



Exploring Workers' Motivation to Participate in Gig Economy: A Case Study of Platform Drivers of New Delhi

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Abstract:

The gig economy has witnessed unprecedented growth globally, transforming the nature of work and challenging traditional employment paradigms. The emergence of the platform economy has revolutionized labour dynamics, particularly in the transportation sector. The paper delves into the complexities of gig work. The research paper investigates the motivations driving platform drivers in New Delhi's gig economy, focusing on ride-hailing services like Uber and Ola. By employing rich qualitative narratives, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted motivations that shape gig economy participation. The methodology combines field observations and semi-structured interviews with 50 platform cab drivers in New Delhi. The unconventional interview setting, conducted during rides, aims to provide a natural and candid conversation, exploring drivers' personal details, motivations, and experiences. The findings reveal that autonomy, encapsulated in the term 'Marzi,' is a central theme in platform drivers' narratives. Economic motives drive individuals to join the gig economy, with the promise of higher earnings, car ownership, and improved quality of life. However, the pursuit of autonomy faces challenges, such as the emergence of taxidars and the impact on physical and mental well-being. These findings contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding the motivations of gig workers, offering valuable insights into the factors that attract individuals to the gig economy, ultimately shaping a more nuanced and holistic perspective on the contemporary nature of work.

Keywords: Gig Economy, Motivation, Uber, Platform Economy, Qualitative

Introduction:

The emergence of the platform economy has reshaped the dynamics of labor and employment (Kenney & Zysman, 2016), creating a multifaceted ecosystem intricately woven with the interactions of its key stakeholders—the users, partners, and the platform itself. At its core lies the interplay facilitated by technology, where the app serves as the nexus for ordering services and acts as the initial point of contact among these integral actors. This interconnectedness sets the stage for the landscape of platform work, a central focus in the global discourse that examines the complexities of the modern gig worker's experience.

The transformative impact of ride-hailing applications, epitomized by industry giants such as Lyft, Uber, and Ola, adds another layer to the evolving narrative of the platform economy. These platforms, characterized by their swift and on-demand nature, strategically position themselves to disrupt the conventional taxi industry. In contrast to traditional taxi services encumbered by licensing requirements for both drivers and vehicles, ride-hailing services seek to streamline market dynamics, minimizing friction and costs associated with search

and waiting times for both riders and drivers. Functioning as aggregators of demand and supply, they introduce an innovative approach to mobility.

Crucially, these platforms redefine the employment landscape by categorizing drivers as independent contractors rather than employees (Schor & Vallas, 2020) (Mattila & T. Seppälä, 2015). While this model streamlines operational processes and eliminates the need for driver licensing, it becomes a focal point for legislative scrutiny due to its circumvention of stringent norms governing taxi services. The shift from traditional employment structures to independent contracting raises contentious issues related to day-offs, working hours, mandatory days, maintenance expenses, and insurance for vehicles.

The classification of drivers as independent contractors introduces complexities that extend to proprietary app regulations. Despite Uber's assertion as an internet company merely aggregating rides, it exerts significant control over driver activities through app-based regulations (Lehdonvirta, Graham, Hjorth, & Wood, 2018). Instances of rejecting multiple ride requests leading to blanket termination of contracts underscore the delicate

balance between autonomy and control. Moreover, the imposition of minimum-basic work-a-day requirements challenges the notion of drivers as truly independent contractors, introducing a layer of complexity to their relationship with the platform.

In addition to internal regulations, these platforms leverage a network effect (Wood, Graham, Lehdonvirta, & Hjorth, 2019), a pivotal factor in their success. Agile background checks facilitate the rapid onboarding of a large number of drivers, optimizing search, waiting times, and pricing to attract more customers, thereby creating a self-reinforcing cycle. This efficient onboarding process stands in stark contrast to the traditional taxi industry's approach, which often compromises on personal history checks. The dissociation of ride-hailing platforms from the accountability of onboarding quality drivers has resulted in a surge of legal challenges (Khan, 2017), with lawsuits contesting the platforms' practices and accountability.

