



P The Gig Economy as a Transitional Mechanism: A Netnographic Analysis

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Abstract: The gig economy is developed as a major labor market structure that has emerged rapidly in the post-pandemic era. It is a market that offers flexible, task-based employment through digital platforms, including Uber, Swiggy, Upwork, and Fiverr. For the people who are going through unemployment phase, gig work is frequently observed the very next step to regain income and pull us back in the economic cycle. However, most of the existing studies highlight only the aspect of short-term financial relief and thus fail to completely understand the extent to which gig employment ensures long-term stability. The present study tries to fill this gap by focusing gig work as a transitional stage in the unemployment-to-stability pathway. The study uses netnography and follows a qualitative exploratory method aligning with the constructivist paradigm to understand the experiences of gig workers shared in open-access platforms like Reddit, Quora, and personal blogs. The study examined 120 different posts and through thematic analysis identified themes from these posts using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. NVivo 14 was used as software support for coding and theme development. The findings showcase that gig work is often integral to one's adaptive coping strategies in situations of economic turmoil, and psychological resilience and continuity of income are facing the same consequences. However, the type of stability at which they do arrive is mostly partial and, Moreover, fragile since it is identified by factors such as unstable income, lack of social security, and work availability controlled by algorithms. As the researchers mentioned in their article, though such work might serve as a temporary buffer, the capacity to provide sustained economic security for the long term is still questionable. Thus, they highlight the need for policy frameworks that give more protection, benefits, and access to formal employment for workers.

Index Terms - Gig economy, unemployment, digital labor platforms, job stability, thematic analysis, platform work.

I. INTRODUCTION

The gig economy is treated as one of the main changes in the 21st-century labor market that has produced from the technological progress made in the fields of communication, data management, and processing. Because of the existence of such digital platforms as Uber, Swiggy, Fiverr, and Upwork, gig economy represents a more flexible, task-oriented, and on-demand mode of employment that barely resembles traditional and long-term job structures. According to the estimates, the gig workforce in India has increased to more than 7 million and a half in 2023 and it is foreseen that this number will be more than tripled by the year 2030 [2]. The rise of gig work is really important for the post-pandemic world where it has become the main source of income in most of the households that have suffered from unemployment, as well as the method of workforce retention [4], [22]. Some of the existing publications claim that gig work brings good awareness in the short buffer and mainly it can function as a temporary safety net during periods of unemployment. An idea of the researchers is that through gig work, one can manage a complete loss of income, which is a major disruption for the underemployed people, and also stands as a launchpad to enter the labor market through providing a flexible way to earn while searching for long-

