoretical frameworks specifically for the gig economy is not just timely but essential, marking a significant advancement in the field of gig workforce development.

Prior to the pandemic, a surge in gig workers was already evident, with 34% of the U.S. workforce engaged in gig work as of 2017 (Laviertes & McCoy, 2020). Projections indicate that by 2027, 86.5 million people in the U.S. will be participating in gig work, making up 50.9 percent of the total workforce (Statista, 2023). This trend signals a shift towards a more flexible and autonomous future of work. Despite this, both in practical and academic realms, the understanding of how to effectively manage this nontraditional workforce remains in its infancy. By bridging the existing knowledge gap in managing the nontraditional workforce, this study is set to significantly influence the evolving paradigm of work, steering it towards a future marked by increased flexibility and autonomy.

This study will also enrich the growing body of research on employment relationships. Despite the dramatic increase in the number of gig workers, their representation in labor and employment relations research has been limited, partly due

to their classification as independent contractors rather than employees in the U.S. (IRS, 2022a). This classification has been criticized by several researchers who argue that gig workers should be treated as employees (Bajwa et al., 2018; Hyers & Kovacova, 2018; Watson et al., 2021). While the classification of gig workers is not the primary focus of this dissertation, the findings will contribute valuable insights to the literature, informing policies and guidelines on managing contingent employment relationships.

Furthermore, this study could make a significant theoretical contribution to the field of human resource development (HRD) field, particularly in the context of gig workforce and organization development. The social exchange and power relations theories employed in this study, which have their roots in sociology, predominantly address the social environment and the constraints it imposes on individuals (Blau, 1986). This sociological perspective contrasts with the primary aim of HRD, which is to unleash human expertise and enhance individual, group, and organizational effectiveness through targeted activities and processes (McLagan, 1989; Swanson, 1995). This divergence in focus does not diminish this study's applicability to HRD. As Kuchinke (2010) highlighted, HRD inherently benefits from a cross-disciplinary approach, drawing valuable insights from various social science disciplines. By incorporating social exchange theory from sociology, this research not only enriches HRD theories and practices but also addresses a notable research gap in HRD literature concerning the development of the gig workforce, as underscored by existing studies (Duggan et al., 2020; Jonker-Hoffrén, 2021; Waldkirch et al., 2021). Through this dissertation, I aim to bridge this gap, exploring effective strategies to

fully realize the potential of the gig workforce within the evolving landscape of the gig economy.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter presents an overview of the existing research that underpins the inquiry of this study. The literature review is organized into three principal sections: a) an examination of the gig economy and its workers, b) a critical review of literature on employment relationships, and c) an analysis of literature that supports the theoretical framework of social exchange and power relations. The chapter begins by defining key terms that are frequently used throughout this study. Following that, a comprehensive review is presented, focusing on the experiences of gig workers. Echoing the concerns raised in Chapter One, this review acknowledges that a mere comparison of gig working relationships with traditional employment relationships can lead to an oversight of the unique aspects of gig working relationships. To this end, the literature review on employment relationships extends beyond comparisons, emphasizing the process of relationship establishment. To further understand how employment relationships evolve, I also delve into studies on psychological contracts, which emerge within the context of employment relationships and represent the mental processes involved in maintaining these relationships. Lastly, in alignment with the exploratory nature of this study, a critical examination of literature pertaining to social exchange and power relations within organizational settings is undertaken, providing a theoretical backdrop for the subsequent analysis.

### **Gig Economy and Workers**

The term gig was initially used in the musical industry to describe musicians who were employed to play for a particular evening or a set of music (Friedman, 2014). In today's business world, the term gig is increasingly used to describe project-based or task-based work (Kuhn, 2016). First coined by the former *New Yorker*

journalist Tina Brown in 2009, the term gig economy describes a contingent work arrangement in which workers pursue “a bunch of free-floating projects, consultancies, and part-time bits and pieces while they [transact] in a digital marketplace” (Hasija et al., 2020). As an emerging economy, the gig economy has a unique transactional model, which aims to provide clients access to certain services or products through digital platforms, such as apps or websites (Acevedo, 2016). In gig transactions, workers have some degree of flexibility in time management, while service standards and rates are determined and monitored by platforms (Acevedo, 2016).

Gig workers, as defined by Kuhn (2016), are independent and self-directed workers who engage in short-term working relationships with one or more digital platforms, receiving compensation on a project basis. In the U.S., these workers are classified as independent contractors, a classification that has been critiqued by many scholars for its perceived inequity. This critique stems from the fact that digital platforms leverage this classification to minimize labor cost, notably by circumventing the provision of essential benefits typically afforded to employees (Graham et al., 2017). Compounding this issue, gig workers often exhibit characteristics akin to traditional employees: they perform tasks central to the platform’s business, adhere to specific rules and regulations set by the platform, and experience limited autonomy and entrepreneurial opportunities (Dubal, 2017). This overlap in roles raises substantial debate regarding the legal validity of their classification as independent contractors.

Diverse criteria have been employed in literature to categorize gig workers. Friedman (2014) distinguished between high-wage gig workers, including lawyers,

editors, and consultants, and low-wage workers, such as personal care attendants, dog walkers, and landscapers. Duggan et al. (2020) further classified gig workers into three distinct groups: capital platform workers (e.g., Airbnb hosts), who connect with customers via digital platforms; crowd workers (e.g., Amazon Mechanical Turk Workers), who undertake remote tasks posted on platforms; and app-workers (e.g., DoorDash deliverers), who complete local tasks through mobile applications. Despite the varied classifications, all gig workers share a contingent, task-based relationship with digital platforms, a characteristic that differentiates them from traditional employees. Nevertheless, the dynamics of organizational attraction, worker satisfaction, and retention are still relevant in the gig context, as these relationships fundamentally revolve around the exchange of labor for compensation (Kuhn, 2016).

This dissertation does not primarily focus on the potential misclassification of gig workers. Instead, it centers on exploring the dynamics between gig workers and platforms. Adopting Friedman's (2014) conceptualization of the gig economy as "an economy without jobs," this study views the gig workforce as operating under flexible arrangements, characterized by the absence of "a long-term connection with a company, a job ladder, and mutual interest in the well-being of both the company and the worker" (p. 171).

### **Overview of Gig Workers' Experiences**

Building on the foundational understanding of the gig economy and gig workers, this section reviews studies on the lived experiences of gig workers to uncover the challenges, aspirations, and realities of gig work.

### ***Potential Challenges Caused by the (Mis)classification of Gig Workers***

As gig workers represent an emerging segment of the workforce, research exploring their specific challenges remains limited. Most existing studies highlighted the absence of benefits and development opportunities for gig workers, attributing these gaps to their legal classification as contract workers (Bajwa et al., 2018) and their ambiguous employment or tax status (El Hajal & Rowson, 2021; Watson et al., 2021). According to Flanagan (2019), digital platforms transform gig workers into entities within “a self-contained universe for the resolution of disputes,” isolated from broader legal systems and institutions (p. 75).

By developing the Gig Work Challenges Inventory, Caza et al. (2021) identified six categories of challenges faced by gig workers: a) viability challenge, a lack of steady and predictable income due to the contingent employment relations between gig workers and firms; b) existence-related challenge, completing work and dealing with work-related issues (e.g., tax, changing technology, fluctuating workloads) without organizational or peer support; c) identity challenge, a lack of access to a clear social identity within an organizational setting; d) career-path uncertainty, the lack of relationships, identities, and career aims make gig workers unable to constitute the notion of their own career paths; (e) emotional challenges, the task-based work is associated with various emotional swings; and f) relational challenges, a lack of routine social interactions and stable contractual engagement. These challenges underscore the multifaceted impact of economic, sociological, and psychological factors on gig work, highlighting how the unique nature of gig work differentiates these challenges from those faced by traditional employees.

The status of gig workers as independent contractors not only limits their opportunities for training and career growth but also restricts their access to health

and social insurance benefits. Bajwa et al. (2018) identified three primary factors affecting the health and well-being of gig workers: (a) occupational health risks, including injuries and dangers associated with specific tasks; (b) the precariousness of gig work, largely due to the dissolution of traditional employer-employee relationships in platform-mediated contracts; and (c) platform control and surveillance. The absence of adequate occupational regulations and enforcement exacerbates these impacts, leaving gig workers particularly vulnerable.

### ***The Illusion of Flexibility and Autonomy***

The perceived benefits of gig work, notably flexibility and autonomy, often mask the underlying limitations and challenges caused by algorithmic management, which is a performance management technology adopted by most digital platforms. Wiener et al. (2021) identified two fundamental functions of algorithmic management in gig organizations: gatekeeping and guiding. Gatekeeping involves the use of algorithms to select qualified workers and deselect those deemed unsuitable for specific tasks (Duggan et al., 2020; Wiener et al., 2021). Guiding, as described by Wiener et al. (2021), entails platforms utilizing algorithms to monitor daily work and provide feedback to workers, offering guidance on improving performance. Algorithm-driven platforms swiftly assign new tasks and offers to workers, facilitating real-time monitoring and efficient data collection about workers, clients, and market trends. Yet, this stands in stark contrast to the advertised flexibility and autonomy of the gig economy. Gig workers, in reality, are subjected to the stringent control of algorithmic management, which significantly limits their developmental potential in this sector (Duggan et al., 2020; Gramano, 2020).

As the primary tool for managing and monitoring performance, algorithmic management in digital platforms has been criticized for its dehumanizing nature. It restricts workers from engaging in meaningful opportunities and collaborations, a stark departure from traditional management practices (Woodside et al., 2021). The nature of the platform-based work keeps gig workers always under surveillance, undermining the expected high level of flexibility in work time and location. Platforms often use algorithms to exclude those not meeting specific working hours or who frequently reject task offers (Prassl, 2018). Moreover, the economic pressures of recessions have intensified competition for limited job opportunities, further eroding the flexibility that gig work is supposed to offer (Hu & Fu, 2021).

Despite the expectation for gig workers to operate in a highly self-directed manner, they often find themselves navigating cautiously, particularly due to the impact of customer ratings on their work opportunities. The absence of a robust verification process for customer ratings leaves gig workers vulnerable to unfair assessments (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017). Durlauf (2019) noted that algorithms may even divert new offers from workers who have received negative ratings in the past. Compounding this issue, Waldkirch et al. (2021) discovered that not all feedback is transparent or accessible to gig workers, with some platforms (e.g., Upwork) concealing customer feedback from them. This situation creates an ironic paradox where gig workers, expected to work autonomously, are tightly controlled and often disadvantaged by the platform's mechanisms.

### ***A Sociological View of Gig Work***

To shed light on the characteristics of gig workers, a number of researchers have studied the nature of gig work from a labor sociology perspective. Engelmann

(2022) highlighted the inherent imbalance in bargaining power between employers and workers, noting that this disparity is particularly pronounced for gig workers who contend with the influence of powerful digital platforms. Gramano (2020) further emphasized the market dominance of these digital platforms, which significantly restricts the ability of gig workers to negotiate terms and conditions. In Wood et al.'s (2019) interviews with CEOs of major digital platforms, they found that some platforms have the unilateral power to terminate workers' contracts abruptly, without prior notice. This aspect of gig work exacerbates the already skewed bargaining power. Cattani et al. (2021) added that gig workers, typically bounded by fixed-term contracts, often allocate the majority of their working hours to the tasks at hand, leaving limited time for training or professional development. Moreover, Standing (2015) and Wood et al. (2019) pointed out that gig workers often invest a considerable amount of their personal time in unpaid and unrecognized activities, such as searching for new orders and preparing for upcoming tasks, further illustrating the challenges they face.

By employing embeddedness theory, several studies have revealed that gig workers are often disembodied from social connections and norms. As Tronsor (2018) highlighted, unlike traditional organizations where collective efforts are directed towards mutual goals, digital platforms, dominated by independent contractors, struggle to foster collective action. This situation is exacerbated by the geographic dispersion of gig workers and the absence of shared preferences and social embeddedness within their organizations, leading to emotional isolation from coworkers, as noted by Bunders and Akkerman (2022). Consequently, the exchange of help and support among workers is markedly reduced in the gig economy. Wood et

al. (2019) further pointed out that due to the readily available pool of gig workers and the fragmented nature of gig work, platforms face lower costs in replacing workers compared to traditional firms. This dynamic contributes to the commodification of labor in the gig economy, resulting in gig workers being disembedded from traditional social protections (Wood et al., 2019).

In sum, the relationship between gig workers and digital platforms, while devoid of formal employment ties, is primarily transactional, centered around the exchange of labor for pay. The gig work paradigm, marked by its focus on individualized tasks and reliance on fixed-term contracts, substantially diminishes the bargaining power of these workers. This diminishment extends beyond their professional interactions. As noted by Bunders and Akkerman (2022), gig workers also experience detachment from broader social relations. Such isolation prompts a critical inquiry: In the absence of shared motives or collective goals, what factors bind gig workers within digital platforms? Investigating the power dynamics in gig working relationships and exploring the reasons behind gig workers' adherence to digital platform directives are essential. These explorations are key to comprehensively understanding the complexities and evolving nature of the gig work landscape.

### **The Nature of Employment Relationships**

Driven by a central assumption that conflict is embedded in enduring differences between employers' and employees' interests (Riordan & Kowalski, 2021), a substantial body of research on employment relationships attempted to identify practices that can mitigate this conflict and align the interests of the involved parties. This review identified three main perspectives in the employment relationship

literature: a) the social exchange perspective, b) the frames of reference perspective, and c) the labor law perspective.

Under the social exchange perspective, researchers have concentrated on elucidating the nature and construct of employment relationships. Many have employed social exchange theory to elucidate the patterns of exchange characterizing these relationships (e.g., Audenaert et al., 2019; Fee & Gray, 2020; Martini et al., 2021). The frames of reference perspective, predominantly situated in the field of industrial relations, leverages Alan Fox's frames of reference theory as an analytical tool. This approach is used to conceptualize the conflicting interests of parties in employment relationships (e.g., Bray et al., 2020; Budd, 2020; Gold, 2021). Lastly, the labor law perspective, represented by scholars such as Deakin (2013) and Fudge (2017), focuses on identifying the objective social realities that influence employment relationships.

### ***The Social Exchange Perspective***

Studies that adopted the social exchange perspective were mostly built on the seminal works by Simon (1951), Rousseau (1990), and Tsui et al. (1997), who proposed that employment relationships are formed by both economic and social exchanges between employers and employees. For instance, Brandl (2021) conceptualized employment relationships as a process of developing mutual trust, wherein both workers and employers engage in efficient interaction and risk-taking behaviors. Although the development of employment relationship may involve short-term losses for one party, it would lead to great mutual benefits in the long run (Brandl, 2021). Doellgast et al. (2021) reviewed the evolution of employment relationship theory and observed that while the context of these relationships is

constantly changing, their core elements remain unchanged. The exchange of labor for pay continues to be a primary income source, and work remains a crucial source of meaning (Doellgast et al., 2021). These findings underscored that the exchange relationship extends beyond the mere trade of time and performance for compensation; it also encompasses mutual expectations between employers and workers regarding psychological fulfillment.

### ***The Frames of References Perspective***

Alan Fox, a prominent industrial sociologist, initially delineated three frames of references, namely unitary, pluralist, and radical frames, to conceptualize the varying interests and values of employers, workers, and union (Fox, 1966, 1974). Later, Budd and Bhawe (2008) introduced a fourth frame, the neoliberal egoist, to incorporate the influences of economic markets. According to Budd (2020), the frames of references perspective posits that employment relationships are fundamentally characterized by antagonistic conflicts of interest between employers and workers. The unitary frame views such conflicts as detrimental, advocating for strategies to align the divergent interests of different parties (Budd, 2020). In contrast, the pluralist frame recognizes the legitimacy and value of these conflicts, suggesting that navigating them can enhance employment relationships (Van Buren III et al., 2021).

The critical frame, closely aligned with radical, feminist, and race research, contends that conflicts are deliberately engineered by dominant parties in employment relationships to sustain their authority (Budd, 2020). In contrast, the neoliberal egoist frame of reference perceives employers and employees as rational agents pursuing self-interest, with conflicts arising from voluntary and mutually beneficial

transactions (Budd, 2020; Kaufman, 2016). However, this notion of neoliberalism has faced criticism. Nwagbara (2020) argued that it is fundamentally rooted in managerialism and authoritarianism. Additionally, Thomas et al. (2020) highlighted that neoliberalism merely offers an institutional framework designed to deliver a politically acceptable agenda, rather than addressing the underlying complexities of employment relationships.

Studies adopting the frames of references perspective generally favors the pluralist frame, as evidenced by studies from several scholars (e.g., Gold, 2021; Kaufman et al., 2021; Van Buren III et al., 2021). In a comprehensive analysis involving 7000 nonsupervisory employees across Australia, Canada, the U.K., and the U.S., Kaufman et al. (2021) developed a Relational Quality Index to categorize employment relationships from high to low quality. Their findings indicated that pluralist-type employment relationships were more prevalent than those of the radical or unitarist types in all four countries. As Van Buren III et al. (2021) noted, competing interests are simply social facts that are inherent in employment relationships. Similarly, Gold (2021) pointed out that employment regulation is deeply embedded in private property rights, legal frameworks, and hierarchical pay systems, all integral to capitalist social structures. Consequently, class inequality between employees and employers, a primary source of conflicting interests, is an enduring feature of these relationships.

### ***The Labor Law Perspective***

Many social science researchers have investigated employment relationships with a focus on the relational interaction between employers and workers (e.g., Nwagbara, 2020; Peng et al., 2020). This research stream is based on an assumption

that the relationship is mainly affected by the subjectivity of the involved parties (Beckmann, 2020). Conversely, labor law scholars have underscored the significance of objective elements in employment relationships (e.g., Deakin, 2013; Fudge, 2017; Gaudio, 2021). Deakin (2013), for instance, highlighted that the foundation of employment relationships is the employment contract, which not only links workers' subordination to employers' coordination power but also protects workers against abuses of employers' managerial prerogative. Building on Deakin's (2013) view, Fudge (2017) argued that employment relationships, as a multifaceted linking mechanism, are shaped by various political and social conflicts. These include transitions from industrial to financial capital, evolving employment regulations, workforce demographics, and the balance of power between labor and capital, all of which challenge the durability of the standard employment relationship. In addition, Gaudio (2021) critiqued the conventional labor law view that primarily considers employers as the sole counterparty in employment contracts. As Gaudio (2021) pointed out, other legal entities, not formally recognized as employers yet bearing similar obligations, are often neglected in the discourse on employment relationships. For instance, certain agencies in the U.K. system, while not classified as employers, still carry most employment law responsibilities without having a formal contract of service with their workers.