While the preceding narrative primarily reflects the perspectives of the global North and the intricacies of their market dynamics, the implications of freelancing or gigging resonate differently in diverse contexts. India, characterized by a burgeoning demography in the age group of 21-40, grapples with distinct employment challenges and views the opportunities presented by the gig economy through a unique lens (NITI Aayog, 2022). The nature of gig work in India, shaped by its specific market and labor characteristics, demands a nuanced examination to comprehend the multifaceted implications and intricacies of the gig economy within this rapidly evolving landscape.

In contemporary dialogues surrounding platform work, the dichotomy between liberation and exploitation resonates across popular media (Srnicsek, 2017) (Zuboff, 2019) and academic circles (Vallas & Schor, 2020). While there is a prevailing consensus acknowledging the challenges faced by the modern-day gig worker (Kalleberg, 2013), there exists a pressing need to delve qualitatively into their motivations, aspirations, and ambitions. This research paper addresses this imperative by embarking on an exploration of the perspectives of platform drivers in New Delhi. Employing an exploratory qualitative research approach, the study aims to unveil the antecedents shaping the motivations of platform drivers, thereby shedding light on the intricacies of their experiences in the gig economy. The analytical framework employed in this study draws inspiration from existing literature on platform labor and precarity within a technologically mediated context.

As the global platform economy evolves, understanding the motivations, experiences, and challenges of gig workers becomes a central focus in academic research. This study aims to contribute

to this ongoing discussion by delving into the motivations of platform drivers in New Delhi, providing a nuanced exploration that goes beyond prevailing narratives of micro-entrepreneurship and flexible work arrangements. The research paper explores the perspectives of platform drivers in New Delhi through an exploratory qualitative approach, seeking to uncover the underlying motivations that drive their engagement with platform work.

Literature Review:

Workers' motivation to participate in the gig economy is a complex issue influenced by various factors. The existing literature indicates that gig workers are motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The gig economy, characterized by short-term, flexible work arrangements facilitated by digital platforms, has become a focal point of research in recent years. Understanding the intricate motivations driving individuals to participate in this evolving labor market is paramount for comprehending the complexities associated with their engagement. This literature review seeks to consolidate existing research on the diverse motivations influencing gig workers. Jabagi et al. (2019) assert that the motivation of gig workers is a nuanced interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Predominantly, financial gain emerges as a powerful driving force, highlighting the economic allure of gig work. The flexibility offered by companies like Uber is another appealing aspect for gig workers, allowing them to balance work with other commitments (Cornelissen & Cholakova, 2019). The autonomy permits workers to harmonize professional commitments with personal responsibilities, fostering overall job satisfaction.

The gig economy presents itself as a viable option for individuals facing financial hardships and limited full-time employment opportunities (Cornelissen & Cholakova, 2019). This underscores the socio-economic impact of the gig economy, offering an alternative avenue for income generation to those in need. Consequently, participation in the gig economy is not solely driven by economic necessity but also by the promise of financial autonomy and diversification of employment options.

Tassinari and Maccarrone (2019) shed light on the importance of solidarity among gig workers. Shared experiences and challenges, particularly in response to the individualization and monitoring pervasive within the gig economy, create a sense of unity. This solidarity not only contributes to the motivation of individual gig workers but also hints at the emergence of collective consciousness within this dynamic labor market.

Moreover, self-actualization has been identified as a key motivator among gig workers, enhancing productivity, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Wason et al., 2023). The gig

economy, with its emphasis on autonomy and creative performance, becomes a platform for individuals to realize their full potential. The motivation of gig workers, therefore, plays a mediating role between workplace learning activities and creative output, contributing to a dynamic and innovative gig economy.

The growth of the gig economy, driven by technological advancements, underscores the need to consider gender differences in gig worker safety (Cox et al., 2023). Technology has not only simplified participation but has also opened opportunities for a diverse workforce to engage in gig work. This aspect highlights the importance of understanding how technological interfaces and digital platforms can impact gender dynamics within the gig economy.