term jobs [1], [12]. However, this is always a transitional situation, thus in most of the cases these advantages vanish when the short-term period is over. The researchers acknowledge in the paper argue that people in gig work experience income instability, absence or minimal benefits, uncertainty in their jobs, and unpredictability of work hours, thus resulting to the chronic issue of underemployment rather than economic growth [3], [13], [17], [20]. Besides the money aspect, the radical researchers focused on the social and mental aspects of engagement in gig work. The aspect of flexibility that gig work provides might upbring the independence and happiness of the person initially, but in the long-term haul, continuous dependence on social platforms with no social security will trigger stress, apprehension, and emotional weariness [7], [11]. Additional studies of gender issues suggest that female gig workers commonly face discrimination in the form of lower wages, lack of safety, and reduced promotion opportunities as an outcome of the general labor market discrimination trends, which are emerged in the gig economy sector too [8], [19]. One of the major gaps in the available body of research is that most of the works cited above primarily depend on quantitative and cross-sectional data so, they project short-run labor and economic outcomes or experiences but do not reflect on real life experiences and understanding by the workers over time. Hardly any study have gone deep into an analysis of the way people perceive their journey of transitioning from the state of being unemployed to stability through gigs, especially in the digital realm where sharing personal experiences has become common currency [5], [9], [21]. Although there is a growing body of literature in the area of gig economy, the number of studies that examine the transition from unemployment to freelance or zero hours platform work and whether this transition leads to long term financial stability is limited. This study therefore aims to address the following research questions: RQ1: What is the role of gig work as a bridge for the unemployed? RQ2: Whether gig work is economically stable. RQ3: What structural barriers contribute to gig work instability. Drawing on a qualitative netnographic research design, this study investigates gig work as a transition mode of digital work in today's labour market.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The gig economy is no longer purely a buzzword, but rather a way of changing the concept of work globally. In the US, for instance, multiple studies highlight that gig jobs enable people to pay their bills during the phase of unemployment, yet they surely make it difficult to get a regular job afterwards [1]. In India, the gig workforce is skyrocketing; 7.7 million in 2023 and over 23 million by 2030 [2]. Global studies continue to identify similar issues: unstable income along with a non-existent or inadequate social safety net [3]–[5]. Workers of platforms face a lot from extreme levels of stress to vulnerable conditions [6], [7]. Women in these jobs allegedly receive the shortest straw; they face more under-employment and make compromises concerning flexibility, specially during recessions [8]. So there is China, where algorithms are the drivers and, accordingly, with 210 million people being gig workers. Yes, the scale might be huge, but so are the inequalities [9]. As far as Europe is concerned, self-employed digital workers doesn't showcase happiness and good health when compared to people with traditional jobs [10]. Psychologists are clearheaded about: job insecurity, unpredictable pay, and permanent stress causes an imbalance in work-life balance [11]. Policy experts give calls for better protection-benefit, insurance, decent pay-so that gig work does not imply a life on the edge [12]–[14]. In summary, research portrays a complex picture. On one hand, the gig economy keeps many doors open. Other hand, it leaves many out in the open: financially, socially, and health-wise. And regulators cannot look the other way much longer [15]–[23].of five years. The time series monthly data is collected on stock prices for sample firms and relative macroeconomic variables for the period of 5 years. The data collection period is ranging from January 2010 to Dec 2014. Monthly prices of KSE -100 Index is taken from yahoo finance.

III. RESEARCH GAPS

While the gig economy gained worldwide attention, the majority of the existing research tends to focus only short-term gains, such as situations where the income level is restored or a worker temporarily gets a job after being laid off. There is, somehow, a significant gap that connects to the understanding of how long the gig job actually is able to serve as a bridge to stabilize workers in the labor market after they lose their jobs. Most of the previous research works has focused only cross-sectional data that can measure immediate financial relief or re-employment and skipped focusing on workers for longer periods of time. Therefore, there is a gap in knowledge regarding the question of is gig economy contributing to career advancement, income security, and economic resilience beyond the short-term impact or if it is only a temporary buffer from which one cannot expect consistency in the long run. Besides, majority of the research works available are also limited to certain regions and shows shortage of the necessary comparative studies, which would provide a deeper insight into the different labor markets. This is

important for an accurate evaluation of whether gig work serves as a valid means of transition or as a systemic constraint in unofficial digital labor systems.

IV. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

Introduction Gig or shared economy work has become a common phenomenon today. However, very few studies have examined gig work as a bridge to employment. This study aimed to explore gig workers' experiences of gig work that serves as a bridge between employment and unemployment. **Methodology** This qualitative study employed a constructivist approach through the netnographic research method. **Results:** **Conclusion** This study explored gig work as a transition bridge that connects employment and unemployment through gig workers' online narratives shared on various gig work platforms.

The methodology employed in this research is Ethnography or also known as 'Netnography'. Gig workers have a variety of social media platforms at their disposal where they can share their views, opinions and experiences on issues such as work transition, income insecurity, terms and conditions of the gig economy job market platforms and the ways in which they adapt to this new market. The online discussions on the forums related to the topic of research will be collected and analyzed to gain first-hand information through direct quotes of gig workers' experiences and opinions towards their journey of attaining economic stability and adapting to the changing job market. Ethnography is the study of people and their culture using online content. This content can be in the form of discussions in online forums, social media and blogs. The content is generated organically in relation to the topic of the research. The fact that it is less intrusive also means that it is free from bias.

4.2 Data Collection and Sampling

The data was sourced from a few online forums where people discuss their gig work and experiences of becoming unemployed. The main data was sourced from Reddit and Quora. Reddit and Quora were chosen due to the large number of users, the level of anonymity that users can have, and the existence of communities that focus on discussions of work and employment, such as freelancing, ride-sharing and platform work.