## **The Changing Landscape of Employment Relationships**

### ***Flexible and Contingent Employment Relationships***

The ongoing reshaping of work has led to a continual evolution in the nature of employment relationships, with a marked trend towards increased flexibility in recent decades (Frey & Osborne, 2017). As workers increasingly engage in multiple,

temporary, and virtual teams, organizational control over them has become more indirect and decentralized. Coun et al. (2019) suggested that in this new landscape of workplace arrangements, long-term relationships between workers and other organizational members are not a given. Instead, collaboration and partnership are increasingly based on “swift trust” (Coun et al., 2019). This shift in the employment landscape has resulted in fewer lifetime jobs, heightened job insecurity, and the emergence of boundaryless careers (St-Denis, 2021).

The advancement of digital technology, while rendering employment relationships more flexible and contingent, has also introduced new management challenges. The integration of digital technologies like artificial intelligence and algorithms has significantly enhanced management efficiency. However, Aloisi and De Stefano (2020) argued that traditional employment relationships are ill-suited to these new work formats and business models. Echoing this concern, Duggan et al. (2020) underscored that algorithm-driven employment relationships may weaken workers’ psychological connections with their employers and potentially “erode the reciprocity found in traditional employment relationships” (p. 121). Furthermore, Goldman and Weil (2021) further argued that contingent workers often find themselves in a grey area between independent contracting and traditional employment, lacking sufficient bargaining power to safeguard their personal and societal interests. Consequently, there is an imperative need to enhance the resilience of employment relationship management in the digital era.

In response to these emerging challenges, several researchers have investigated the need to develop current management practices in employment relationships. Peters et al. (2010), in their mixed-method study involving managers of

remote workers, discovered that a cooperation-based employment relationship, fostering mutual trust and collaboration, is more effective than a control-based approach, especially in contexts involving distant and asynchronous work. Similarly, Sobral et al. (2019) conducted a comprehensive survey with over 2000 contingent workers in Portugal and found a preference for an employment relationship that prioritizes autonomy and economic exchange. These findings suggested that traditional management practices aimed at cultivating loyalty and commitment might not be as effective with contingent workers, indicating a need for adaptation to the changing nature of work.

### ***Fissured Employment Relationships***

Another drastic shift in employment relationships landscape is the increasing trend towards fissured employment. This phenomenon, which includes subcontracting and platform business models, leads to more fragmented workplace arrangements and blurs the traditional boundaries of employment (Anner et al., 2021; Goldman & Weil, 2021). The rise of fissured employment can be attributed to a confluence of factors such as the growing demand for high-skilled labor, globalization, and changes in the demographic composition of the labor force. These factors have compelled employers to adopt subcontracting, outsourcing, and franchising as strategies to minimize labor costs (Kochan & Riordan, 2016). In addition, Park (2018) elucidated the role of the joint-employer relationship as a catalyst in the proliferation of fissured employment. Within this framework, a diverse array of stakeholders, including client organizations, agency firms, HR managers, subcontractors, and parent companies, potentially share employer responsibilities. This complex network often results in a diffusion of accountability regarding labor law compliance (Park, 2018), thereby obscuring the

identification of the primary entity responsible for upholding employee rights and ensuring legal protections.

The fissured employment relationship has also transformed the inherent conflicts between workers and employers. Riordan and Kowalski (2021) found that the dimensions of the conflicts have evolved along with the changing realities of work. Notably, there is an increasing divergence in goals, values, and work identities, coupled with decreased interdependence between employees and employers (Riordan & Kowalski, 2021). As a result, workers are confronted with greater complexities and conflicts arising from multiple obligations to different organizations. They must also navigate and adapt to diverse, and sometimes incompatible, organizational cultures and values.

Despite the extensive scholarly discourse on the transformation of employment relationships, a significant portion of this literature has primarily focused on the impacts of these relationships from the perspective of workers, often overlooking the consequential impacts on employers. According to Anner et al. (2021), as employment relationships undergo a process of decentralization and become increasingly indirect, the applicability of extant theories and frameworks, which traditionally emphasize centralized employers-employee dynamics, is increasingly being questioned. This shift necessitates the development of more suitable theoretical models and frameworks that can accurately capture and interpret the changing nature of employment relationships in this new context.

### **Developing Employment Relationships in Organizational Settings**

A variety of effective organizational practices for developing employment relationships have been identified in recent research. Internal corporate social

responsibility (CSR) activities, such as team-building exercises, are recommended by Supanti et al. (2015) to strengthen interpersonal relationships within organizations. Marzec et al. (2021) highlighted the benefits of increasing job variety and providing on-the-job learning opportunities to cultivate a sense of belonging among employees. Kochan and Riordan (2016) advocated for alternative wage criteria and norms that allow fair and just sharing of gains created by workers. In view of these varied approaches, Lopez-Cabrales and Valle-Cabrera (2020) emphasized the critical need for employer organizations to align the inducements and expectations of employment relationships with their human resource and strategic management practices.

Moreover, Doellgast et al. (2021) proposed several key strategies for organizations to enhance employment relationships. These strategies include facilitating value creation and negotiation between employers and employees, improving employee welfare policies and practices that also benefit broader society, and employing an interdisciplinary lens to analyze human resources and organizational behavior.

### ***Leaders' Role in Employment Relationships***

A handful of studies have focused on the role of leaders in sustaining their subordinates' employment relationships. Leaders, in contrast to employers, tend to have more frequent interactions with their subordinate workers. Audenaert et al. (2017) noted that leader-worker exchanges are characterized by more individual-level exchanges, underpinned by mutual respect, affect, and loyalty, as opposed to the broader employer-worker exchanges. Furthering this research, Audenaert et al. (2018) discovered that workers' perceptions of their employment relationship are significantly influenced by the perceived alignment between their employer's and

leader's expectations. Additionally, existing research has highlighted the pivotal role of leaders in fostering perceptions of work justice and fairness (Pohler & Schmidt, 2016), enhancing work meaningfulness (Peng et al., 2020), and developing trust-based relationships with workers (Audenaert et al., 2019). However, within the evolving landscape of the gig economy, there appears to be a notable deficit in leadership efforts to engage workers in their work. This absence of leadership presence could fundamentally alter workers' perceptions of their employment relationships.

### **The Nature of Psychological Contracts**

Psychological contracts, emerging alongside employment arrangements, are recognized as a fundamental component in the formation of employment relationships (Tipples, 2015). To comprehensively understand the psychological mechanisms underpinning employment relationships, it is crucial to consider these psychological contracts. Existing research has delved into psychological contracts as a pivotal aspect of employment relationships, emphasizing their role in promoting job security and satisfaction (Latorre et al., 2016), cultivating a sense of belonging (Tufan & Wendt, 2020), and facilitating mutual understanding between workers and employers regarding long-term goals (Inkson & King, 2011).

### ***The Ongoing Formulation Process***

Existing studies on psychological contracts often reference Rousseau's (1989) seminal definition, which characterizes them as the mutual expectations regarding obligations held by employers and workers. According to Windle and von Treuer (2014), the development of psychological contracts is an ongoing mental process that involves continuous evaluation and adjustment of content. They delineated three

phases in the formulation of a psychological contract, including (a) anticipatory socialization, (b) early socialization, and (c) latter socialization. As the formulation process progresses, they noted a diminishing inclination among workers to negotiate and validate their psychological contracts, accompanied by a corresponding decrease in the impact of expectation fulfillment (Windle & von Treuer, 2014).

Jepsen and Rodwell (2010) viewed psychological contracts as a mechanism through which workers can keep track of the obligation fulfillment within employment relationships. Similarly, Sherman and Morley (2020) proposed that individual workers act as constructivists, constantly reshaping and revising their psychological contracts along with the evolution of employment relationships. This iterative process of modification and adaptation leads to a continuous transformation in how workers perceive and understand their employment relationship (Sherman & Morley, 2020).

### ***Reciprocity in Psychological Contracts***

An assumption embedded in the development of psychological contracts is that workers and employers are expected to reciprocate with each other. According to Bal and Vink (2011), as the fundamental aspect of psychological contracts, the norms of reciprocity guide exchanges between workers and employers and motivate them to make further commitments to each other. Contrastingly, Atkinson et al. (2016) and Gardner et al. (2021) conceptualized reciprocity as a resultant phenomenon, emerging post the fulfillment of psychological contracts, rather than as an intrinsic element.

The complexity of psychological contracts, rooted in informal agreements and tacit expectations, suggests the influence of additional psychological and contextual determinants. Gardner et al. (2021) pointed out the overlooked significance of psychological ownership in the exploration of psychological contracts. They argued

that the sense of psychological ownership, a key facet of relational psychological contracts, can catalyze a reciprocal response from workers. Ali (2021) challenged the predominant focus on reciprocity, highlighting the skewed power dynamics between employers and workers. This imbalance, as Ali (2021) argued, often renders workers incapable or disinclined to reciprocate. Thus, Ali (2021) advocated for a reconceptualization of psychological contracts as embodying negotiated exchanges, rather than mere reciprocity.

### **Relational and Transactional Psychological Contracts**

Psychological contracts encompass two distinct components: relational and transactional. Relational psychological contracts embody social, affective, and symbolic expectations, whereas transactional psychological contracts are centered on monetary, material, and instrumental expectations (Bal & Vink, 2011). The significance of these contract types can vary depending on individual factors, job positions, industry sectors, and cultural contexts. Rao and Kunja (2019) posited that the fulfillment of psychological contracts is a subjective “state” influenced by individual workers’ personalities and beliefs (p. 1315), suggesting that the context of these contracts can lead to significant variations in perceptions between workers and employers.

In a study of 215 worker-supervisor pairs within a Chinese state-owned airline, Liu et al. (2021) discovered that transactional psychological contracts had a more pronounced impact on workers’ behaviors than relational contracts, especially among contingent workers compared to permanent staff. In contrast, Tufan and Wendt (2020) found that for ethnic minority workers, the fulfillment of relational psychological contracts was more crucial than transactional ones, as relational

obligations were more intimately linked to the enhancement of work and social identities. Gardner et al. (2015) also indicated that workers' self-esteem could affect how relational contract fulfillment influences work performance and job satisfaction.

The evolving business and work landscape is generating new expectations and needs that may not be adequately addressed within the existing framework of psychological contracts. Braganza et al. (2021) found that the effects of psychological contracts were weakened by the introduction of artificial intelligence. Based on this finding, they argued that the current categories of psychological contracts are insufficient to conceptualize the comprehensive mechanism of psychological contracts (Braganza et al., 2021). Similarly, Bal and Vink (2011) pointed out in the new social context, emerging worker needs such as a high-quality work environment and the pursuit of life's meaning are not sufficiently captured by traditional notions of transactional and relational obligations. Additionally, Alcover et al. (2017) highlighted that changes in the nature of work, the rise of temporary work arrangements, and an increased focus on organizational justice have profoundly altered the formation and fulfillment of psychological contracts. Consequently, there is an imperative need to develop a more comprehensive psychological contract framework that accurately reflects the expectations of workers in today's world.

### **Summary to the Section**

The literature review indicates that employment relationships are affected by both subjective and objective elements. Subjective aspects include the competing interests of the involved actors and their reciprocal behaviors, while objective aspects encompass employment contracts and the broader political and institutional frameworks. As workers navigate these dimensions, their perceptions evolve,

subsequently informing the reshaping or revitalization of their psychological contracts.

While the existing body of research on employment relationships predominantly focuses on traditional employment arrangements, this review has elucidated several “non-employment” dimensions that are critical to these relationships. These dimensions include exchange activities and the dynamics of power and subordination, which are also pertinent to broader social and occupational relationships. The subsequent sections of this chapter will delve into social exchange and power relations theories, offering them as potential theoretical lenses to guide the inquiry into the nuances of employment relationships.

### **Social Exchange**

As gig workers engage in the establishment and evolution of their working relationships with digital platforms, social exchange theory emerges as a pertinent theoretical framework for examining these interactions. The roots of exchange theory extend back to the early 20th century, initially employed by anthropologists to investigate normative rules in cultural practices such as gift-giving, cousin marriage, and ceremonial exchange (Befu, 1977). Subsequently, Homans and Blau, drawing from social psychology and economics, systematically refined the theory, focusing on psychological principles and socio-economic processes, respectively.

Homans (1958) conceptualized social exchange as consisting of both tangible and intangible activities between at least two parties, where specific opportunities are foregone as a cost for anticipated payoffs. Homans (1958) particularly emphasized the role of reinforcement in exchange processes, positing that each actor’s behavior is shaped by the responses of others and the prevailing historical and structural

conditions. The continuity or cessation of exchange relationships, according to Homans (1958), relies on how social behaviors, in terms of rewards and punishments, align with the mutual principles of the involved actors. Despite criticism for his work's perceived underemphasis on the influence of broader social processes and structures (Cook & Rice, 2006), Homans's perspective remains valuable for understanding the psychological underpinnings of working relationships. Homans (1961) articulated the principle that the frequency and value of the activities exchanged between individuals influence the persistence of their interaction:

The more often within a given period of time a man's activity rewards the activity of another, the more often the other will emit the activity... The more valuable to a man a unit of activity another gives him, the more often he will emit activity rewarded by the activity of the other. (p. 54-55)

Building on these principles, actors who are involved in exchange processes perceive each other as potential sources of rewards and costs (Crosbie, 1972). Homans's exchange theory has a fundamental influence on social behavior research, as it elucidates the motives that lead people to participate in exchange.

Blau's interpretation of exchange theory diverges from Homans by placing greater emphasis on social power and structural dynamics. According to Blau (1986), social exchange refers to "voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the returns they are expected to bring and typically do in fact bring from others" (p. 91). This definition presupposes that reciprocal incentives are inherent in exchanges and underpin social relations. While this assumption aligns with Homans's propositions, Blau (1986) challenged the notion that the norm of reciprocity is the primary initiator of social interaction:

...the norm of reciprocity merely reinforces and stabilizes tendencies inherent in the character of social exchange itself and that the fundamental starting mechanism of patterned social intercourse is found in the existential conditions of exchange, not in the norm of reciprocity. It is a necessary condition of exchange that individuals, in the interest of continuing to receive needed services, discharge their obligations for having received them in the past. (p. 92)

Blau (1986) argued that exchange processes give rise to “a differentiated social structure” based on the norms of individuals sacrificing some self-interests for collective benefits (p. 92). In organizational contexts, this collectivity is often manifested through adherence to the directives of authorities.

As highlighted in the review of employment relationship literature, exchange theory has been extensively applied in studies examining employment relationships, which is shaped by social and economic exchanges between employees and employers (Braganza et al., 2021). It is crucial to recognize that while both social and economic exchanges involve inducements from employers and contributions from workers, they are fundamentally different. Unlike economic exchange, which is based on explicitly defined obligations, social exchange involves implicit future obligations and is characterized by the discretionary nature of returns, not stipulated in formal contracts (Blau, 1986). Consequently, social exchange uniquely includes “feelings of personal obligation, gratitude, and trust” (Blau, 1986, p. 94).

Furthermore, Blau (1986) posited the existence of indirect exchanges, where subordinates comply with superiors’ directives in return for social approval from other organizational members. This social process legitimizes the superior’s power

through the collective endorsement of the organization's members, thereby establishing compliance with directives as an emergent social norm.

### **Power Relations**

As indicated in the literature review, employment relationships are fundamentally shaped by conflicting interests of the involved actors, with the resolution of these conflicts requiring a delicate coordination of power and subordination. This dynamic is not only pertinent to business organizations but also extends beyond mere exchange relationships. As Blau (1986) pointed out, not all behavior in social interaction can be conceptualized as exchange, if the behavior toward others is “not at all oriented in terms of expected returns from them”, the application of exchange would be tautological (p. 6). To avoid tautology, Blau (1986) suggested that behaviors devoid of anticipatory returns fall outside the scope of exchange. Consequently, this study incorporates a power relations perspective alongside the social exchange framework to elucidate interactions related to power dynamics in gig working relationships.

Power relations, as conceptualized by Blau (1986), encompass both directive and compliant behaviors and are distinct from reciprocity-focused exchanges. However, they are still rooted in the principles of exchange theory. Prominent sociologists, including Blau (1986), Collins and Raven (1969), and Crosbie (1972), asserted that power relations represent a specific form of social interaction intrinsically linked to the domain of exchange.

### **Legitimate Power in Organizations**

Power, viewed as an extrinsic force in unilateral transactions, is integral to the dynamics of organizational relationships. Blau (1986) posited that the stability and

longevity of an organizational system rely on the legitimacy of power. When power is legitimized, it empowers managers to extend their influence over subordinates, reaching beyond the formal boundaries set by employment contracts (Blau, 1986). Echoing this, Weber (1978) identified authority as the key to legitimizing power.

However, power is often viewed as having an arbitrary nature, reflecting an individual's will to dominate others. This contrasts with the concept of authority, which implies a more reciprocal relationship. Aldrich (1979) noted that those who possess power believe in their right to impose their will, while those who are governed accept an obligation to obey. This distinction between power and authority underscores the complex interplay of these forces within organizational structures.

While sociologists have predominantly developed theories related to exchange and power with an emphasis on social structures, this focus may inadvertently downplay the significance of organizational factors and norms. To address this, this study intentionally intertwines the exploration of power relations with the nature of organizations.

Organizations, as unique social entities, can be conceptualized as systems of norms that dictate individual actions and prescribe ideal relational dynamics (Parsons, 1990, p. 327). A common characteristic of most organizations is their provision of conditions that enhance individual effectiveness in achieving goals unattainable independently (Parsons, 1956). This implies that organizations play a crucial role in coordinating individual efforts towards shared objectives (Simon, 1991), thereby exerting power over their members who are bound by organizational rules and principles. As Parsons (1956) emphasized, organizational goals, legitimized by the value system, can only be achieved through the exercise of power.

The dialectical tension between organizations and individuals positions organizations as both products and constraints of social relations (Aldrich, 1979). Derived from institutional theory, sociologists view organizations as a distinct type of social forms comprising subjective dimensions like institutional patterns and values, and objective dimensions including norms, structures, and procedures (Parsons, 1990). Individuals' continuous obedience to organizational norms stems from their belief in the organization's value and moral authority (Blau, 1986; Parsons, 1990), legitimizing the implementation of its subjective patterns and values (Parsons, 1956).