Research indicates that gig workers, including Uber drivers, find motivation in the unique features of their work (Zaman et al., 2020). The intrinsic joy derived from gig work and the satisfaction of fulfilling basic psychological needs contribute significantly to their motivation (Jing & Zhou, 2022). The gig economy's easy entry and exit further enhance its attractiveness for a broad spectrum of individuals seeking autonomy, flexibility, and varied professional experiences ("Gig Workers, Social Protection and Labour Market Inequality: Lessons from Malaysia," 2022).

However, concerns about job insecurity and the mental well-being of gig workers persist, necessitating effective regulatory measures to enhance their situation (Choudhary & Shireshi, 2022; Gupta & Gupta, 2022). The collaborative efforts with sectors like insurance, as suggested by Kajwang (2022), represent a potential avenue for providing social security benefits to gig workers. These measures, rooted in collaboration and regulatory frameworks, aim to mitigate the vulnerabilities associated with gig work.

Despite the evident benefits, gig workers, including Uber drivers, face challenges such as financial precarity and mental well-being issues (Apouey et al., 2020). The reliance on algorithmic control and gamification techniques within the gig economy can impact workers' autonomy and well-being negatively (Wiener et al., 2021; Vasudevan & Chan, 2022). Furthermore, gig workers with disabilities encounter both opportunities and challenges in engaging in meaningful work within the gig economy (Harpur & Blanck, 2020).

Exploring the motivation of workers in the gig economy reveals a multifaceted and dynamic landscape. The synthesis of existing literature highlights the intertwined nature of financial, intrinsic, and socio-economic motivations driving gig workers. As the gig economy continues to evolve, future research should delve deeper into the nuanced motivations of gig workers and advocate

for regulatory frameworks that balance flexibility with worker well-being. Understanding these motivations is essential for policymakers, businesses, and society to create an environment that supports the diverse needs and aspirations of gig workers.

Methodology:

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining field observations and semi-structured interviews to comprehensively explore the experiences and motivations of platform cab drivers in New Delhi, India, particularly those affiliated with Uber and Ola. A total of 50 platform cab drivers, representing both career drivers and individuals transitioning from non-driving professions, participated in semi-structured interviews. This diversity aimed to provide a comprehensive perspective on the industry.

The interviews were conducted during rides, with each session lasting an average of 60 minutes. This unconventional approach aimed to immerse the researcher in the driver's environment, fostering a more natural and candid conversation. Follow-up questioning over the telephone was utilized to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the drivers' experiences. The structured questions covered various aspects, including personal details, educational qualifications, place of residence, family structure, hometown or migration location, duration of association with Uber, monthly income range, previous occupations, mother tongue, and languages learned. These questions aimed to establish a comprehensive profile of the drivers and provide context to their experiences.

The interviews took place in a unique setting, with the researcher seated in the backseat of the cab while the driver occupied the front. This approach aimed to create an atmosphere mirroring the everyday work environment of the drivers. The structured interaction concluded with a transaction, replicating the culmination of a typical ride. Given the potential influence of this transactional aspect on the drivers' responses, echo probing was employed to establish trust and neutrality, encouraging the drivers to share genuine grievances or complaints against users or the platform.

A distinctive aspect of the methodology involved recording postscript observations. After the structured interaction, the researcher documented how drivers reacted to notifications for subsequent rides after the researcher's ride. This indirect method of observation, rather than direct questioning, provided valuable insights into the drivers' perspectives on the ride allocation process and their engagement with subsequent customers. Particular attention was given to the pre-arrival phone call, a critical phase that sets the mood for the ride. The questions posed by both drivers and customers during this interaction were analysed to understand

the expectations and dynamics in this service delivery setup.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their anonymity and privacy were rigorously protected. The research adhered to ethical guidelines and sought to minimize any potential impact on the drivers' work routine.