Sampling Strategy: This study adopted a purposive sampling approach. Social media posts that fulfilled the criteria provided below were selected for analysis: Gig workers declared their gig-working status and shared their personal experiences of navigating into the gig economy from a state of unemployment. These online posts pertained to gig workers' evaluation of their income security, job stability and prospects of career advancement in the gig economy.

We selected about 120 blog posts published between 2023 and 2025 for analysis, based on when we reached thematic saturation—that is, when we did not find any significant new information or insights in later blog entries. All data was available in the public domain. The researchers did not access any private sites or member forums, and they did not interact directly with blog authors or readers.

4.3 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed by using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) strategy with the guidelines recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). This analysis strategy was in accordance with the constructivist philosophy of the study. Themes are constructed by researcher through interpretive engagement with the data. They are not discovered.

The analysis followed six phases:

- Familiarization with the data through repeated reading.
- Initial open coding to identify meaningful segments.
- Collapsing similar codes into broader categories.
- Iterative refinement of themes.
- Reviewing themes against the dataset for coherence.
- Defining and naming final themes.

Coding was done using NVivo 14 software to organize, compare and retrieve the data segments systematically. The analysis was inductive in nature drawing out themes as they emerged from the participants' accounts as they narrated them

4.4 Reflexivity and Researcher Positioning

The line with principles of reflexive thematic analysis, our approach recognized the active involvement of the researcher in the process of deducing themes from the data. Themes emerged through numerous readings and revisits of the data, as well as through discussions and deliberations about potential understandings of precarity, platform labor and economic security undertaken among the co-authors. An audit trail of the initial coding and subsequent theme development was maintained in an effort to ensure methodological accountability.

4.5 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

As credibility and reliability were considered essential, the following strategies were employed to achieve this: - Cross-validation between the platforms was achieved by referring to the stories that were posted to each platform in order to ascertain that similar themes were derived from the text across platforms. - The codification undertaken by the researcher was clearly detailed in an attempt to maintain an audit trail. - In an attempt to reduce personal bias, the derived themes were reviewed and discussed by all researchers.

In the course of our research, we attempted to adhere to the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) principles for Internet research ethics. Our research was limited to publicly available data and we made no attempt to reach out or make contact with any users of the platforms we studied. All usernames and profile information specific to each platform were removed in order to protect the identity of users and to prevent the identification of any individual. All personal identifiable information will be withheld.

V. FINDINGS

5.1 Transition Phase: From Unemployment to Gig-Based Stability

There is an observed data from multiple recent labor studies that the changes from unemployment to gig work mostly focuses on a multi-stage adjustment pathway. According to research, workers who lose their jobs firstly go through a period of shock and financial disruption, which leads then to find quick sources of income through platform-based jobs like delivery, freelancing, or ride-hailing[1],[3]. Gig platforms are often a first choice during unemployment crises because entering by low registration barriers and quick earning potential[5],[7]. As per research on algorithmic conditioning and skill acquisition in gig environments [12],[15], workers phases an adaption as they start participating, during which they learn platform rules , rating systems, and customer interaction norms. Moreover, research shows that some workers go through a phase of partial stabilization, it is where their earnings become stable enough to meet their needs without giving formal benefits or long-term security [2], [9], and [14]. As workers recognize continuous problems like income violation, physical stress, and pause in career, the final solution is frequently re-evaluation. This is persistent with worldwide evidence that gig work rarely sustains in upward mobility [8], [10], and [19]. These phases shows that gig work acts mainly as a short-term stabilizing mechanism, giving instant but weak security for people coping from unemployment.

5.2 Challenges Faced During Transition

Workers transforming from unemployment to gig work gets to face a lot of challenges that affect on short-term stability and long-term prospects. Findings shows that the most common difficulty is unpredictability of income, because of fluctuation in the earnings based on demand cycles, ratings, and platform algorithms [2], [7]. Most of the workers also struggle with lack of social protection, since gig platforms mostly do not offer benefits such as health insurance, paid leave, or job security [9], [14]. Sector-specific issues such as physical stress, safety risks, fuel expenses, and stressful customer interactions furtherly complicate the transformation, mostly for delivery and ride-hailing workers [11], [18]. Studies also focus on psychological stress, coming from long working hours, uncertain workloads and consistent performance monitoring [8], [10]. These issues collectively stop workers' ability to gain sustainable stability, maintaining gig work as a temporary coping mechanism rather than a secure long-term employment path.