From an economic standpoint, relationships between workers and organizations are maintained through formal contracts and the corresponding economic exchange (Williamson, 1979), while industrial psychology posits that organizations offer financial or material compensation in exchange for long-term service (Levinson, 2009). In contrast, sociologists emphasize the stability of organizations as reliant on the legitimate implementation of norms and values (Blau, 1986), influenced by external factors such as environmental stimuli, social and political elites, and interorganizational dynamics (Aldrich, 1979; Scott & Meyer, 1982).

Almost all organizations are embedded in institutional environments (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), which produce normative pressures for organizations to respond (Zucker, 1987). This necessitates a balance between efficient production and coordination with other entities in the same community (Scott & Meyer, 1982). Often, organizations adopt legitimated elements like standard operating procedures and government requirements, sometimes at the cost of efficiency, due to external pressures (Zucker, 1987). Therefore, internal power relations are also shaped by these

external institutional and political forces. As organizations become more market-oriented, their power structures and objectives are correspondingly influenced (Selznick, 1957).

In sum, the theoretical frameworks of social exchange and power relations collectively offer a comprehensive lens for examining working relationships in the gig economy context. Social exchange theory elucidates the psychological motivations driving individuals to engage in exchanges and the social norms and structures that reinforce these exchanges. Power relations theory complements this by guiding the investigation of relationships that extend beyond mere exchange.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The objective of this dissertation was to develop a theoretical understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying gig working relationships. By shifting focus away from conventional employment narratives, this study emphasized the unique experiences of gig workers as they navigate and adapt to the evolving landscape of gig work. Particularly, this study examined how gig workers construct and modify their psychological contracts with digital platforms.

To understand how gig workers in the U.S. context experience their working relationships and formulate psychological contracts with digital platforms, this inquiry was anchored in a relativist ontological framework. Following this orientation, this study adopted a grounded theory method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to gain an in-depth understanding of gig workers' perceptions and interpretations of their interactions with digital platforms.

#### **Research Orientation**

A relativist ontological framework guided this study in exploring how gig workers construct narratives about these relationships with digital platforms. Central to this ontological approach is the question of the form and nature of reality, as posited by Guba and Lincoln (1994). Based on the ontological assumption, qualitative researchers analyze the diverse perspectives of individuals involved in the research situation to address the nature of multiple realities (Creswell, 1998). Diverging from the realist ontological stance, which asserts that the external reality exists independent of human perception, the relativist ontological position contends that reality should be comprehended through individuals' interpretations and socially constructed meaning (Ormston et al., 2013). In this study, the working relationships between gig workers

and digital platforms are not perceived as existing independently. Instead, they emerge from interactions among various actors, extending beyond workers and platforms to include broader stakeholders like customers and coworkers.

The framework of a relativist ontology is consistent with key assumptions of the constructivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Constructivism adopts a relativist view, suggesting that “realities are apprehendable in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). Embracing a subjectivist epistemology, social constructivists view realities as socially (co-)constructed phenomena, shaped by groups’ and individuals’ sense-making activities (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

Following this paradigm, the current study proposed that the nature of the gig working relationships should be understood depending on the specific context they are embedded in. This research acknowledged the inherent conflicting interests between gig workers and platforms, while also considering the influence of various social, economic, political, and environmental factors. These elements were incorporated into the interview questions to capture the multifaceted nature of these relationships.

### **Research Design**

This study delved into the nature of the gig working relationship by exploring the diverse perspectives of gig workers. Central to this inquiry was the exploration of the myriad realities as interpreted by gig workers themselves. This approach is consistent with the fundamental assumptions of the grounded theory method, as outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2008b), which posits that there are multiple realities out there waiting to be discovered. Moreover, this research acknowledged that any

given reality can never be entirely comprehended by researchers. By embracing this perspective, the current study sought to uncover the varied and nuanced understandings of gig working relationships as experienced and perceived by those in the gig economy.

### ***Grounded Theory Method***

This study adopted grounded theory as its primary methodological approach for three key reasons: a) grounded theory is oriented towards developing substantive theories pertinent to specific and practical contexts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008a); b) it emphasizes the analysis of actions and processes over themes or structures (Charmaz, 2006); and c) it is particularly effective in exploring issues that are theoretically underdeveloped and of global relevance (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Developed by two sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, grounded theory is a widely used approach in qualitative research. It diverges from traditional logical-deductive theorizing, which typically relies on the verification of pre-existing theories. Instead, grounded theory facilitates the systematic generation of theories closely connected to the empirical data of a specific social phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). This grounded theory method's emphasis on generating theory from "hard study of the data" enables researchers to avoid relying on "opportunistic use of theories that has dubious fit and working capacity" (Glaser & Strauss, 1999, p. 4). As such, this approach ensures that the proposed theories are firmly rooted in the studies phenomena, rather than being constrained by ill-fitting theoretical constructs.

While acknowledging the foundational assumptions of grounded theory, I diverge from Glaser's (1978) stance that variables emerge from data in an objective, non-interactive manner. Aligning with a constructivist viewpoint, I concur with

Charmaz's (2005) assertion that while theory generation should strive for objectivity, researchers cannot and should not detach themselves from the data. Charmaz (2005) underscored the necessity for researchers to apply their theoretical sensitivity throughout the data analysis process, indicating that grounded theory is not entirely neutral.

The application of grounded theory in this study was aimed at constructing middle-range theories through systematic data collection, analysis, and conceptual development (Charmaz, 2005). From a sociological perspective, grand theories, while comprehensive, can sometimes be too detached from the experiences of specific social groups. Middle-range theories, in contrast, are grounded in more focused observations of specific social phenomena. Despite involving abstractions, these theories are distinct from mere working hypotheses and offer a more nuanced understanding of social dynamics (Merton, 1949).

Current theories on employment relationships predominantly focus on the dynamics between employers and employees engaged in relatively long-term and stable employment. However, these theories may not be directly applicable to the gig work context, where workers engage in contractual relationships characterized by high flexibility, self-direction, and typically short-term, contingent engagements. Consequently, the expectations that gig workers and platforms hold in establishing and maintaining their working relationships may significantly diverge from those prevalent in traditional employment settings. This evident discrepancy highlights the imperative for a systematic exploration of the psychological mechanisms inherent in gig working relationships. The current theoretical frameworks fall short in adequately capturing the unique properties and dimensions characteristic of these emerging work

arrangements. Therefore, there is a compelling need to develop new theoretical constructs that more accurately mirror the realities faced in gig work contexts. In this vein, as Corbin & Strauss (2008b) suggested, the grounded theory method emerges as particularly instrumental for this research objective. The grounded theory method is ideally suited to developing theories that resonate with the unique aspects of gig working relationships, thereby filling the existing theoretical gap.

### *Sample*

Theoretical sampling was employed to collect in-depth perspectives of gig workers from multiple digital platforms in the U.S. In the grounded theory framework, theoretical sampling is utilized to identify incidents that shed light on the variation of concepts for the purpose of broadening the scope of the theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008a). According to Charmaz (2006), the central goal of theoretical sampling is to elaborate and refine the categories that can be used to generate emerging theories, rather than mirroring population distributions or generate cross-group contrasts. Corbin and Strauss (1990) also highlighted that the primary consideration of theoretical sampling is the representativeness of concepts, rather than particular persons. Additionally, grounded theory research necessitates an iterative process of moving between data collection and analysis, continuously refining comparisons between categories. The ideal theoretical sampling strategy relies on the categories that emerge from the data (Charmaz, 2006). In the initial phase of theoretical sampling, where any categories have not yet been identified, researchers should predict the type of data required to fill gaps based on existing literature.

In light of these principles, the focus of the theoretical sampling for this study was on capturing the diverse experiences and perspectives of gig workers, rather than

particular individual workers or digital platforms. The literature review suggested that exploring gig workers' work experiences, exchange processes, and psychological assumptions are instrumental in understanding their working relationships.

Additionally, recent data indicated varied engagement levels among gig workers in the U.S., showing that about 41% of Americans who have participated in gig work spent less than 10 hours performing gig tasks in a typical week, compared to 29% who spent 10 to 30 hours and 8% who spent more than 30 hours performing gig tasks (Anderson et al., 2021). Based on these preliminary findings, the theoretical sample was selected using the following criteria: (a) the worker is currently engaged with at least one digital platform in the U.S.; (b) the worker has been involved in gig work for a minimum of three months; and (c) the worker dedicates at least eight hours per week to gig jobs.

In addition to employing theoretical sampling, this study also utilized snowball sampling to enrich the diversity of participant perspectives. This method involved asking current interviewees to recommend their coworkers for potential inclusion in this research (Creswell, 1998). The snowball sampling method is particularly effective in enabling researchers to rapidly access a wide range of participants. By leveraging existing participants' networks, it allows for the gathering of extensive information from broader targeted individuals who might not have been accessible through direct recruitment strategies (Silverman, 2022). The plan was to conduct interviews with 15-20 gig workers, with the final sample size being determined by the point of theoretical saturation.

### ***Data Collection***

Data collection for this study was conducted from May to September of 2023. The process began with theoretical sampling, which served to establish a foundational participant base. Potential participants in the theoretical sampling phase were from five gig worker Facebook groups, which have more than 20,000 gig worker members in total. The services performed by these members include delivery, ride-hailing, home repair, personal assistance, etc. All these groups are self-organized by gig workers to help gig workers around the U.S. stay connected and help each other. The creation years of these groups range from 2016 to 2022. Most groups have 20-60 new posts per month (see Appendix E for Table 3). The theoretical sampling approach was then complemented by snowball sampling for broadening and diversifying the respondent pool.

Starting from May 2023, recruitment messages were disseminated across group pages of the five gig worker Facebook groups. These posts included a concise overview of the study's purpose, the criteria for potential participant eligibility, and a brief outline of the collection process, all approved by the Institutional Review Boards (see Appendix A). To encourage participation, the posts also mentioned an incentive: a \$15 Amazon gift card for each participant. Interested individuals were initially contacted via Facebook Chat to verify their eligibility according to the three recruitment criteria. Following the preliminary screening, a formal invitation and a consent form were emailed to those who qualified to schedule an interview (see Appendix C).

Snowball sampling was also employed to expand the participant pool. This process involved requesting current interviewees to recommend their coworkers who might be suitable for participation. Additionally, some interviewees proactively

suggested coworkers whom they believed met the recruitment criteria. To ensure the integrity and relevance of the sample obtained through this approach, a verification process was implemented. Each prospective participant was contacted via email which served to confirm both their willingness to participate and their alignment the established criteria for inclusion in the study. This step was crucial in ensuring that the snowball sample met the necessary standards of quality and relevance. Following the verification process, the procedure was similar to the theoretical sampling phase. Each participant who met the qualifications was sent a formal invitation via email, along with a consent form. This communication also included arrangements for scheduling an interview. This consistent approach ensured a streamlined and standardized process for all participants, regardless of the sampling method used to recruit them.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary data collection method in this study. The interviews were specifically designed to gain a comprehensive understanding of gig workers' experiences in the gig economy and their perceptions of relationships with digital platforms in the U.S. context. Accordingly, the interview guide (see Appendix B) was structured into four main sections: (a) participants' perceptions of gig work, (b) interactions with multiple stakeholders in the work, (c) working relationships with digital platforms, and (c) the nature of their psychological contracts. Prior to the formal interviews, two pilot interviews were conducted in accordance with the interview guide. Both sessions were carried out online using Zoom. The first pilot interview involved a Ph.D. student at the University of Minnesota, who had experience in conducting in-depth interviews for research projects. The second interviewee was an undergraduate student at the

same university, concurrently working as a deliverer for a digital platform. These pilot interviews served several critical purposes: they provided an opportunity to familiarize myself with the interview structure, assess and enhance the clarity of the interview questions, and make necessary refinements to the interview guide.

In addition to semi-structured interviews, participants were requested to complete a brief demographic survey at the end of each interview session (see Appendix D). This survey gathered information on the interviewees' duration of gig work experience, age, gender, ethnic origin, and educational background. The demographic data collected was instrumental in ensuring a systematic analysis of the participants' experiences.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom, with each session lasting between 40 to 60 minutes. Participant consent was obtained at the beginning of each interview for recording purposes. The interviews were initially transcribed using Zoom's automatic transcription service, followed by a thorough manual transcription to ensure accuracy and completeness. Following each interview, a brief memo was drafted to encapsulate key points from the participant's responses and my reflective observations. These memos, along with the interview transcripts, constituted the primary data for analysis.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data analysis of this study adhered to the qualitative analysis procedures outlined by Corbin and Strauss (1990) and Charmaz (2006). The initial step involved compiling the demographic information of the participants, which was instrumental in providing a systematic understanding of their background (Charmaz, 2006). A total of 19 participants were interviewed (see Appendix F for Table 3). The duration of

these participants' engagement in gig work varied, ranging from five months to 12 years, and encompasses a variety of fields including ride-sharing, food delivery, transcription, personal assistance, project assistance, and graphic design. Of these participants, 12 were in their 20s, and 13 held a bachelor's degree or higher. Notably, 14 out of the 19 participants were engaged with more than one digital platform, highlighting the diversity and multiplicity of their gig work experiences.

Thematic analysis was adopted as the primary analytic method for conducting a meaningful and relevant analysis of the qualitative data collected through interviews (Lester et al., 2020). This approach facilitated a systematic examination of gig workers' interpretations of their work and their working relationships with digital platforms. The analytic adhered to the coding procedures delineated by Corbin and Strauss (1990), which are segmented into open, axial, and selective coding stages. These stages are designed to systematically refine and categorize the data, thereby enabling the identification of significant patterns and categories.

In the open coding phase, the main objective is to identify similarities and differences across the qualitative data sources (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This initial coding stage facilitates the generation of patterns and categories, at the same time, highlight areas where additional data and analysis might be necessary. The main task of the subsequent phase, axial coding, focuses on examining the relationships between identified categories and their subcategories, as well as the interrelations among the subcategories themselves (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This phase involves a detailed exploration of the variations in the emerging categories and subcategories. Selective coding, undertaken in the later phases of the study, seeks to integrate all categories into a core category that represents the central phenomenon of the study (Corbin &

Strauss, 1990). An additional objective of selective coding is to pinpoint any categories that are underdeveloped or lacking in conceptual density. Such categories require further elaboration to enhance the theoretical depth of the study, leveraging mere description of the data to a more nuanced understanding (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978).

Corbin and Strauss (1990) also emphasized the use of theoretical memos throughout the analysis process. These memos are critical for capturing conceptual details and thereby enhancing the depth and clarity of findings (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). In alignment with this approach, while coding in *NVivo*, the *Notes* feature was utilized to create annotations that reflect the conceptual analysis of the transcripts. This practice ensured a thorough and nuanced interpretation of the data, grounded in the theoretical framework guiding the study.

The interview data was the primary source for identifying patterns and categories in this study. In the open and axial coding phases, all transcripts were compiled and analyzed in *NVivo*. Through a thorough and iterative review process, I developed various preliminary codes based on observed similarities and differences across the transcripts. The coding process further entailed the integration of these codes into distinct categories according to emergent themes, including reasons to participate in gig work, the self-employed nature of work, personal goal fulfilment, performance management and evaluation, benefits and supports from digital platforms. Alongside the open and axial coding processes, theoretical memos were crafted, drawing upon the study's theoretical perspectives: social exchange and power relations. Throughout the analysis of interview transcripts, key insights that are specifically pertinent to these theoretical lenses were pinpointed and compiled using

the *Notes* feature of *NVivo*. Annotations for these key insights served as preliminary reflections, and were thereby crafted to ground the analysis in the concepts of social exchange and power relations.

In the selective coding phase, the various patterns and categories were further refined. This stage involved a rigorous comparison and reorganization of codes, with a focus on their relevance to the study's three research questions. The categories were distilled into two primary streams: one centered on gig workers' perceptions of the working relationships, and the other on the components of gig workers psychological contracts. Additionally, the latter stream's codes and categories were sorted based on their association with factors either facilitating or hindering these working relationships. This refinement process involved continuous revisiting earlier theoretical memos for ensuring critical conceptual details were not overlooked in the refinement of the categories.

This data analysis process was guided by the principle of constant comparison of interchangeable patterns from the data (Holton, 2007). The iterative process continued until reaching theoretical saturation, a point at which the categories and their interrelations were fully identified, and no additional interpretations can be generated (Glaser, 2001).

### ***Trustworthiness***

Building trustworthiness in qualitative research involves a diligent process aimed at enhancing the rigor of the findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) have identified four critical evaluation criteria for qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Throughout this research, various strategies were

employed to comprehensively address these four dimensions, ensuring the integrity and reliability of the study's outcomes.

**Credibility.** Credibility, refers to the internal validity of a qualitative study, is significantly influenced by the quality of data sources. Credibility is enhanced through the continuous refinement of the interpretations of data in light of existing patterns (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, the strategic use of both theoretical and snowball sampling ensures the relevance and integrity of the data sources. Prior to distributing the consent form, I communicated the three participant recruitment criteria via Facebook Chat or email, reinforcing the credibility of the data sources from the outset. In addition, at the start of each interview session, I engaged participants in discussions about the types of their gig work, weekly work hours, and tenure as gig workers to re-affirm their eligibility for the study.

Triangulation serves as another pivotal strategy for enhancing credibility. Beyond interviews, the collection of demographic information through surveys and the keeping of theoretical memos contributed to a triangulated approach to the findings. For instance, to ensure the credibility of the interpretations, questions regarding health insurance, social security, and performance evaluation methods, informed by initial participant responses, were included in subsequent interviews with participants from the same digital platforms. This approach allowed for the cross-validation of these aspects, thereby reinforcing the credibility of the findings.

**Transferability.** Transferability, also known as external validity, is facilitated by providing a thick description of the research context and participants' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This approach enables readers to draw parallels between the study's data and similar contexts. By adopting thick description as a key strategy, the

study's findings were detailed with rich and thick contextual information and direct quotes from participants. Such detailed reporting ensured that the interpretations of findings were deeply rooted in the social phenomenon and specific contexts being studied, thereby enhancing the dependability of the research.