Findings:

This section deals with platform drivers' motivation regarding their work. While the questions were primarily framed in the terms of working hours and earnings, the drivers often employed a singular narrative to describe their motivations, aspirations and ambitions. The discussion around cab work can be encapsulated in just one word that every cab drivers uses – Marzi (autonomy). The many definitions of autonomy included control over earnings, time, a sense of guarantee that if you are on the road with your app on, then you will get rides, and importantly the absence of feeling of slavery which some had experienced in their previous jobs.

Even the time that I would have otherwise spent on commute yields cash ~ K, 33

Economic motives emerge as powerful driving forces behind individuals' decisions to join the gig economy, particularly the ride-hailing sector. Respondents report not only higher earnings than their previous jobs but also view these platforms as providers of opportunities for a prosperous future. The allure of increased income, the promise of car ownership, and the belief that more working hours equate to a better life motivate drivers to invest in their gig careers. For those with lower educational qualifications, ride-hailing platforms offer a compensatory avenue, ensuring regular income, aiding in debt repayment, and providing mobility and a sense of dignity. In the Indian context, these temporary gig jobs are transforming into avenues for micro-entrepreneurship, challenging the notion of temporary or freelancing work and positioning gig work as a long-term livelihood strategy.

At least I am not a slave to anyone here ~ P, 28

I do not have to report to anyone or beg for leave when required ~ N,24

In the realm of ride-hailing platform driving in India, the overarching theme that echoes through drivers' narratives is autonomy, often encapsulated in the term 'Marzi.' Autonomy goes beyond the conventional control over working hours and earnings; it extends to the assurance of consistent rides, a sense of financial control, and a departure from the perceived servitude experienced in previous employment. This desire for autonomy becomes a potent force, propelling individuals to break away from traditional employment structures

and embrace the opportunities presented by the gig economy.

However, this pursuit of autonomy is not without its challenges. The initial surge in ride-hailing's popularity led individuals to leave white-collar jobs for the promising opportunities these platforms offered. Strikes in 2017 and 2018, coupled with declining revenues and driver dissatisfaction, unveiled the less glamorous side of this burgeoning industry. The upheaval introduced a new category of stakeholders, the taxidars, who bought cars to attach to these companies, offering salary-based arrangements to drivers. This additional layer disrupted the trajectory towards autonomy, limiting control over earnings and working hours—the very essence that gig work promises.

There is money to be made in this line, no doubt, but you can only make a good amount if the car is yours ~ R,25

While the coveted goal for many platform drivers is ownership of their vehicles, the journey is far from straightforward. Approximately 30% of drivers manage to own their vehicles, but out of this group, only 27% secure loans from formal channels. The challenges escalate as drivers, unable to pay hefty EMIs for newly purchased automobiles, turn to informal networks, subjected to exorbitant daily rental fees. This reliance on informal arrangements curtails the envisioned benefits of flexibility and autonomy, creating a nuanced landscape where the pursuit of ownership becomes a delicate balance between economic viability and the harsh realities of financing.

The relentless pursuit of autonomy and higher earnings exacts a toll on the physical and mental well-being of ride-hailing platform drivers. With reported working hours reaching up to 18 or even 24 hours a day, coupled with a significant number forgoing breaks, the drivers grapple with musculoskeletal issues. Although underreported due to societal stigma and limited mental health awareness, drivers express feelings of tension and worry about their work and income. The dual burden of physical and mental strain underscores the challenges faced by gig workers in maintaining a balance between economic motives and personal well-being, raising pertinent questions about the sustainability and impact of gig work on the health of these individuals.

Discussion:

Drivers joins platforms with various motives and view it as an investment, a business venture, a way out of debts, a source of a stable income and a fast track for social and economic mobility. The platform economy promises employment and flexibility to its partners and hence must be analysed from that angle. The examination of platform-based employment within the urban context reveals a complex interplay of

socioeconomic factors, individual aspirations, and systemic challenges. Our analysis, incorporating insights from a survey and additional details provided, elucidates the multifaceted nature of gig work in the ride-hailing industry.