VI. Discussion

The review finds evidence that gig work consistently plays the role of a short-term buffer in unemployment, offering an immediate income-continuity function and flexible re-entry into the labor market, Both literature and qualitative narratives identify that the stability is predominantly short-term, as workers are regularly facing the issue of unstable earnings, lack of social protection, and eventual dependency on platform algorithms. These structural constraints restrict opportunities for long-term financial security and make upward mobility precarious. Sectoral contrasts also arise, more turbulence than freelancers, while

demographic factors related to gender and education also mold the outcomes of workers. Overall, the evidence suggests that although gig work acts as a temporary bridge from joblessness, it rarely offers durable economic stability without appropriate regulatory frameworks.

VII. IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Theoretical Implications

The results of the study represent a significant contribution to the gig economy literature as the findings enhance the discussion of precarious work with a new aspect. The existing literature tends to focus either on the temporary functions that secure workers' income or the stabilization functions that support workers in the transition period between employment relationships. So far, the majority of gig economy studies have only focused on the precariousness of gig work. The present study extends gig work from being an unconditional labor model that provides only a couple of attributes of adaptive entry, partial stabilization and inherent instability. Thus, this study also contributes to the transitional labor market theory and platform work. The conditional nature of gig work, its phase-based character, and ambivalent structural position in labor market relations between exploitation and emancipation prevent it from falling into extreme positions.

7.2 Policy Implications

Social protection should be a major factor in labour market policies that take into account the new labour market conditions faced by gig economy workers. Options such as portable benefits, income support schemes, and measures to address the impact of algorithms could all contribute to reducing the impact of precarious and unstable labour conditions related to gig work. Skills certification and hybrid work arrangements could also serve as a transitional phase where gig economy work can be a stepping stone towards more secure and better paid job opportunities in the formal economy. Labour market policies should start by acknowledging gig economy workers as people who pass through a labour market transitional phase while also implementing regulatory reforms to reflect the new realities of labour market conditions rather than accept and legitimate the informality of the gig economy.

VIII. LIMITATIONS

We've identified a number of limitations with our work. First, the source data in our study is taken from gig economy stories posted to social media and online forums. This data set is consequently unrepresentative of gig economy workers. There may be subgroups of gig economy workers whose narratives or experiences are more frequently posted to certain social media platforms or are less likely to be posted in a publicly accessible forum, resulting in a non-representative sample being drawn. Second, the legitimacy or authenticity of the demographic statements contained in the text samples we analyzed is difficult to verify. That is to say, we are unable to confirm or deny the presence of various attributes such as age, level of education or socioeconomic status within our data set. A limitation of this study is that it provides a cross-sectional snapshot of attitudes at a particular point in time and delves into the employment experiences of individuals in only a limited fashion, beyond that provided through their personal stories. While netnography provides qualitative insight into individuals' lived experiences, we must keep in mind that any findings derived from research of this nature will be contextually specific, and therefore exploratory in nature, and not necessarily universal.

IX. Conclusion

Review of Gig Work This working paper looks at gig work as a first line of defence for workers navigating unemployment, offering them a fast track to get started, an assortment of flexible activities and almost immediate pay. What surprises is that almost all of the global and Indian surveys have concluded that gig workers' wage stability is at best fragile, temporary and conditional upon the rules of the gig platforms, fluctuations in work demand and limited labour rights. While gig work may act as a transition space to bring workers back to the labour market, it generally does not translate into secure jobs, career advancement opportunities or other forms of social protection. As labour policy-makers grapple with the fact that many gig economy workers depend on short-term pay in order to ward off greater long-term hardship, the ILO is calling for more policy action, greater platform regulation, and better labour market standards. The report found that gig work is best viewed as an "incomplete form of short-term income stabilization" and is not yet an employment model that can guarantee full-time sustainable income and meaningful job opportunities unless there are rules and protections to enable workers to learn and develop skills, as well as address issues such as pay equity and the rights to join unions and participate in collective bargaining.

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