**Dependability.** Dependability, which reflects the reliability of a qualitative study, can be enhanced through strategies such as peer reviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To reinforce dependability of this study, feedback was solicited on the research design from my advisor and faculty members at the University of Minnesota. This feedback was instrumental in refining the research process, particularly in terms of sampling strategies and the development of the interview guide. In addition, pilot tests were conducted with a Ph.D. student experienced in qualitative research and an undergraduate student engaged in gig work. These pilot tests were crucial for improving the clarity and relevance of the interview questions.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability refers to the objectivity of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Audit trails are recognized as an effective means for achieving confirmability, ensuring that the findings are a reflection of the research subjects and conditions rather than influenced by researcher bias (Guba, 1981). To mitigate the potential impact of my own bias, I engaged in a rigorous practice of recording memos after each interview and also throughout the data analysis process. This reflective practice was crucial for examining my assumptions and biases that could potentially shape the research process and the interpretation of findings.

In addressing biases stemming from the theoretical lenses guiding this study, I consciously grounded the coding process in the transcripts, ensuring that categories emerged naturally from the sorting and organizing of identified patterns. The

reporting of data analysis results was purposefully tailored to address the study's three research questions. Following this process, theoretical lenses were carefully integrated. This approach was designed to sidestep the potential biases and assumptions associated with the theoretical lenses during both the coding and reporting stages. Consequently, these lenses were employed solely at the last theoretical exploration phase, serving to enrich the interpretation of the findings with deeper insights.

### **Confidentiality and Anonymity**

Prior to conducting this study, approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Minnesota. In accordance with the research protocols approved by IRB, all the recordings and analysis documents have been securely stored on the research's personal laptop, which is protected by an access code. As the sole researcher of this study, only I have the ability to access these data and documents. Additionally, all identification information, including participant names and the names of digital platforms, was anonymized with pseudonyms throughout the data analysis and reporting of findings.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

This study aimed to uncover the psychological mechanisms underlying gig working relationships. Central to this objective was an exploration of gig workers' work experiences, specifically their perceptions concerning the multifaceted nature of their work, with an emphasis on the relational and transactional dimensions of their psychological contracts with digital platforms. This chapter presents an in-depth analysis of the empirical findings, drawing from interviews with gig worker participants.

The analysis presented in this chapter is structured to address the core research questions: (a) how do gig workers perceive their relationships with digital platforms, (b) what are the key components of gig workers' psychological contracts, and (c) how do gig workers' psychological contracts enhance or impede their working relationships with platforms. The following sections begin by exploring gig workers' perceptions of their relationships with digital platforms, then transition to examining their psychological contracts with these platforms.

### **Gig Workers' Perceptions of Relationships with Digital Platforms**

The exploration of gig workers' perceptions of their relationships with digital platforms is grounded in an analysis of their views on gig work itself and their interactions with the digital platforms they engage with. The decision to pursue gig work was predominantly driven by various financial reasons, including diversifying income sources and covering educational expenses, as noted by the majority of participants. Alongside financial incentives, a preference for flexible work arrangements stands out as another key factor influencing their choice, reflecting a broad desire for adaptability in work schedules. Notably, participants employed a

range of terms to describe themselves, ranging from freelancers to agents, which reflects a diversity in how they perceive their roles in these platforms. The variance in self-identification underscores their complex understanding of their roles and the nature of their relationships with digital platforms.

These findings suggest that gig workers' perceptions of their working relationships with digital platforms are deeply rooted in personal factors, such as financial needs and work preferences, but also influenced by their interpretations of their own roles and responsibilities in the platforms. To provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of the dynamics of platform-based work, the analysis and reporting of findings on gig workers' perceptions of their working relationships with digital platforms are organized into two domains: their perceptions of the work itself and their perceptions of the digital platforms.

### ***Gig Workers' Perceptions of Gig Work***

In the interviews with gig worker participants, their perceptions of the work itself are indicated in three emergent themes: (a) the drivers that motivated them to engage in gig work, (b) the dual nature of flexibility in gig work, and (c) the meaningfulness of work.

**Drivers of Gig Work Participation.** The interviews revealed a diverse array of reasons for their participation in gig work. Three main themes emerged from all these reasons: (a) financial factors, (b) a preference for flexibility, and (c) a rejection of traditional employment relationships.

Undoubtedly, financial considerations stand as the primary catalyst for individuals engaging in gig work, as highlighted by the vast majority of participants. The intricacies of these financial motivations varied among gig workers. Beyond the

common goal of earning additional income, distinct motivations were articulated. For instance, one participant emphasized that “what motivated me to work with these platforms was the way they treat their staff and the compensation they offer,” highlighting the appeal beyond mere financial gain. Others sought gig work as a means to secure a higher income than what was previously earned in non-gig roles, with one noting, “I needed a job that would pay more than what I was earning previously.” Additionally, nearly all participants, except for one, belong to the millennial and Gen Z generations. Among them, three were full-time students engaging in gig work to support their educational expenses, while four others mentioned they were accumulating savings from gig work to further their education in the future.

Flexibility emerged as another critical factor, with most participants expressing a preference for a flexible work arrangement. “I needed the flexibility of the work. I just wanted to be able to do things at my own pace,” one worker shared, emphasizing the value of self-directed work. Another also noted, “because when you’re doing this kind of job, you can work from home, thanks to its flexibility. That’s actually why I prefer this kind of work.” This desire for flexibility extends to managing one’s work schedule, as Ava, a food deliverer elaborated:

You are your own boss. If you’re tired, or if you feel like it, you can actually turn down an offer. So, you’re in charge of your own time. You can have free time, time to hang out, or attend to other things, balancing different areas of your life. And you are the boss of your own. You decide what to make, how much to charge, and all that...

Furthermore, family obligations emerged as a significant factor influencing some workers' preference for flexible work arrangements. For example, a participant employed as a personal assistant via a gig work platform shared that her family responsibilities span across different countries, necessitating her to provide care. This situation impedes her from committing to any full-time work on a long-term basis.

Although not as pronounced as the financial and flexibility motivations, a notable rejection to traditional employment was expressed. One participant, who engaged in project assistant jobs through several freelancing job platforms, shared experiences of unsuccessful job applications in large organizations. This participant expressed a clear preference against the formal administrative structures of such entities. Similarly, another participant, involved in hair styling and web design through digital platforms, articulated her rejection of working in a formal employment:

Working for someone and working for yourself have significant differences, and there's a big advantage to being your own boss. In some companies, you might do a lot of work and get paid less than you deserve...And if you're working with a company, anything could happen, you might get fired, or you could be asked to leave your job at any time.

Notably, those expressing a reluctance to engage in traditional employment all identify with the Gen Z demographic, and had not experienced formal employment prior to their gig work. Although this sentiment of rejecting formal employment was not as universally shared as the motivations for financial gain and work flexibility, it was nonetheless emphasized by three participants. This perspective reveals a nuanced reason behind the choice of some individuals to pursue gig work and signals an

emerging trend among the younger generation, who show a growing preference for self-employment over traditional organizational employment.

**The Dual Nature of Flexibility in Gig Work.** Flexibility emerges as critical factor motivating most participants towards gig work, with many highlighting the high levels of self-direction and autonomy that characterize their roles. However, this flexibility also acts as a double-edged sword. As indicated in the interviews, while flexible work arrangements allow workers to customize their work schedules and tasks to fit personal preferences and life commitments, they also bear the entirety of potential risks. These include undertaking additional efforts to ensure client satisfaction and encountering fluctuating incomes as direct consequences of their autonomous work decisions.

Beyond the flexibility in scheduling work hours, participants noted their autonomy in selecting preferred job offers and determining their approach to task completion. Despite most digital platforms imposing limits on the percentage of job offers a worker can decline, gig workers typically have self-direction in choosing among available offers, often based on the payment and task difficulty. Maya, a food deliverer, illustrated this self-direction,

I set a weekly goal that I need to achieve and I know the number of deliveries I am set to accept and complete. If I see that the tips are actually high, and if I am free at that point of time, I would go for it.

Distance also plays a critical role in decision-making, as Walker, a ride-sharing driver, explained: “I can decide to accept or decline rides, depending on how far a client is from my location, which could be a major reason to decline a ride.” Another driver further elaborated on the autonomy afforded by their roles:

There were times when I declined requests for trips that were long-distance. A client could book a ride, and they would be very far from my current location. So, I am allowed to decline. Then, [platform name] would redirect the ride to someone nearby, and I wouldn't be penalized.

Compared to these local service workers, for those providing remote gig services, such as graphic design or transcription, negotiating over payment before work is common. Ella, who accepted transcription service orders through two gig work platforms, highlighted:

I could choose which projects to work on and which not to. That's how I used to acquire my clients. Of course, we had to discuss the payment, and we would negotiate based on the length, the time required, the content involved, and so on. If I was dealing with content that was relatively simple or straightforward, the payment was lower. But if the task was more challenging, then, of course, the payment would be higher...and only after reaching an agreement would I start working.

The self-direction and autonomy inherent in gig work not only require gig workers to take responsibility for ensuring service quality but also exposes them to the intricacies and potential misjudgments of task duration and effort by clients. To secure more job offers and maintain client satisfaction, gig workers often find themselves compensating for these discrepancies and assuming risks independently. Paige, a personal assistant accepting various types of assistance services via a gig platform, mentioned:

People don't realize how much work goes into an hour's task. For example, if someone says they're going on vacation and want me to place something in

their house, they often don't understand that I need to have the items in my car, drive there, enter the house, and then remove them from my car. What is perceived as an hour's work can actually take two or three hours, and they don't grasp that. So, if it takes three hours to complete, I might bill them for two to avoid any hard feelings.

Eli, who takes on project assistance jobs at various construction sites through a gig platform, also highlighted the unpredictability of his work:

I actually got a small sense of what I'm about to do. They said this is what you're meant to expect from me, so I went. I actually went to all the places they told me.

This illustrates that while gig workers enjoy the flexibility to select their tasks and determine their execution, they also bear all the consequences of these decisions. As a food deliverer succinctly put it,

...the pay you receive is based on the number of deliveries you make.

Therefore, not working means not earning, so the outcome is just like that.

### **Meaningfulness of Work: Building Connections and Career Preparation.**

The majority of the participants of this study acknowledged the meaning of their gig work, particularly in terms of extending connections and preparing for a future career. Notably, almost all the ride-sharing drivers emphasized the value of building connections with clients, which is likely due to the more frequent opportunities for client interaction inherent in ride-sharing compared to other forms of gig work. The benefits of such connections are multifaceted. Jacob, with over a decade of experiences as both a food deliverer and ride-sharing driver across different

platforms, highlighted the value of his diverse gig roles in fostering an expansive network and developing meaningful connections:

I needed to have different experience. You know, I wanted to advance from delivering items to transporting people. From this, I could learn some basic things like getting to know more locations, visiting new places, meeting more people, and thereby having more connections.

Beyond the development of basic skills and exposure to new perspectives and information, as several participants mentioned, some underscored the significance of these connections for their future career aspirations. For example, a ride-sharing driver with ambitions of becoming a mechanical engineer shared a pivotal interaction:

During a conversation with a client, he asked me if I planned to continue working with [platform name] for a long time. I opened up to him and he mentioned he was a mechanical engineer as well and gave me many tips.

Three years from now, I plan to enroll in school and work with him, since he owns a workshop.

Ava, a food deliverer, similarly shared how her interactions with various restaurants during her work provided valuable insights into restaurant operations, which she believed crucial for her future goal of opening her own restaurant.

Remarkably, like Ava, several participants (8 out of 19) exhibited entrepreneurial aspirations, with many planning to establish businesses in domains related to their gig work. For instance, George, who worked as a deliverer for both a food-delivery platform and a freelancing platform, intended to start his own delivery business and leverage his current client base for growth. Similarly, Nessa, engaged in graphic design on a digital platform, aspired to become an independent designer and

establish her own platform to showcase the work of other designers, thereby facilitating more job opportunities for them. This trend suggests a strong entrepreneurial spirit among gig workers, with their current roles serving as a stepping stone towards future business ventures.

### ***Gig Workers' Perceptions of Digital Platforms***

Beyond the realm of gig workers' perceptions of gig work itself, the exploration of gig workers experiences also involved their nuanced perceptions of digital platforms. These perceptions are pivotal in sharpening their overall understanding of their relationships with these platforms. The interviews revealed that workers' views on digital platforms are complex and multifaceted, characterized by two distinct yet interconnected aspects: brand recognition and job opportunity stability, and evaluation dynamics between algorithmic assessments and human oversight.

#### **Platform Selection: Brand Recognition and Stability of Job**

**Opportunities.** The interviews revealed that gig workers place a high value on the brand recognition and market share of the digital platforms they choose to work with. These factors are crucial, as they directly influence the consistency and stability of the workers' income streams. Paige, who accepted personal assistance tasks from a well-known gig work platform, contrasted her experience with previous part-time jobs. She highlighted the instability and lower profitability of part-time jobs that were contingent on the fluctuating needs of job provides. In stark contrast, her engagement with the digital platform offered her a more stable and profitable opportunity. She elaborated:

...and the gig work with [platform name], if I need money, I just put myself as available. People trust [platform name], so I get better and more clients. I can work as much as I want, which means I can make money faster than I would with a small part-time job.

Moreover, the majority of the participants were simultaneously engaged with multiple digital platforms, providing unique insights into the comparative advantages of these platforms, particularly regarding brand recognition and client base. For instance, Nessa, a graphic designer, when discussing her choice of platform, described her current platform as offering abundant work opportunities and a vast market for selling her services and acquiring clients.

The significance of a platform's market share is particularly pronounced in sectors like ride-sharing and food delivery, where one or two dominant platforms often capture the majority of the market. Sage, associated with a prominent food delivery platform, noted the brand's reliability and trustworthiness as key factors in her choice, stating, "for me, it is a brand thing. I feel like [platform name] is a better brand than others, they have certainty, they can be trusted, and [workers] can rely more on this platform." Similarly, drivers for a well-known ride-sharing platform reported a higher volume of rides compared to other platforms, attributing this to the platform's popularity among users. Dane, a driver for this platform, mentioned that the platform's reputation and customer base were key reasons for his transition from a previous platform.

These insights indicated that the stability and reliability of job offers provided by digital platforms play a crucial role in gig workers' decision-making process. The brand recognition and market share of a platform significantly influence their

preferences, guiding their choices towards platforms that offer consistent and profitable work opportunities.

**Evaluation Dynamics: Algorithmic Assessments and Human Oversight.** In the interviews, a majority of participants conveyed a clear understanding that their performance evaluation is contingent upon both the quantity and quality of their services. A notable diversity in procedural details emerged from their descriptions, with many acknowledging the significant role of algorithms, often referred to as the “system.” For instance, Dane, who worked for a ride-sharing platform, explained how the algorithmic system monitors drivers’ performance based on acceptance and cancellation rates. He described how the system actively manages this aspect by issuing email alerts to drivers each time they cancel an offer. This mechanism is designed to ensure that drivers adhere to the platform’s established threshold for cancellation rates, thereby maintaining a balance between service availability and reliability.

Nessa, a graph design, provided insights into how the system assesses the quality of her work:

...before you submit your work, the system assesses it and provides a percentage rating. For example, if the expected standard for a task is at least 75%, and the system rates your work as approximately 60%, this indicates that the target has not been met.

She emphasized that her compensation is directly linked to this evaluation, with the potential earning up to 75% of the total service fees paid by clients, depending on the system’s assessment. This evaluation system, based on algorithmic assessment, is a common feature across platforms operating in different domains. Dylan, a ride-

sharing driver, described a similar evaluation system in his platform, which operates on a five-star rating scale. He explained that drivers receive full payment, including both ride fees and tips, for achieving a five-star rating. However, for a four-star rating, they are entitled to only 80% of the full payment. This tiered compensation structure underscores the significant impact of algorithmic assessment on gig workers' earnings.

While most participants perceived this algorithm-driven evaluation system as fair, some expressed concerns and dissatisfaction. Paige, for example, discussed the challenges she faced due to her inability to maintain a consistent task completion rate due to family obligations. Despite receiving positive ratings, the algorithmic system did not recognize her as a "Star Worker" (a pseudonym used for anonymity), impacting her visibility and job offer frequency on the platform. She expressed frustration, saying,

The algorithm doesn't support you. If you're the kind of gig worker who takes a week off and then works for two weeks, if that's your lifestyle, you won't be rewarded; The platform doesn't reward that. It puts you at the bottom of the list, and only those at the top get more work.

Walker, formerly a food deliverer and now a ride-sharing driver, criticized the inflexibility of the evaluation system in his previous platform. As he pointed out, "they offer a kind of rigid flexibility because when a client places an order, I have to deliver it on time. If I don't, it becomes a problem, and I get penalized for it." He, along with other drivers and deliverers, highlighted that the algorithms often penalize delays in delivery and ride-sharing, failing to account for the factors like the long distance between the pickup and delivery locations or last-time client orders. These

factors, often beyond the workers' control, can lead to unavoidable delays and lower ratings, yet are not considered by the algorithm-driven evaluation system.

In addition to algorithmic evaluations, many participants emphasized the role of a human liaison in managing and evaluating their performance. This role was commonly identified as a "supervisor," with some participants alternatively using terms like "representative" or "mediator." Notably, most participants did not perceive this supervisory role as a leadership position, noting that its primary responsibilities did not include traditional leadership or management tasks. Valerie, a food deliverer, clarified her perception,

I wouldn't call him a leader. I just think that's his role in the company. He's there to keep things in order, monitor the delivery system, ensure the accuracy of deliveries, receive complaints, and oversee the workers

Similarly, Jane, who worked with both ride-sharing and food delivery platforms, echoed this perceptions, referring to the role as a "customer representative" tasked with assisting platforms with workers' performance reviews.

The primary responsibility of these human liaisons, as described by participants, revolved around the weekly review of workers' performance. This typically involved a focus on communicating the review results to individual workers. As Ava, a food deliverer, illustrated, her supervisor would review customer feedback and the number of tasks she completed each week. The communication between the supervisor and the workers often occurs through online chat within the app rather than a formal meeting, and focuses solely on work-related topics.

Given the limitations and potential unfairness of algorithm-driven evaluations, as highlighted by participants in the previous section, the human intermediary role

often acts as a supplement to algorithm-driven evaluations, catering to the specific needs and challenges faced by workers. Ron, a ride-sharing driver, described the interplay between algorithms and human oversight in performance evaluation:

For our performance records, there's an algorithm for that. The supervisor has access to our records. If there are poor reviews, it's the supervisor's responsibility to gather more information on this by engaging drivers in conversations, and ensure every driver improves their performance.