The neoliberal individualization ethos prevalent in the gig economy is evident among Uber and Ola drivers who perceive their constraints not as dictated by social structures but by their own abilities and hard work. Despite increased income, some drivers acknowledge working harder and longer hours, transitioning from traditional taxi driving to embrace the perceived autonomy and flexibility offered by ride-hailing platforms. The willingness to accept risks, such as accidents without insurance coverage, highlights the individualized responsibility drivers assume in this economic model.

The importance of car ownership emerges as a central theme, with drivers striving to attain ownership to enjoy the promised benefits of autonomy and flexibility. The emergence of a new layer of stakeholders, taxidars, adds complexity to this pursuit, limiting drivers' control over their earnings and work hours. The shift towards ownership is gradual, with some drivers initially operating under salary arrangements before transitioning to leasing directly from the platform. This additional layer introduces challenges, as drivers contend with limited control over their work arrangements and financial outcomes. The pursuit of car ownership, while desirable for autonomy, proves to be a challenging journey. A significant portion of platform drivers, despite owning their vehicles, struggles to secure loans from formal channels, leading to reliance on informal networks with high rental fees. This aspect creates barriers to reaping the promised benefits of flexibility and autonomy, emphasizing the complexities inherent in the gig economy's economic structure.

The impact on drivers' physical and mental well-being is a critical dimension of our discussion. The demanding nature of the job, characterized by long working hours, irregular eating and sleeping patterns, and limited breaks, raises concerns about the sustainability of such employment. Reports of musculoskeletal issues affecting three-quarters of respondents underscore the physical toll, while the lack of acknowledgment or discussion around mental health concerns reveals a gap in understanding the holistic well-being of gig workers.

Strategies employed by drivers to maximize earnings reveal a calculated approach to navigating the gig economy. Knowing destinations in advance is a preferred strategy, allowing drivers to estimate profitability and optimize gig allocation. The strategic avoidance of drop-off locations with limited passenger availability reflects drivers'

proactive efforts to maximize their income. The prevalence of short breaks or pauses taken inside the car without logging off from the app underscores the continuous pressure to remain available for potential gigs.

Economic motives are dominant factors shaping drivers' choices in the gig economy. The allure of higher earnings compared to previous jobs and the belief that more hours equate to more money drive individuals to engage with Uber and Ola. For those with lower educational qualifications, this gig work is perceived as a compensatory avenue, offering regular income, debt repayment opportunities, mobility, and a semblance of dignity.

Conclusion:

Ride-hailing platforms like Uber and Ola have created new job opportunities in Delhi, yet they have also led to closures and reduced business for traditional taxis and auto-rickshaws, showcasing a form of "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey, 2005). Formerly self-employed individuals or property owners have become new platform owners. Some displaced traditional drivers transition to platform-based employment (Sundararajan, 2016), while a new demographic of first-time platform drivers, often migrants, is attracted by the promise of high income and incentives (Evans & Gawer, 2016). This dynamic shift in the job market reflects a complex interplay between traditional and platform-driven transport, prompting ongoing scrutiny for a comprehensive understanding of its long-term implications on the diverse workforce in Delhi. The closures, rise of new owners, and entry of first-time platform drivers collectively reshape the urban employment landscape, necessitating continued research and policy considerations for equitable outcomes.

The evolving employment landscape of platforms in Indian cities raises questions about the long-term sustainability and impact of these platforms. The rapid capture of the taxi market within a relatively short period is notable, yet uncertainties persist regarding future growth, potential regulatory interventions, and the entry of new competitors. The ongoing debate surrounding the impact on unemployment in India highlights the availability of a workforce willing to adhere to the conditions set by platform companies, reinforcing the gig economy's influence on the broader employment market.

Thus, the analysis of Uber and Ola employment reveals a complex interplay of factors, encompassing promises of prosperity, entrepreneurial aspirations, health trade-offs, and economic motivations. The multifaceted nature of gig work in the ride-hailing industry requires ongoing research and policy considerations to address the challenges and opportunities presented

by this dynamic employment model within the evolving urban landscape.

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