Additionally, Dylan, another driver, mentioned that his supervisor would examine the reasons for declining offers, ensuring that drivers with legitimate concerns are not unfairly penalized by the algorithmic system. However, the effectiveness of this human intermediary role varies across platforms. Jane, who was engaged with a ride-sharing platform, recounted an instance where she received a poor rating from a rider in a bad mood. Despite her belief that she had provided quality service in accordance with the platform's policy, her report to the supervisor did not yield support. As a result, her earnings were adversely affected by this negative review. This experience led Jane to question the fairness and reliability of her platform's evaluation system. Therefore, while the human intermediary role has the potential to address workers' needs and mitigate the unfairness inherent in algorithm-driven evaluations, the level of support and accommodation offered by this role varies significantly across different platforms and specific intermediary positions. This variability in the effectiveness and responsiveness of human liaisons appear to play a considerable role in shaping gig workers' perceptions of fairness and equity within the platform.

### **Gig Workers' Psychological Contracts with Digital Platforms**

This section advances the exploration into gig workers' psychological contracts with digital platforms, specifically focusing on the transactional and relational dimensions. While preceding findings on "Gig Workers' Perceptions of Relationships with Digital Platforms" touched upon aspects relevant to these contract dimensions, this section shifts the emphasis towards a more in-depth analysis of gig workers' subjective interpretations and emotionally laden narratives. It places a particular emphasis on emotionally charged narratives regarding their engagements with digital platforms. This nuanced focus aims to uncover how various facets of their work experiences lead gig workers to continually reassess and redefine their expectations from digital platforms. Such a perspective underscores the inherently subjective and affective nature of psychological contracts, highlighting the dynamic interplay between gig workers' experiences and their evolving perceptions of digital platforms.

Drawing from the literature review, it is noted that while the construct of psychological contracts can vary significantly among individuals based on their personalities and beliefs (Rao & Kunja, 2019), there tends to be a pattern where certain groups sharing similar identities or working within similar domains exhibit comparable psychological contracts (Gardner et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2021; Tufan & Wendt, 2020). This observation lays the foundation for presenting collective perceptions among gig worker participants. Subsequent sections will categorize these findings into transactional and relational components, providing a detailed examination of gig workers' interpretations of the diverse aspects in their work experiences that lead to the refinement of their psychological contracts.

### ***Gig Workers' Transactional Psychological Contracts***

This section delves into the transactional aspects of gig workers' psychological contracts with digital platforms. Transactional psychological contracts typically represent workers' monetary, material, and instrumental expectations for their working relationships (Bal & Vink, 2011). In exploring the transactional psychological contracts between gig workers and digital platforms, it is crucial to distinguish between various forms of compensation and support that are characteristic of gig work. Unlike traditional employment, gig work typically does not include traditional employee benefits such as health insurance and social security. Instead, gig workers often receive performance-based incentives and rewards. Additionally, gig workers are provided with only basic training by digital platforms, which is specifically focused on improving their performance and service quality, rather than any form of advanced training. These distinctions are critical for understanding the nuanced dynamics of gig workers' psychological contracts with digital platforms. Accordingly, the findings are organized into three distinct parts: (a) incentives and rewards provided by digital platforms, (b) absence of traditional employee benefits, and (c) basic training and its limited impact on psychological contracts.

**Incentives and Rewards Provided by Digital Platforms.** Engaging with digital platforms as independent contractors presents gig workers with a markedly different landscape from that of traditional employment, especially regarding benefits and incentives. Despite recognizing the inherent trade-off of forgoing traditional employee benefits, a notable number of participants highly valued the modest incentives and rewards offered by their platforms. These incentives, primarily bonus payments for tasks requiring additional effort or exceptional performance as gauged

by customer reviews, are perceived as crucial in enhancing workers' attachment to and satisfaction with their platforms.

For example, one food deliverer mentioned that she used to receive incentives for long-distance delivery orders, while a ride-sharing driver noted that the platform raised her earnings per ride for her consistent positive customer reviews. Beyond this, the incentives also involved non-monetary rewards. Gabel, who worked with two food-delivery platforms, shared his appreciation for one platform's support services, such as vehicle maintenance, which enhanced his loyalty:

I also learned that [platform name] had some other services, like some forms of support for their delivery men...like sometimes assisting in the maintenance of cars and delivery bikes. So those were very exceptional things I learned, which motivated me to work for [platform name].

Nessa, a graphic designer, highlighted her platform's provision of customizable rewards for high-performing workers. As she described:

...if you are ahead of the other workers, you can receive some cash on top of the salary. And [platform name] might also come to ask you how you want to be rewarded. I received a laptop because I got positive feedback from my clients. Since my old laptop was sometimes disappointing, I asked them for a new one.

Although these incentives are modest compared to full-time employment benefits, they play a critical role in shaping psychological contracts, making workers feel more satisfied with their platforms. Maya's experience of receiving bonus for maintaining long-term positive ratings underscored this sentiment, "I feel [platform name] treats their workers friendly, and I feel connected because I feel that my help is needed and

appreciated.” Thus, these incentives, characterized by participants as modest and occasional, nevertheless serve as significant motivators in fostering their transactional psychological contracts.

**Absence of Traditional Employee Benefits.** While the previous section highlighted the modest incentives and rewards provided by digital platforms and their role in fostering worker satisfaction and attachment, the absence of traditional employee benefits warrants examination. Among participants with over five years of service (7 out of 19), only one reported an increase in the proportion of earnings received per job as a recognition of their long-term commitment. However, tenure-based compensation increases do not appear to be a decisive factor in maintaining long-term engagement, as evidenced by other workers’ continued engagement without such increases.

The interviews also extended to the provision of health insurance, a benefit widely advocated by participants, especially by those in ride-sharing and food delivery as their work requires them to constantly drive around and meet different people. Dane, a ride-sharing driver, and Maya, a food deliverer, both argued for health insurance provision regardless of contractor status. Moreover, discussion on the absence of health insurance inevitably led to concerns regarding work safety and protection. Valerie, another food deliverer, articulated these concerns, highlighting the potential risks associated with gig work:

I don’t feel safe and protected in my work. The work is actually at your own risk; the company doesn’t guarantee your safety at all...actually, they should provide some security and health insurance.

Valerie's statement not only underscored the need for health insurance but also brought to light the critical issue of safety in the gig economy. This revealed a notable gap in the protections offered to gig workers, highlighting an area that requires attention from digital platforms. However, it is crucial to note that despite the advocacy for health insurance, especially among those providing local services, the overall sentiment to the absence of such benefits remained relatively subdued, and did not exhibit profound dissatisfaction among gig workers across various domains.

Furthermore, while gig work serves as an important source of income for many participants, it is often viewed not as a long-term career path but as a transitional phase towards achieving broader career aspirations. For instance, Daisy, a full-time nursing student, intended to continue her work in both food delivery and ride-sharing platforms as part-time work to financially support her studies. She noted that her career plan is to be a nurse in the future and viewed these gigs as essential for her current financial stability rather than as her ultimate career destination. Similarly, Ron, who worked simultaneously for two ride-sharing platforms, envisioned a future beyond gig work:

I tend to have other streams of jobs as well, but you know, the majority of my income comes from the two apps. So, I will continue for a very long time.

This gig work is not my dream job. My dream job is to be a programmer. But even if I become a successful programmer, I wouldn't quit because, you know,

I would also use my spare time for additional income.

These perspectives suggested that while gig work constitutes a significant portion of participants' current income, it is predominantly viewed not as a long-term career but as temporary stepping stones towards achieving their career aspirations. This

understanding sheds light on why the absence of traditional employee benefits, while recognized, does not markedly detract from gig workers' overall satisfaction with digital platforms. This finding highlighted the nuanced dynamics between gig workers' expectations and the realities of independent contract work, indicating that gig work is considered more a component of broader career trajectory than as a final career destination.

**Basic Training.** Beyond the modest incentives and benefits, digital platforms commonly provide basic, yet essential training to gig workers. Most of such training serves as the foundational preparation required for various gig roles. According to participants, this training typically spans a short duration, ranging from three days to one week, primarily focusing on essential work-related knowledge and skills. The interviews indicated that key areas covered in this training included navigating the platform's app, customer service techniques, and communication skills. In addition to these general content, role-specific training examples cited by participants included customer interaction strategies for ride-sharing and food delivery drivers, formatting guidelines for transcription workers, and design standards and software usage for graphic designers. Safety training emerged as a common theme, especially for those in ride-sharing and food delivery, emphasizing the importance of personal security and customer interaction. Jenney, with experience in both sectors, shared,

I received online training courses that cover topics about life safety, customer service, and how to use the app. One thing I won't forget is the safety tips on preventing sexual harassment and staying safe on the road.

Additionally, participants also highlighted receiving specific training content aimed at maximizing tip earnings or maintaining positive ratings. Daisy, associated with a

food-delivery platform, detailed the additional training she received beyond basic app navigation and customer relations:

The training I've received from [platform name] was on how to increase my rating and we were informed that a high rating is more likely to receive better tips and bonuses, because the ratings are actually based on customer satisfaction.

These insights indicated that most training provided by digital platforms focuses on improving knowledge and skills related to specific work content. Participants underscored that helpfulness of the training in providing essential information and clarifying potential work challenges. For instance, Dane, who transitioned from traditional cab driving to gig work, valued the platform's training for enhancing his professional development:

It was really really helpful. You know, initially, I was just a driver for a company. I never had this experience, never met new people. So, attending the training, trying to improve my communication skills, and learning some safety tips from the video during the training really helped me improve.

Jane, who received sexual harassment training from her platform, emphasized the value of training, especially for female drivers:

...being a lady and a driver, the chances of being sexually harassed are actually high. So, being provided with such training is actually a good thing.

Furthermore, a subset of participants showcased a deeper emotional response to the training provided by digital platforms. Nessa, who received graphic designing orders from two platforms but was only offered training by one, articulated a strong preference for the platform that provided training, stating "when someone gives you

something valuable, you also have to give back.” Similarly, Nancy, engaged in transcription services through a digital platform, expressed her appreciation for the comprehensive training she received, noting, “I feel like platform name] has done a lot for the workers. Yes, the only thing required now is that the workers should also give back to the company.”

Despite these expressions of gratitude, it is noteworthy that such sentiments were not widely shared among all participants. The majority acknowledged the value and comprehensiveness of the training but did not report increased satisfaction or loyalty as a direct result. Sage, a food deliverer, for instance, considered the provision of essential training by platforms as a standard expectation, which is necessary to ensure service quality. She reflected a common sentiment among participants that while training is beneficial, it is often viewed as a basic requirement of the job rather than a special privilege or bonus.

This finding indicated that while basic training seems crucial for equipping gig workers with the necessary skills and knowledge for their roles, its provision appears to be generally regarded as a standard practice by digital platforms. Consequently, although training can enhance gig workers’ understanding of their tasks and improve service quality, it does not seem to be viewed as a significant factor in strengthening their psychological contracts with the platforms. The appreciation for training, where present, underscored the perceived value of additional learning opportunities, yet the overall impact on gig workers’ loyalty and satisfaction appears to remain limited.

### ***Gig Workers’ Relational Psychological Contracts***

This section explores the relational aspects of gig workers’ relational psychological contracts with digital platforms. Relational psychological contracts

embody social, affective, and symbolic expectations (Bal & Vink, 2011). Drawing upon the narratives of gig worker participants, this section unveils the nuanced dynamics between workers and digital platforms with a focus on workers' relational expectations. The findings are organized into two areas: feeling excluded as non-employee workers, and human intermediary support in fostering workers' attachment.

**Feeling Excluded as Non-Employee Workers.** The status of gig workers as non-employee emerged as a critical factor, which seems to greatly influence gig workers' sense of attachment and identity with digital platforms. This status, while offering flexibility, often positions gig workers as external to the platform's core operations, inadvertently prioritizing customer satisfaction over worker well-being.

The interviews unveiled the diverse terms they used to describe their roles within the digital platforms they engage with. Beyond the commonly used term "gig workers," participants also identified themselves with a variety of labels such as freelancers, agents, mediums, and clients. Despite the varied terminology, a common thread among most participants was a clear distinction from traditional employee status, primarily due to the lack of employee benefits and insurances. For example, Daisy, who worked across ride-sharing and food delivery platforms, stated, "I don't consider myself an employee of [platforms' names]. Employees should have some insurances, which I don't have." Echoing this sentiment, Maya, another food deliverer, expressed:

I feel that as an employee, there are certain benefits you should enjoy, such as those most employees receive from companies, like benefits, [basic] payment, and health insurance. Since I don't receive such benefits from [platform name], I don't see myself as an employee.

Moreover, the contingent and contractual nature of gig workers' relationships with platforms further differentiates their status from that of employees. Jane, who engaged in both ride-sharing and food delivery, pointed out that her part-time work arrangement set her apart from traditional employees. Dane, another ride-sharing driver, emphasized:

My relationship with [platform name] is that I work with them. I don't consider myself an employee because the only thing that binds me to this platform is our contractual agreement.

Upon further inquiry into the nature of this contractual relationship, Dane elaborated that he does not perceive himself as being legally bound to the platform in the same way as a formal employment agreement would. Specifically, Dane acknowledged that this arrangement does not entitle him to the majority of benefits typically associated with employee status.

In contrast, workers engaged with platforms beyond the realms of food delivery or ride-sharing, such as transcription, graphic design, and personal assistance, often perceive the platforms as collaborators or mediums that facilitate their access to clients. For example, Jack, a graphic designer, considered himself a freelancer to the platform, with no involvement in internal or management tasks. Similarly, Nessa, another graphic designer, and Paige, a personal assistant, noted that they utilized the platform primarily as a showcase for their work or qualifications to attract clients. This perspective underscored gig workers' perception of digital platforms as enablers of independent work engagements, positioning themselves as external to these entities.

This perceived external status appears to result in digital platforms not valuing or protecting their workers adequately. Sage, a food deliverer, criticized her platform for attributing delivery delays to workers and failing to provide protections:

[Platform name] doesn't protect workers; for the delivery workers, protection and safety are on our own basis...But the thing is, as a delivery company, the workers are the most important people in the company, but they don't understand that.

This sentiment of feeling undervalued and excluded prompted Sage to consider leaving the platform, "I will stay maybe for a year or two, depending on what I get. If I get a better offer, I can just let it slide."

Another food deliverer, Valerie, shared a similar experience of exclusion, noting a lack of effort from the platform or her supervisor to understand the challenges behind poor customer reviews. As she underscored, "they care more about their clients, they care more about performance." Such sentiment was also echoed by Jane, who highlighted the unfairness in her platform's performance evaluation system. Jane expressing dissatisfaction with the lack of consideration for her explanations regarding poor reviews from a disgruntled rider:

I think they need to value their workers more, even as they back up their customers. But then, it should be a 50-50 thing; they shouldn't be one-sided.

These findings suggested that the non-employee status seems to lead gig workers to perceive themselves as external to their platforms and diminish their sense of attachment. Additionally, the prioritization of customer satisfaction over worker well-being by digital platforms appears to foster a sense of unfairness and exclusion

among gig workers. Consequently, the non-employee status emerges as a critical barrier to developing relational psychological contracts with digital platforms.

**Human Intermediary Support in Fostering Workers' Attachment.** The evaluation and management of gig workers' performance, as previously discussed, involve both algorithmic management and human intermediaries. The interviews revealed that several gig workers benefited from the support and accommodations provided by human intermediaries, who often mitigated the challenges posed by algorithmic management. Ron, a ride-sharing driver, highlighted the supportive role of his supervisor in navigating customer review challenges:

... If there are poor reviews, it's the supervisor's responsibility to gather more information on this by engaging drivers in conversations... I would say that depends on your relationship with your supervisor. My supervisor helps me make some amendments; he wants to work with you, to help you gain bonuses.

In a similar vein, Maya, a food deliverer, shared how her supervisor guided her in accepting more deliveries and achieving promotions. Specifically, she was advised to occasionally accept long-distance orders as a strategy to maintain a high status among deliverers.

Given the self-directed nature of gig work, it is important to note that the human intermediary role often represents the sole channel through which gig workers can communicate with and understand their platforms. Participants who perceived this human intermediary as supportive and responsive generally reported a stronger sense of attachment to the platform. For example, Nancy, a transcription worker, was assigned a director to fulfill the human intermediary role. She found her director to be

supportive, which in turn shaped her positive perception of the platform's culture. As she described:

The director is very supportive. He ensures that everything is set for both the clients and his workers. He looks at both sides of the picture. So, I can describe the culture of this company as employee-friendly. It's very concerned with the issues that employees go through, looking at both sides of the picture.

This sentiment of increased relational attachment was particularly pronounced among the workers involved with multiple platforms, who experienced varying levels of support from different intermediaries. Walker, who worked with two ride-sharing platforms, felt a deeper connection to the one where the supervisor was notably supportive and encouraging:

When I started working with [platform name] in 2016, I didn't know much about the rules or the working principles. My supervisor was one of the major supportive factors for me at [platform name]. When I was assigned to him, he was friendly and provided the tips on how to upgrade, and how we could make more money from [platform name]. I see him as someone who motivates me to do more and encourages me to put in my effort. He was also a major reason why I decided to continue working for [platform name].

Echoing this sentiment, Jane, contrasting her experiences between a food-delivery and a ride-sharing platform, noted a closer relationship with the latter due to a stable and ongoing relationship with her supervisor:

The representative at [food delivery platform] is not my leader, because they get changed. But the supervisor I have at [ride-sharing platform] is always constant, like I keep meeting, I keep relating to the same person over and over

again. The reason why I feel like I have a closer relationship with [ride-sharing platform] is because there's already a relationship built between the both of us, like he knows me. I know him, and I don't really have to go over again.

These insights indicated the pivotal role of supportive human intermediaries in enhancing gig workers' sense of belonging and attachment to their platforms. Despite the inherently flexible and independent nature of gig working relationships, the presence of an encouraging and responsive human intermediary appears to foster a sense of connection that transcends the impersonal interactions often associated with algorithmic management. Consequently, supportive human intermediaries seem to significantly contribute to the development of gig workers' relational psychological contracts with their platforms.

In summary, this study adopts a relativist ontological stance, delving into the varied interpretations gig workers hold regarding their relationships and psychological contracts with digital platforms. This approach aims to uncover the multitude of realities as perceived by gig workers themselves. Figure 1 offers a synthesized visual summary of the findings, illustrating both the distinct and overlapping aspects of gig workers' perceptions of their work, digital platforms, and psychological contracts.

As illustrated in Figure 1, gig workers' perceptions of their relationships with digital platforms stem from their views on gig work itself and the platforms. The interviews identified three influences on gig worker' perceptions of gig work: (a) drivers of gig work participation, including financial incentives, preferences for flexibility, a rejection of traditional employment, which shape their initial views on gig work; (b) the dual nature of flexibility, offering the freedom to manage work

hours while also obligating them to bear potential risks such as income precarity and clients' misjudgments of task duration and effort; (c) the perceived meaning of gig work, including the building of valuable connections and preparation for future careers through client resources or meaningful relationships gained from gig work. Gig workers' views on digital platforms are influenced by platforms' brand recognition and market share, which directly impact the stability and volume of job opportunities available. Additionally, the evaluation systems, blending algorithmic assessments with human oversight, are pivotal. Most participants found the algorithm-driven system fair, yet some noted its rigidity, alleviated by human liaisons who mediate review outcomes with gig workers. These elements collectively influence gig workers' perceptions of their work and platforms, forming the basis of their views on their working relationships.

Furthermore, Figure 1 outlines the key components of gig workers' transactional and relational psychological contracts identified in the interviews. The transactional aspects consist of the incentives and rewards provided by digital platforms, absence of traditional employee benefits, and the basic training provided by platforms. Despite being modest in comparison to standard employment benefits, these incentives and rewards are pivotal in forming psychological contracts, enhancing worker satisfaction with the platforms. The absence of employee benefits, particularly health insurance, is deemed important. However, the temporary nature of gig work in workers' broader career paths tempers their expectations for these benefits. Consequently, gig workers did not exhibit strong sentiments regarding the absence of such benefits, which does not seem to substantially impact their overall satisfaction. Basic training, viewed as a job requirement rather than an incentive or

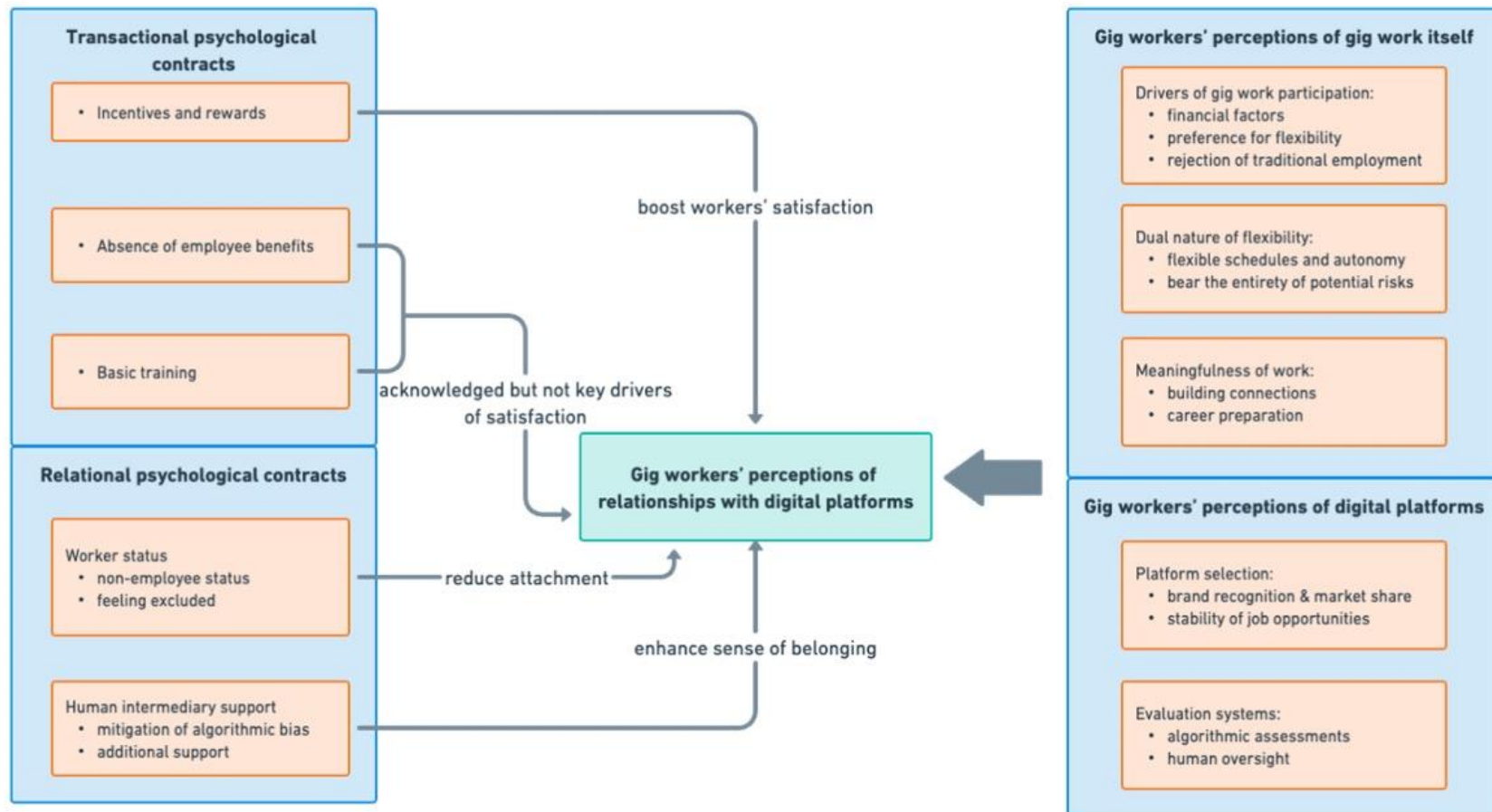
reward, is an appreciated but not a notable factor in enhancing gig workers' satisfaction with digital platforms.

The relational aspects include the non-employee status and human intermediary support. The non-employee status tends to make gig workers feel external and excluded from the platforms. Conversely, support from human intermediaries addresses the limitations of algorithmic management and the self-directed nature of gig work, greatly enhancing workers' sense of belonging and attachment to their platforms.

Both transactional and relational components, central to gig workers' psychological contracts, influence their overall perceptions of working relationships with digital platforms, with varying effects on their satisfaction and attachment. The distinct effects of these psychological contract components are illustrated with the descriptions in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Gig Workers' Working Relationships and Psychological Contracts with Digital Platforms*



## Chapter 5 Discussion

The purpose of this grounded theory study is to develop a theoretical understanding of the psychological mechanisms that shape gig workers' relationships with digital platforms. Adhering to Charmaz's (2005) guidelines, the construction of the grounded theory is situated in broader social and interpretive contexts with theoretical sensitivity, while being open to the integrating of existing theories as guidance to inform the research process. The preceding chapter concentrated on interpreting gig workers' insights to uncover their nuanced perceptions of gig working relationships, this chapter progresses by examining these findings through the lenses of social exchange and power relations, thereby presenting a theoretical framework depicting the interplay between gig workers and digital platforms in different phases of gig working relationships.

Specifically, this chapter is organized into five sections: (a) dynamics of gig workers' relationships with digital platforms, (b) theorizing the developmental process of gig working relationships, (c) limitations, (d) implications for HRD research, (e) implications for practice, and (f) conclusion.

### **Dynamics of Gig Workers' Relationships with Digital Platforms**

This section delves into the findings from interviews regarding gig workers' relationships and psychological contracts with digital platforms, specifically through the lenses of social exchange and power relations. Given that the development of psychological contracts is dynamic, evolving through continuous evaluation and adjustment by the workers (Windle & von Treuer, 2014), this analysis is structured into two main parts: the establishment and the ongoing adjustment of gig working relationships.

### *The Establishment of Gig Working Relationships*

The interview findings indicate that gig workers' decision to participate in the gig economy is primarily driven by the allure of financial incentives, flexible work schedules, and freedom from traditional employment's administrative constraints. Additionally, the interviews reveal that some workers contrast gig work with traditional part-time jobs, noting that despite the contingent nature of gig work, it often offers more stable job opportunities and income, further enticing their participation. However, opting for gig work means forgoing certain traditional employment benefits typically provided by employers, such as employer-contributed health insurance and social security. In the gig economy, gig workers, classified as independent contractors, bear the responsibility for both the employee's and employer's portions of Medicare and social security taxes. Within this context, the mechanism of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) plays a crucial role in gig workers' decisions to engage with the gig economy, as they weigh the potential benefits against the associated costs.

Beyond the choice of engaging in the gig economy, the norm of reciprocity extends to gig workers' selection of specific digital platforms, where factors like brand recognition and market share play pivotal roles. These considerations promise additional advantages, including access to a wide client base and consistent job opportunities. Additionally, the preferences of certain gig workers shed light on the varied benefits they seek in different platforms. For example, some food delivery workers choose their roles over ride-sharing jobs to avoid extensive customer interaction, despite the potential for higher earnings in ride-sharing. This preference highlights the complex considerations gig workers navigate between personal

preferences and the costs associated with selecting digital platforms. It is widely recognized among food-delivery workers that, although both food delivery and ride-sharing work involve driving, food delivery demands much less customer communication. In contrast, ride-sharing workers often engage in continuous and positive communication with riders during driving. Moreover, most food delivery workers are aware of the income disparity with ridesharing, yet they find food delivery to be more manageable and less burdensome, which influences their choice of digital platforms. Thus, personal preferences emerge as another critical benefit, which plays a significant role in the mechanism of reciprocity influencing workers' choice of digital platforms. More importantly, selecting specific gig work and platforms based on personal preferences reflects gig workers' strategic consideration in actively enhancing their job satisfaction and overall experience in the gig economy.

Homans's (1958) social exchange theory offers a valuable lens for understanding the psychological mechanisms behind gig workers' establishment of relationships with digital platforms. It posits that individuals enter exchanges with an awareness of potential benefits and costs, which set the stage for their initial expectations (Crosbie, 1972). The expectations of gig workers, influenced by their perceptions of gig work and the platforms, serve as the foundation of their interactions with these platforms. Moreover, before entering the gig economy, gig workers are aware that their status as independent contractors frees them from the administrative constraints of traditional employment while simultaneously restricting their access to most employment benefits. This arrangement places the financial responsibilities of both the employee's and employer's contributions to social security and Medicare taxes squarely on individual workers. This collective understanding

establishes the basis of gig workers' psychological contracts with digital platforms. These expectations are not only crucial for gig workers to define their own engagement principles with digital platforms but also shape how they perceive the benefits and challenges of such engagements (Homans, 1958).

Blau's (1986) social exchange theory delves deeper into the social relations and power dynamics involved in gig working relationships. Beyond reciprocity, Blau (1986) emphasizes the differentiated social structure and inherent power imbalances in exchanges. The gig economy, dominated by a few major platforms, significantly shapes power dynamics, diminishing gig workers' bargaining power. The interview findings demonstrate gig workers' awareness of their non-employee status and the replaceability of their labor. For instance, a food deliverer remarked, "whether I quit or not wouldn't greatly affect the platform, since my service can easily be replaced." This insight reflects gig workers' understanding of their diminished bargaining power and the willingness to accept higher associated costs in the engagement with digital platforms.

Blau's (1986) theory also provides insight into how digital platforms' authority is legitimized by gig workers. The interview findings suggest that the absence of most employee benefits and advanced training seems to minimally impact gig workers' perceptions of their relationships with digital platforms. This minimal impact reflects gig workers' prioritization of the flexibility and income opportunities provided by gig work, acknowledging the dominant role digital platforms play in providing work opportunities. This acknowledgment does not equate to passive acceptance but rather indicates a strategic decision-making process in the constraints of the gig economy. Additionally, according to Blau (1986), power imbalances in

social relations are manifested in individuals' adherence to the directives of authorities. As gig workers prioritize digital platforms' brand recognition and market share over the absence of employment benefits and advanced training, they are, in fact, legitimizing the platform's authority. This legitimization grants platforms the capacity to influence and regulate the actions of gig workers. The process signifies a progression in the establishment of gig working relationships, simultaneously refining gig workers' psychological contracts with digital platforms by integrating these power dynamics and legitimacies more deeply.

In sum, the establishment of gig working relationships intricately navigates through workers' expectations of reciprocity, where the appeal of financial incentives, flexibility, and stable job opportunities is weighed against the acceptance of certain drawbacks, such as the absence of employer-contributed social security and Medicare taxes. This dynamic reflects a complex negotiation process where gig workers consciously trade off the access to most employment benefits for the perceived advantages of gig work. Simultaneously, this process involves a critical recognition and acceptance of power imbalances inherent in the gig economy. Workers acknowledge the non-employee status and absence of most employment benefits as a part of their contractual agreement with digital platforms, which, in turn, legitimizes the platforms' authority over them. This acknowledgment does not imply passive acceptance but rather indicates a strategic choice by workers, who navigate these power dynamics to optimize their benefits within the constraints of the gig economy. This nuanced understanding of gig workers' motivations and the compromises they make underscores the trade-offs involved in the establishment of gig working relationships, and lays the groundwork for a more comprehensive exploration of

implications for diverse stakeholders, including workers, platforms, policymakers, and HRD practitioners, in the gig economy.

### ***The Adjustment of Gig Working Relationships***

As gig workers embark on their journey in the gig economy, their interactions with digital platforms promote ongoing refinement of their psychological contracts and perceptions of engagement. The interview findings highlight the crucial role of platforms' modest incentives and rewards and support from human intermediaries in enhancing gig working relationships. Conversely, the non-employee status, initially perceived as an associated cost of entering the gig economy, increasingly impedes the development of these relationships as workers' engagement with platforms evolves.

Modest incentives and rewards, along with support from human intermediaries, are identified as key contributors to the development of gig working relationships. Interviews reveal that despite their modesty, these offerings are instrumental in promoting gig workers' satisfaction and a sense of belonging. Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) provide insight into this dynamic, drawing from Homans's and Blau's social exchange theories. They note that exchanged resources cater to both economic and socioemotional needs in social exchanges, with valuation mechanisms differing across social groups and contexts. In the context of gig work, financial incentives and benefits meet economic needs, while human intermediary support addresses socioemotional needs, collectively fulfilling gig workers' financial and self-esteem needs. Notably, despite the limited scope of these incentives and limited interactions with human intermediaries, gig workers attribute great value to these exchanges, especially when their expectations for other resources, like training

and health insurance, are moderate. This finding unveils gig workers' nuanced valuation mechanism in their exchanges with digital platforms.

The interviews also reveal a shift in gig workers' perceptions of their non-employee status, underscoring the dynamic and evolving nature of social relations as proposed by Homans (1958). This theory posits that the reciprocal exchange process encourages individuals to continuously refine their interactions based on past experiences and perceived benefits. This theoretical lens not only elucidates gig workers' shifting perceptions regarding non-employee status but also highlights the importance of exploring the factors that lead to these changes.

In the interviews, many gig workers expressed a sense of detachment from their platforms, attributed to their non-employee status. They perceived their platforms merely as means to connect with customers or showcase their profiles to the market. This sense of detachment is exacerbated by the platforms' reliance on algorithm-driven evaluation systems, which place a premium on customer satisfaction and service quality at the expense of worker well-being, leading to feelings of exclusion. Specifically, workers in food delivery and ride-sharing sectors criticized algorithmic management for grounding performance evaluation predominantly on customer reviews and penalizing unavoidable issues like delivery delays or last-minute orders without considering circumstances beyond the workers' control. Therefore, these unfair assessments and the sense of being marginalized by the platforms emerge as principal reasons for the growing dissatisfaction and evolving perceptions of gig workers regarding their non-employee status.

Furthermore, exploring this evolving relationship through the lens of power dynamics (Blau, 1986) reveals that despite acknowledging the authority and control

of digital platforms, gig workers view platforms' accumulating power as unjust and detrimental to their interests, which sparks their resistance against this power structure. Beyond expressing dissatisfaction, as indicated in the interviews, some gig workers even engage in "algoactivism" (Kellogg et al., 2020), employing strategies like ignoring directives, sharing tips on evading unfavorable clients, and using technology to avoid surveillance (Newlands, 2021). This indicates an ongoing refinement in the power dynamics between gig workers and digital platforms. While incentives and support may foster the legitimacy of digital platforms' power, unfair treatment and exclusion challenge the development of gig working relationships, reflecting a complex interplay of acceptance and resistance within this engagement.

Additionally, the meaningfulness of gig work, particularly in terms of building connections and preparing for future careers, emerges as a crucial element in enhancing gig working relationships. Despite the diverse domains of gig work represented by participants, ranging from food delivery and ride-sharing to transcription, graphic design, and project and personal assistance, their perceptions of what constitutes meaningful work were notably similar and confined to only two primary aspects. As posited by Spencer (2015), meaningful work is influenced not only by the nature of the work itself but also by its broader context. This perspective suggests that the specific characteristics of the gig economy may limit the range of perceived meaningfulness among gig workers. According to Nemkova et al. (2019), meaningful work within the gig economy encompasses both instrumental rewards and significant and purposeful work experiences. They identify several gig economy-specific factors that may reduce the experience of meaningful work, offering insight into why only two aspects of meaningfulness were predominantly highlighted by

participants. The transient nature of gig relationships and the gig economy's competitive environment, with workers competing for limited job opportunities, significantly diminish workers' bargaining power and autonomy, challenging their ability to find work meaningful. In addition to these broader factors, the interviews revealed two specific elements that further limit workers' perceptions of meaningful work: an algorithm-driven evaluation system that prioritizes customer reviews and satisfaction, often at the expense of workers' interests, and the predominance of minor, repetitive tasks in gig work, which particularly limits workers' opportunities for engaging in more complex and skill-enhancing tasks. Collectively, these factors constrain the potential for workers to perceive their work as meaningful.

Bricka and Schroeder (2019) suggested that the sense of entrepreneurialism may be a new source of meaning in gig work. This proposition is supported by interview data, where most workers highlighted the importance of connections made through gig work in laying the groundwork for their future careers. Remarkably, eight participants also considered these connections instrumental in advancing their self-employment ambitions. With an entrepreneurial mindset, these individuals expressed intentions to start their own businesses, either related to their gig work or in fields of personal interest. These observations underscore the importance of relationship-building for gig workers, highlighting how such connections can significantly contribute to their sense of purpose and future career planning.

While the findings spotlight only two dimensions of meaningfulness of gig work, building connections and preparing for future careers, these aspects seem to profoundly shape workers' perceptions of their work and foster their positive sentiments towards their platforms. Drawing upon Blau's (1986) analysis of power

dynamics, the issue of excessive power imbalances often results in dissatisfaction and withdrawal behaviors. In the gig work context, it is shown as “algoactivism,” as previously discussed. However, the potential for meaningful connections and career preparation acts as a counterbalance, fostering stability and satisfaction in gig working relationships. This nuanced understanding of meaningful work in the gig economy underscores the complex interplay between workers’ aspirations and the structural constraints of the gig work context.

In sum, the adjustment of gig working relationships is influenced by several key factors. Firstly, modest financial incentives, the absence of employment benefits, and support from human intermediaries are crucial in fostering satisfaction and a sense of belonging among gig workers, despite their modest scope. These elements serve both economic and socioemotional needs, fulfilling financial and esteem needs and are highly valued by gig workers for their nuanced benefits. Second, the non-employee status of gig workers introduces a dynamic of detachment and evolving perceptions towards gig work. This status, coupled with algorithm-driven evaluation systems that prioritize customer satisfaction over worker well-being, exacerbates feelings of exclusion and dissatisfaction. Furthermore, exploring these factors through Blau’s (1986) power dynamics lens reveal a complex relationship of authority, control, and resistance. Despite recognizing platform authority, perceived unjust power imbalances lead to resistance behaviors such as “algoactivism.” Lastly, the meaningfulness of gig work in terms of building connections and preparing for future careers, while primarily influencing workers’ perceptions of their roles rather than the platforms, contributes positively to gig workers’ sentiments towards their exchange

engagement. Additionally, it acts as a counterbalance to power imbalances, promoting stability and satisfaction in gig working relationships.

Table 1 presents a structured overview of the critical arguments proposed on the dynamics of gig workers' relationships with digital platforms. It delineates the factors influencing gig workers' approach to establishing and adjusting their working relationships with these platforms, focusing on both the establishment and subsequent adjustment phases. Additionally, the table highlights the theoretical frameworks of social exchange and power relations that underpin the analysis, specifically employing Homans's (1958) concept of reciprocity to examine the trade-offs gig workers make between benefits and costs, and Blau's (1986) theory of power relations to investigate how gig workers acknowledge and legitimize the authority of digital platforms.

### **Theorizing the Developmental Process of Gig Working Relationships**

This grounded theory study, following the principles of Charmaz (2005), aims to construct a middle-range theory that elucidates the complex interplay between gig workers and digital platforms. To achieve this goal, this study crafts a nuanced theoretical framework that captures the complex developmental trajectory of gig working relationships. This framework, as shown in Figure 2, moves beyond mere description to actively theorize the critical components that catalyze the initiation and ongoing refinement of gig workers' psychological contracts and their relationships with digital platforms. Central to this framework is the intricate interplay between reciprocity mechanisms and power dynamics, which are essential for understanding both the initial engagement and subsequent evolution of these relationships.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Key Arguments in the Dynamics of Gig Workers' Relationships with Digital Platforms*

<b>Dynamics of Gig Workers' Relationships with Digital Platforms</b>		
<b>Phase</b>	<b>Arguments</b>	<b>Theory</b>
<b>Establishment of Gig Working Relationships</b>	<b>Decision to Participate in Gig Work:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gig workers are motivated to participate in gig work due to financial incentives, flexible schedules, and freedom from traditional job constraints.</li> </ul>	Reciprocity Mechanism (Homan, 1958)
	<b>Platform Selection:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gig workers' choice of digital platforms is influenced by brand recognition, market share, and personal preferences.</li> </ul>	
	<b>Engagement with Platforms:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gig workers' engagement with digital platforms is shaped by a deliberate balance between the autonomy offered by gig work and the trade-off between flexibility, income opportunities, and the absence of traditional benefits and advanced training.</li> <li>Gig workers navigate power imbalances with digital platforms, legitimizing platform authority influenced by their strategic considerations of the benefits of working with platforms and their non-employee status.</li> </ul>	
<b>Adjustment of Gig Working Relationships</b>	<b>Modest Incentives and Rewards:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Modest financial incentives and human intermediary support play a key role in fostering gig workers' satisfaction and sense of belonging, despite their limited scope.</li> </ul>	Reciprocity Mechanism (Homan, 1958)
	<b>Non-Employee Status Evolves into Detachment:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Initially accepted non-employee status gradually leads to feelings of detachment and exclusion, influenced by algorithm-driven evaluations prioritizing customer satisfaction.</li> </ul>	
	<b>Recognizing Power Imbalances</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Despite recognizing the authority and control of digital platforms, gig workers view platforms' accumulating power as unjust and engage in "algoactivism" as a form of expressing their dissatisfaction.</li> </ul>	Power Relations (Blau, 1986)

	<p><b>Meaningfulness Through Connections and Career Preparation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building meaningful connections and preparing for future careers emerge as significant, positively influencing gig workers' perceptions and counterbalancing power imbalances.</li> </ul>	
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This theory articulates how gig workers tactically navigate the gig economy, weighing potential benefits against the associated costs, and how their engagements with digital platforms necessitate a refinement of expectations and perceptions in the face of shifting power dynamics. This ongoing refinement is not merely a response to external conditions but a fundamental aspect of the evolving psychological contracts that form the bedrock of their relationships with digital platforms.

Highlighting a critical transition, the theory underscores gig workers' evolving perception of non-employee status, from merely being an entry cost to being recognized as a potential source of exclusion. This shift implies a pivotal phase in gig workers' perspectives, marking a deeper understanding of their position in the gig economy's power structure. Brand recognition and market share are identified as decisive factors that influence gig workers' selection of digital platforms, which, in turn, shape the power dynamics in these gig working relationships. This theoretical framework highlights that during the formation of gig working relationships, gig workers acknowledge power imbalances and accept the authority of digital platforms. Despite recognizing the lack of most traditional employment benefits and advanced training, these absences do not markedly affect the initial formation of their psychological contracts with digital platforms. This suggests that while gig workers are aware of these limitations, they do not perceive them as significantly detracting

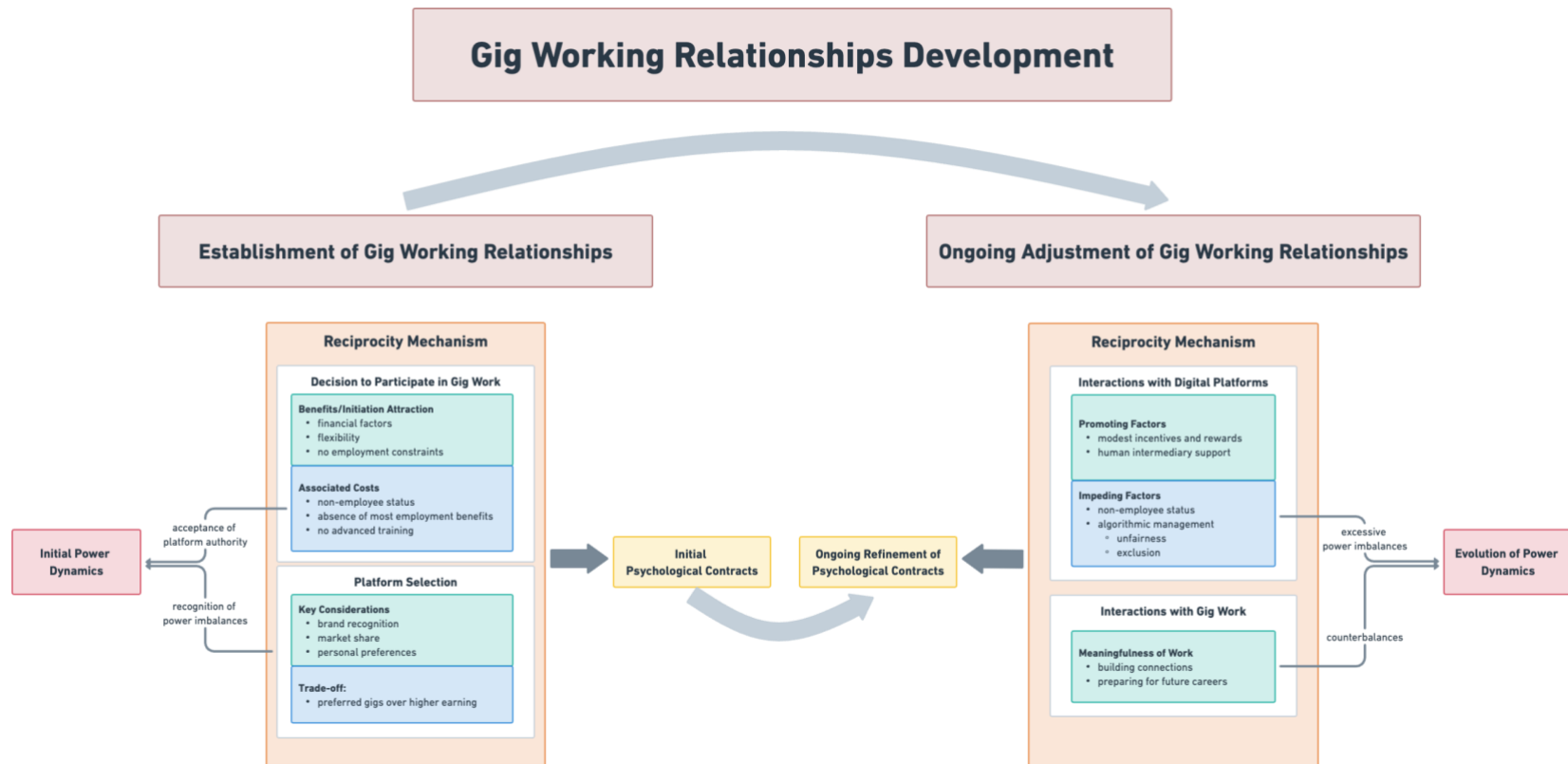
from their overall satisfaction or fundamentally altering the basis of their psychological contracts with the platforms.

As these relationships progress, gig workers' perceptions of their working relationships are increasingly challenged by inequitable treatment, particularly in the realm of algorithm-driven performance assessments. This introduces a growing dissatisfaction and resistance towards power imbalances. However, the accumulation of positive work experiences, such as the development of valuable connections and career preparation, act as a counterbalance, enhancing gig workers' views of their relationships with digital platforms. This theory highlights the significance of modest incentives and rewards and the support of human intermediaries as crucial elements in the ongoing refinement of gig workers' psychological contracts.

This theoretical framework underscores the dynamic adaptation by gig workers as they navigate their psychological contracts and manage the complexities of reciprocity and power imbalances with digital platforms. It unveils a novel and critical understanding of gig workers' responses to the challenges of inequitable treatment and feelings of exclusion, against the constantly evolving power dynamics with digital platforms. By focusing on the development of gig working relationships, this theory contributes a discourse on the social dynamics in the gig economy, illustrating the nuanced components and their impacts on the evolution of these relationships.

Figure 2

Framework of Gig Working Relationships Development



## **Limitations**

This study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of gig working relationships and the psychological aspects involved. However, it is not without its limitations, which are important to acknowledge for a comprehensive understanding of its scope and implications.

Firstly, the grounded theory method adopted by this study, which is effective in developing theories grounded in the lived experiences of gig workers, may not allow for the broad generalization of the findings across a wider gig worker population.

Secondly, the participant pool was limited to gig workers engaged in typically minor and repetitive tasks. Although the gig economy consists of a range of jobs requiring varying levels of skills and expertise, such as consulting, programming, and data analytics, this study specifically focused on a segment of the gig workforce. This decision was made to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of those who currently represent a significant portion of gig workers, while potentially overlooking the experiences of those in more skilled roles.

Thirdly, the study is primarily based on the interview data of gig worker participants, and the data collection and analysis are inherently subjective and influenced by participants' willingness and ability to articulate their thoughts and experiences. This approach may not fully capture the complexities of gig workers' experiences or their relationships with digital platforms. Additionally, participants may have withheld details about their challenges or negative experiences in their work due to concerns about anonymity, privacy, or potential repercussions. This may have led to an underrepresentation of such issues in the study's findings.

Furthermore, this study is specifically focused on the U.S. context, which limits the applicability of the findings to other geographical and cultural settings. The rise of the gig economy is a global phenomenon, which varies significantly across different working conditions, regulatory environments, and cultural background. Therefore, the findings may not fully resonate with the experiences of gig workers in other regions.

In sum, while this study enriches our understanding of gig working relationships in the U.S. context, its limitations indicate that the findings should be interpreted with caution. Future research should aim to address these limitations by employing more diverse methods and expanding the geographical and cultural scope of the study.

### **Implications for HRD Research**

Before discussing the implications of this study for HRD research, it is important to acknowledge the distinct context of the gig economy, where traditional organizational components, such as culture, structure, and design are markedly diminished or even rendered irrelevant. Dominated by algorithmic management, the gig economy shifts traditional management roles and supervision towards more flexible work arrangements (Muldoon & Raekstad, 2022). Moreover, gig workers often do not rely on a single platform but rather engage with multiple platforms simultaneously, leading to a decentralized nature of work. Sutherland and Jarrahi (2017) used terms like “information infrastructure” and “digital nomads” for digital platforms and gig workers, respectively, highlighting their non-traditional employment and decentralized relationships.

Despite the dilution or absence of traditional organizational norms and even the concept of an organization itself in the gig economy, this study underscores HRD's critical and enduring role in the gig work context. As early as 1989, McLagan (1989) pointed out the constantly evolving workforce and the need for HRD practices in organizations to adapt accordingly. Expanding on this, McLean and McLean (2001) advocated for a broader scope of HRD that includes all processes and activities aimed at unleashing the potential of human expertise for the development of individuals, groups, organizations, communities, nations, and the whole of humanity. Moreover, given its interdisciplinary nature, HRD has increasingly adopted a transdisciplinary approach, particularly since the Academy of Human Resource Development 2019 International Research Conference (Wang, 2019), to address real-world challenges systematically. Therefore, the evolving norms and organizational dynamics in the gig economy do not diminish HRD's relevance but rather present new opportunities and challenges. HRD scholars are called upon to reassess conventional organizational assumptions and explore the emerging needs of the gig workforce. This involves navigating the complexities and nuances of the gig economy to effectively support and develop the gig workforce.

Drawing upon the research gaps identified in the findings, this section outlines the implications for future HRD research across four key areas: (a) the diverse impacts of the human intermediary role, (b) training and development for gig workers, (c) HRD's role in addressing challenges posed by algorithmic management, and (d) gig workforce and working relationships in other contexts.

Firstly, there is a pressing need for empirical studies to examine the diverse impacts of the human intermediary role in digital platforms. This includes

investigating the factors contributing to the varying levels of support and accommodations provided by human intermediaries. The interviews revealed that while some gig workers benefited significantly from the support provided by human intermediaries in addressing the limitations and unfairness caused by algorithm-driven evaluations, others reported a lack of support or accommodations for issues beyond their control, ranging from late deliveries, customer dissatisfaction, and poor ratings. The effectiveness and responsiveness of these human intermediaries could be influenced by a range of factors, such as the responsibilities assigned by platforms, the degree of autonomy and flexibility allowed, the workload and the capacity to attend to individual gig workers, whether the reward system encourages accommodating practices, and the platform's prioritization of customer satisfaction versus workers' well-being. Additionally, these human intermediaries are distinct from traditional leaders or managers due to their lack of direct managing or leadership responsibilities. This raises questions about whether conventional leadership traits such as integrity, accountability, inspirational and communication skills, and empathy (Judge et al, 2009) are necessary for their effectiveness, or if their role is primarily to offer general support and accommodation, regardless of their communication style with gig workers. To explore these aspects thoroughly, empirical quantitative studies are essential to examine how various factors influence the impact of human intermediaries on gig workers' experiences.

Secondly, there is a critical need for research into training and development tailored for gig workers. The interviews revealed that training provided by digital platforms is often basic and short-term, aimed primarily at equipping workers with essential skills for quality service and safety. Although some workers appreciated this

training for enhancing their work-related skills, most viewed it as a fundamental onboarding requirement and as essential for ensuring service standards. However, platform-provided training seldom addresses mental health and sexual harassment issues, which were underscored by several workers in the interviews. This is likely due to gig workers' non-employee status and the transient nature of their working relationships, which deter digital platforms from investing in comprehensive training. In addition, dissatisfaction with algorithmic management among gig workers suggests a gap in training that could better help them to understand and navigate the algorithm-driven evaluation system.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that current gig worker training efforts are limited to skills directly related to specific job tasks, overlooking advanced and transferable skills such as project management, decision-making, leadership, and interpersonal skills. This deficiency has been highlighted by Duggan et al. (2022), who argued that the lack of opportunities to develop transferable skills could restrict workers' career competencies. Given the increasing number of gig workers and the profound career development challenges facing them, future HRD research should, therefore, investigate ways to offer gig workers training and development opportunities that provide transferable skills for their future careers. Research could also explore ways in which digital platforms could benefit from providing such training and development. Additionally, considering gig workers' contingent engagement with digital platforms is likely to contribute to the absence of most training and development opportunities, future HRD research could also explore development systems that reframe gig work as a viable long-term career option by refining work

design and platform structures, which could also benefit the gig economy's sustainable growth.

Thirdly, the feelings of exclusion and inequitable treatment by algorithmic management, as highlighted by many gig workers in the interviews, underscore the need for future research to address the limitations of algorithmic management. This area presents a notable research gap, making it especially critical for HRD researchers. Despite the growing body of work on artificial intelligence (AI) in HRD (e.g., Ardichvili, 2022; Chang & Ke, 2023; Ekuma 2023), HRD researchers have yet to specifically focus on algorithmic management, a topic that has been widely explored in human resource management (HRM). While both AI and algorithmic management are algorithm-driven technologies that automate human activities in various organizational practices, algorithmic management specifically focuses on informing managerial decisions, differing from AI's broader application across various complex practices. Algorithmic management has been employed extensively by digital platforms such as Uber, Lyft, Amazon Mechanical Turk, and TaskRabbit and has been a focal point in gig work research (Duggan et al, 2020).

In addition to gig worker dissatisfaction, inequity, and exclusion identified in the interviews, HRM studies have also highlighted concerns such as reduced autonomy and flexibility (Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2023) and "algoactivism," which refers to workers' resistance strategies against algorithmic control, such as ignoring directives or obfuscating data to evade surveillance (Newlands, 2021). Beyond HRM research, addressing these challenges is essential for HRD research to develop effective strategies for gig workforce development. Therefore, future HRD research should critically examine HRD's role in mitigating the limitations of algorithmic

management and fostering inclusion and equity in its implementation. This exploration is pivotal for understanding how HRD can contribute to navigating the complexities introduced by algorithmic management in the gig economy.

Fourth, this study's exploration into gig working relationships is situated in the U.S. context, highlighting the necessity for future HRD research to examine these dynamics across diverse global settings. Notably, in the U.K., legal distinctions have led to some Uber drivers being classified as employees, thereby granting them various employment protections (Spiggle, 2021). Moreover, the economic landscape in China shows a stark wage gap, with the average worker earning significantly less than their counterparts in more developed countries like the U.S. (Ezrati, 2023). This wage gap, coupled with a highly competitive labor market, subjects Chinese gig workers to lower pay and longer work hours (Jiang, 2023). Such disparities in employment status and labor conditions across countries underscore the importance of examining the potentially diverse psychological contracts and working relationships of gig workers in different contexts.

Furthermore, the theoretical lenses of social exchange and power relations, which are adopted in this study, originate from Western academic discourse. These theories may not fully capture the nuances of gig working relationships in non-Western settings. For instance, in China, the gig workforce predominantly consists of migrant laborers moving to urban areas seeking job opportunities (He, 2024). The group's limited skill set, combined with the lack of local household registrations, greatly restricts their job options. Similarly, in Russia, the majority of gig delivery workers are economic migrants from Central Asia. This trend is a result of Russia's prolonged demographic crisis and is significantly influenced by the decreasing value

of the ruble (Cordell, 2023). Consequently, the power dynamics characterizing gig working relationships in China and Russia are shaped by a complex interplay of social, political, and economic factors that are specific to their own contexts, which may not be adequately addressed by the theories of Blau and Homans. This gap highlights the need for future study to either examine the adaptation of Western theories or adopt more flexible theoretical approaches when investigating gig working relationships in diverse cultural and political contexts.

### **Implications for Practice**

Based on the findings, with an aim for gig workforce development and the sustainability of the gig economy, this study proposes implications and recommendations for HRD practitioners, digital platforms, and policymakers.

#### ***HRD Practitioners***

The findings of this study highlight that gig workers primarily receive basic and short-term training, which is focused on essential skills for service quality and safety. This training often overlooks the crucial aspect of navigating algorithmic management, a gap that can lead to worker resistance and impact the overall effectiveness of management in digital platforms. To address this, HRD practitioners are encouraged to develop training programs that not only enhance gig workers' understanding of the operational and management mechanisms of digital platforms but also equip them with strategies to optimize their work in these technologically driven systems.

Moreover, this study reveals that perceptions regarding meaningful work shared by gig work participants mainly focus on two aspects: building connections and preparing for future careers. The algorithm-driven evaluation system, which

prioritizes customer satisfaction at the expense of workers' interests, coupled with the repetitive and minor-task based gig work, restrict opportunities for engaging in meaningful and skill-enhancing tasks. Meaningful work is a critical source of autonomy, authenticity, and self-expression, which are essential for fostering an engaged and productive workforce (Martela & Pessi, 2018). Thus, it is crucial for HRD practitioners to create opportunities for gig workers to perceive the meaningfulness of work and engage in purposeful work experiences. This effort could involve refining evaluation and reward systems through the regular collection of feedback and suggestions from gig workers. Such measures would help ensure alignment with workers' interests and well-being, and promote fairness and justice in management practices.

Furthermore, HRD practitioners should consider implementing programs that enable gig workers to develop advanced and transferrable skills, such as project management, decision-making, and interpersonal skills. Such initiatives could not only allow workers to find greater meaningfulness in their work but also enhance their career competencies, supporting their long-term career aspirations. The implementation of such programs necessitates HRD practitioners to extend their search for support beyond digital platforms, which often have contingent relationships with workers and may be hesitant to invest in comprehensive development programs. Therefore, HRD practitioners should seek collaboration and support from government entities, non-profit workforce development organizations, and educational institutions to facilitate these critical training and development opportunities.

### ***Digital Platforms***

This study's findings indicate that while the training provided by digital platforms tends to focus on basic skills and specific work content, it plays a crucial role in enhancing gig workers' work-related skills and fostering their attachment to the platforms. However, the interviews with gig workers reveal variations in training content and delivery formats, even among workers from the same platform, which could affect the effectiveness of these training programs and workers' perceptions of their value. To ensure a positive impact, it is recommended that digital platforms standardize and formalize their training programs, making them more systematic and accessible to all gig workers. Moreover, some workers have highlighted the benefits of receiving training on topics such as sexual harassment and mental health issues. This suggests a need for platforms to expand their training programs, and implement training that address both the technical aspects of gig work and the well-being of workers. To achieve this, digital platforms could adopt strategies such as open communication channels, regular feedback sessions, and workshops. These approaches would not only help platforms to understand the lived work experiences of gig workers but also enable the development of training programs that are more aligned with workers' needs and challenges. By doing so, digital platforms can develop their workers to be more productive, effective, and engaged.

Moreover, the findings highlight that the algorithm-driven evaluation systems adopted by digital platforms, which primarily rely on customer reviews and predefined metrics, often fail to account for challenges beyond workers' control, leading to dissatisfaction and feelings of exclusion among gig workers. Thus, it is imperative for digital platforms to refine their algorithm-driven systems to ensure performance metrics are both systematic and valid for fair evaluation and

management. This could be achieved by platforms facilitating communication and collaboration between the engineers of algorithmic management and gig workers to constantly refine the metrics and data used by the algorithm-driven systems.

Furthermore, digital platforms are encouraged to embrace more inclusive and fair values in their algorithmic management. A pivotal strategy is to enhance the role of human intermediaries, who can act as a bridge between gig workers and digital platforms for fostering mutual understanding. By training more skilled human intermediaries, platforms can provide necessary support and accommodations for gig workers, especially in addressing unpredictable challenges such as late deliveries or miscommunication with clients that algorithmic-driven systems may overlook. Additionally, digital platforms need to reassess the extent of surveillance and control exerted by algorithmic management and consider offering greater autonomy and flexibility to align management practices more closely with the inherent flexibility of gig work. Such adjustments would not only make workers feel more valued and involved in their work but also increase their opportunities to find meaningfulness in their tasks. More importantly, this approach would ensure the management systems are better suited to the self-directed nature of gig work, and ultimately benefit both workers and platforms.

### ***Policymakers***

For policymakers, the emerging challenges and opportunities in the gig economy highlight a crucial need for the development of flexible regulatory frameworks that are attuned to the nuances of gig working relationships and workforce development. The findings of this study point out that gig workers' non-employee status limits their access to various protections and benefits, leading to

feelings of exclusion and precarious work conditions. Thus, regulations could focus on establishing minimum wage standards, reasonable work hours, and basic protections and benefits to improve working conditions for gig workers.

However, when introducing such regulations, policymakers must carefully consider their feasibility for digital platforms and avoid unintended consequences for digital platforms' operations. For instance, after the Minneapolis City Council passed a minimum pay ordinance in March 2024, Uber and Lyft, the two largest ride-sharing platforms, announced they would cease operations in the Twin Cities metro area starting May 1, 2024, which would make thousands of ride-sharing drivers lose their jobs in this area (Valinsky, 2024). The primary reason for this decision was the ordinance's requirement for ride-sharing platforms to pay drivers a rate equivalent to the city's minimum wage, which would significantly increase operational costs for these platforms. In addition to the minimum pay regulation, legislation aimed at mandating job security for gig workers is also being considered in many U.S. states (Vancleave, 2024). The Minneapolis case highlights the necessity for policymakers to find a balance that benefits both gig workers and digital platforms, ensuring sustainable operations while protecting worker rights.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study introduces a theoretical framework of the developmental process of gig working relationships. It outlines a complex trajectory, characterized by the establishment and ongoing refinement of gig working relationships, which are propelled by the interplay of reciprocity mechanisms and power relations. The theoretical framework highlights how gig workers navigate power imbalances and accept the authority of digital platforms during the

establishment of gig working relationships. Notably, despite recognizing the lack of most traditional employment benefits and advanced training, these absences do not markedly affect the initial formation of their psychological contracts with digital platforms. A critical aspect of this ongoing refinement is the evolution of gig workers' perceptions regarding their non-employee status. Initially perceived as an entry cost, this status gradually becomes recognized as a potential source of exclusion, which marks a profound shift in gig workers' understanding of their position in the gig economy's power structure. Furthermore, the framework underscores the significance of modest incentives and rewards and the support of human intermediaries as crucial elements in the continuous refinement of gig workers' psychological contracts. The findings and discussion of this study suggest that gig workers engage in a continuous evaluation of potential benefits against the associated costs, influencing the evolution of their psychological contracts and relationships with digital platforms.

Acknowledging a gap in both gig work literature and practice, this study aims to enhance the understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying gig working relationships. It highlights the critical role of HRD in tackling the challenges in the gig work context. Specifically, this study calls for increased HRD focus on training and development for gig workers to systematically develop the gig workforce. Moreover, it offers recommendations for digital platforms and policymakers to adapt existing practices to the gig work context, with a deep hope to foster the development of benefits and protections for gig workers and promote sustainable growth of the gig economy.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Materials

### Facebook Group Post

Hello! My name is Panpan Zhang. I am a doctoral candidate in the Human Resource Development program at the University of Minnesota. I am reaching out to you because you are a member of [Facebook group name] and you may be familiar with gig work and the people who are working in the gig economy. I am doing my dissertation now. The purpose of my dissertation is to explore how workers perceive their relationships with gig platforms. I plan to interview some workers who have been participating in gig work for at least 3 months and spend at least eight hours doing gig jobs in a typical week. If you believe you qualify for this study, please reply to this message. I will send you a formal invitation email to schedule a one-hour Zoom interview with you. You will receive a \$15 Amazon gift card as a “thank you” for participating in the study. I appreciate your consideration of this study and look forward to hearing from you.

### Invitation Email

Dear [participant’s name],

Greetings! Thanks for your willingness to participate in my dissertation study.

The purpose of this research study is to explore the psychological mechanisms underlying gig working relationships by understanding gig workers’ work experiences in the U.S. context. I am particularly interested in how gig workers perceive their working relationships with gig platforms.

I am asking you to take part in this research study because you have been participating in gig work for more than three months in the U.S., and spend more than eight hours doing gig jobs in a typical week. You will be asked to have a one-on-one Zoom interview; the interview will be no more than 60 minutes. At the end of the interview, you will fill out a questionnaire asking about your demographic information.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any questions in the interview and survey. You may also withdraw at any time during the interview process. The attached document is a consent form that includes more detailed information about this study. Could you sign it and then send it back to me at your earliest convenience?

After receiving your signed form, I will send you a follow-up email to find an interview time that works for both of us.

I appreciate your participation in this study and look forward to hearing from you.

Best,

Panpan Zhang

Doctoral Candidate, Human Resource Development

University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

## Appendix B: Interview Guide

### Individual Interview Questions

**1. Gig Work: The purpose of these questions is to gain basic information regarding the participant's work**

- a. What platform(s) are you working for now?
- b. What type of work do you do?
- c. When did you start participating in gig work?
- d. What factors influenced your decision to become a gig worker?
- e. How many gig platforms are you working for now?
- f. Do you have any other jobs in addition to the gig ones?

**2. Interactions: The purpose of these question is to explore how the participant perceives the multiple connections in and outside gig work**

- a. Do you have a supervisor or leader in the gig platform?
  - i. If yes, what are your thoughts about your interaction with your supervisor/leader?
  - ii. If no, how has the lack of a leading role affected your work?
- b. Have you built any connections with other gig workers?
  - i. How did you build those connections?
  - ii. Do these connections advantageous to you?
- c. What are your thoughts about your interaction with customers?
- d. Did you work for any other companies before?
- e. Are there any differences between that job and the gig one?

**3. Gig Working Relationships: The purpose of these questions is to explore how the participant perceives the working relationship with the platform**

- a. What are your thoughts about the benefits you've received from the platform?
- b. What are your thoughts about the support you've received from the platform?
- c. How do you perceive your role in the platform?
- d. What are your thoughts about your relationship with the platform?

**4. Psychological Contracts: The purpose of these questions is to explore what psychological components are perceived as important by the participant**

- a. Do you have any needs or concerns that have not yet been addressed by the platform?
- b. What improvement does the platform need to make for its workers?
- c. What have been the challenging parts of being a gig worker?
- d. What are the extra support and benefits that you think the platform should provide to its gig workers?
- e. What are the factors that motivate you to work for this platform?

**5. Is there any additional information regarding your gig work experience that you would like to share?**

## Appendix C: Consent Form

**Title of Study:** Exploring Gig Workers' Experiences of Working with Digital Platforms: A Grounded Theory Study

**Principal Investigator:** Panpan Zhang

**IRB Study Number:** <INSERT AS APPROPRIATE>

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Panpan Zhang, Ph.D. Candidate in Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development at the University of Minnesota. I am emailing you to take part in this research study because you are currently participating in gig work.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this research study is to explore the psychological mechanisms underlying gig working relationships by understanding gig workers' experiences in the U.S. context. I am particularly interested in how gig workers perceive their working relationships with gig platforms. I am also interested in how to optimize existing workforce development systems in digital platforms to better support gig workers.

### **Study Procedures**

If you choose to take part in this study, you will participate in a one-on-one interview via Zoom. The interview aims to understand your experience of working in the gig economy and perceptions of relationships with gig platforms. The interview will take no longer than 60 minutes. All conversations will be recorded for transcription purposes. Potential questions that will be addressed in the interview are as follows:

- a. General information about your gig job
- b. Factors that influenced your decision to become a gig worker
- c. Your thoughts about your interactions with leaders, coworkers, and customers during work
- d. Your perceptions of the benefits and support provided by the gig platform
- e. Factors that motivate you to work for the current gig platform

At the end of the interview, you will fill out a short survey on your demographic information, including your age, gender, location, etc. This information will be used along with the interview transcript for data analysis.

After the first interview, you may be contacted to participate in a follow-up interview. If you accept to take part in this interview, you will be asked a few follow-up questions. The purpose is to gain further understanding of your thoughts related to the topics that have been discussed in the first interview. The follow-up interview will also be conducted via Zoom and recorded for transcription purposes.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any questions in the interview and survey. You may also withdraw at any time during the interview process.

### **Risks and Benefits of Participation**

By participating in this study, potential minimal risks or discomforts you may experience include psychological stress and revealing confidential information. Every effort will be made to keep your information confidential and anonymous. Your names will be replaced by pseudonyms.

You will not receive direct benefits by participating in this study, but your participation will contribute to gig worker research and the development of the gig economy. Your sharing of your gig work experience will also help optimize existing gig worker systems in the U.S.

### **Confidentiality and Anonymity**

All information from this study will be kept confidential. If results of this study are published in journals or presented at research conferences, any participant in this study will not be identified. Pseudonyms will be used to replace the names of all participants.

All original video recordings will be permanently deleted after two years from the time of the interview.

If you have any questions after the interview, you are encouraged to contact Panpan Zhang, the researcher of this study, at [zhan5986@umn.edu](mailto:zhan5986@umn.edu), or 6123-323-8208. My advisor's contact information is as follows: Dr. Alexandre Ardichvili, [ardic001@umn.edu](mailto:ardic001@umn.edu).

*You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers.

I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D: Demographic Information Survey

1. How long have you been participating in gig work?  
\_\_\_\_\_years\_\_\_\_\_months
2. Age \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is your ethnic origin?
  - a. White
  - b. Hispanic or Latino
  - c. Black or African American
  - d. Native American or American Indian
  - e. Asian/Pacific Islander
  - f. other
4. To which gender identity do you most identify?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Trans-male
  - d. Trans-female
  - e. Prefer to self-describe \_\_\_\_\_
  - f. Prefer not to say
5. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?  
*If currently enrolled, highest degree received.*
  - a. No schooling completed
  - b. Some high school, no diploma
  - c. High school graduate
  - d. Bachelor's degree
  - e. Master's degree
  - f. Ph.D. degree
  - g. Other \_\_\_\_\_
  - h. Prefer not to say
6. Please use two or three words to describe the day-to-day tasks of your main gig job:

## Appendix E: Gig Worker Groups

**Table 2***List of Facebook Groups*

No	Type of Group	Creation Date	Total Members	Average Post Activities
1	Gig workers of Uber, Lyft, and Instacart	March 31, 2016	6,800	95 posts per month
2	Gig workers of Lyft, Uber, Instacart, Doordash, Grubhub, and 1099	June 17, 2022	1,703	26 posts per month
3	Gig workers of Lyft, Uber, Instacart, Doordash, Grubhub, and 1099	April 14, 2020	15,733	22 posts per month
4	TaskRabbit Taskers	August, 2018	898	6 posts per month
5	TaskRabbit Taskers	July 12, 2018	3,092	69 posts per month

## Appendix F: Demographic Information of Participants

**Table 3***Demographic Information of Interview Participants*

<b>No.</b>	<b>Pseud</b>	<b>Ethnic</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Degree</b>	<b>Gig Work</b>
1	Eli	Black or African American	Male	26	1y	Bachelor	Tutoring/Project Assistant
2	Jack	Black or African American	Male	25	2y 9m	High School	Graphic Design/Grocery Delivery
3	Paige	White	Female	61	10y 6m	MBA	Personal Assistant
4	Ella	Asian	Female	26	2y 10m	Bachelor	Transcription/Academic Writing
5	Dylan	Black or African American	Male	33	12y	High School	Ride-sharing
6	Nancy	Black or African American	Female	25	2y	Bachelor	Transcription/Academic Writing
7	Dane	Black or African American	Male	32	10y	High School	Ride-sharing
8	Nessa	Black or African American	Female	28	1y 7m	Bachelor	Graphic Design
9	Tessa	Black or African American	Female	24	4y	Bachelor	Hair Stylist/Web Design/Cleaning
10	Ron	Black or African American	Male	34	8y	Bachelor	Ride-sharing
11	Jane	Hispanic or Latino	Female	29	2y 8m	High School	Ride-sharing/Food Delivery
12	Jacob	Hispanic or Latino	Male	39	11y	High School	Ride-sharing/Food Delivery
13	Walker	American Indian	Male	32	9y	High School	Food Delivery/Ride-sharing
14	Daisy	Black or African American	Female	23	1y 8m	Bachelor	Ride-sharing/Food Delivery
15	Sage	Black or African American	Female	25	6m	Bachelor	Food Delivery
16	Ava	Hispanic or Latino	Female	24	1y 2m	Bachelor	Food Delivery
17	Valerie	Black or African American	Female	23	9m	Bachelor	Food Delivery
18	Maya	Hispanic or Latino	Female	22	5m	Bachelor	Food Delivery
19	Gable	Black or African American	Male	30	8m	Bachelor	Food Delivery