

# The Gig Economy: Insights into Worker Experiences in the UK and Saudi Arabia

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## Abstract

The present paper critically examines the operational practices of gig economy platforms in the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia, using data gathered from 21 semi-structured interviews with gig workers in both countries. Leveraging frameworks based on institutional theory, the study reveals that these platforms, loosely termed “institutional chameleons”, do in fact, adapt to different socioeconomic and regulatory contexts, yet their policies do not necessarily align with the well-being of the workers. The UK context expectedly highlights issues like limited work opportunities, inadequate wages, and a lack of robust social protections, challenging the prevailing narratives of work freedom and flexibility in gig work. However, it also unexpectedly unveils a certain degree of job stability and longer, satisfying tenures amongst the workers interviewed, suggesting a nuanced landscape of gig work in the UK. Contrastingly, in Saudi Arabia, the gig economy under lax regulation exposes a landscape fraught with precariousness, instability, and exploitation, particularly for expatriate labor. Moreover, due to highly restrictive labor policies, gig platforms operate in ways that not only disregard but may actively discriminate against their workforce. These findings signify the urgent need for updated labor protection frameworks that are sensitive to the unique challenges and diverse operational models of digital labor and which anticipate the changing nature of work.

## Keywords

United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Gig Economy, Platforms, Digital Labour, Institutional Context, Future of Work

## 1. Introduction

The digital revolution has brought about notable shifts in labor markets, most prominently through the emergence of the gig economy. This flexible, task-based

form of employment is widely regarded as a paradigm shift in employment structures (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017), yet its broader implications for labor rights and economic stability are not fully comprehended. The dramatic increase in digital labor platforms, from 142 in 2010 to 777 in 2020 (Rani et al., 2021), alongside a significant rise in income shares from gig work (Farrell et al., 2018), underscores the transformative nature of the gig economy. These platforms have not only altered consumer behaviour but also redefined work by combining the flexibility of freelance work with algorithmic management (Wood et al., 2019). These integrative dynamics form a prominent component of “platform capitalism” (Srnicek, 2017), necessitating careful and comprehensive examination. While academic research into the gig economy is growing, comparative studies across diverse institutional contexts remain limited. Most research on the gig economy focused on Western contexts (Hall & Krueger, 2017; Lehdonvirta, 2018), potentially overlooking the influences of non-Western cultural, societal, and regulatory environments (Tan et al., 2021). This study aims to fill this gap by comparing the experiences of platform-based food delivery workers in the UK and Saudi Arabia. By investigating how these institutional contexts shape the nature of work within them, the platforms policies and operational practices, and workers experiences, this paper contributes to ongoing dialogues about labor regulation, platform governance, and workers’ rights in the gig economy. The research questions explore the gig economy’s nature, platform policies, workers’ experiences, and the influence of institutional contexts on these factors. The paper begins with an introduction to the gig economy and its impacts, followed by a review of pertinent literature, an overview of the institutional framework, and the research methodology. It then delves into the gig economies of the UK and Saudi Arabia for context and then discusses findings from interviews with gig workers, exploring diverse operational models and workers experiences. The article concludes with an open question about the future of work.

## 2. Literature Review

This literature review engages with the rich spectrum of gig economy scholarship, specifically focusing on work-related themes to explore gig workers’ diverse experiences across different institutional contexts. It dissects the research landscape, discussing precarity, autonomy, regulatory challenges, institutional contexts, and labor conditions in the gig economy. This includes analyzing the narratives of flexibility and insecurity, and the power dynamics between workers and platforms. It also delves into algorithmic management and surveillance in gig work. Building on this, it presents a fourfold critique. Firstly, it addresses the underrepresentation of non-Western gig economy studies, using Saudi Arabia as an example to show how local socio-economic contexts can impact digital labor platforms trajectories. Secondly, it critiques the focus on large platforms like Amazon or Uber and highlights the significance of smaller or niche platforms in the gig economy. Thirdly, it joins scholars in urging study of the systemic rela-

tionships between platforms and traditional firms to understand their mutual impacts and the potential trajectory towards the immanence of gig work across traditional firms and sectors. Lastly, it argues against passive observation and advocates for proactive engagement with the gig economy, invoking precedents such as climate change and tobacco use to emphasize the risks of passivity.

### **2.1. Inside the Gig Economy**

The “gig economy” is broadly defined as “labour markets that are characterized by independent contracting that happens through, via, and on digital platforms” (Woodcock & Graham, 2019: p. 10). It encapsulates a vast array of digital labor platforms that match supply and demand for discretized tasks or “gigs.” These platforms represent a paradigm shift in the organization of labor, as they redefine what it means to work, introducing unprecedented flexibility and reshaping the traditional employer-employee relationship (Woodcock & Graham, 2019). The gig economy spans a broad spectrum of labor, from complex, well-compensated tasks like design, consulting, and software development, to simpler tasks facilitated by ride-hailing and food delivery platforms. Due to their prominence and visibility, these latter sectors often serve as the focal point for much of the existing gig economy research. The gig economy has notably impacted various sectors, particularly personal transport, personal services, and trade professions, whereas manufacturing and public services remain untouched (OECD, 2021; Schwellnus et al., 2019). Gig economy giants like Uber, DiDi, and TaskRabbit have revolutionized personal services while platforms like Deliveroo and Foodora have reshaped the delivery industry (Boeri et al., 2020). Particularly, the food delivery sector has seen significant changes and growth, further propelled by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a revenue surge to around \$5.5 billion in the U.S. alone within five months during the lockdowns (Sumagaysay, 2020). Future projections suggest that by 2027, the global online food delivery industry might reach a market value of US\$1.65 trillion (Statista, 2023). Interestingly, gig economy workers, who are typically young and well-educated men, engage in gig work primarily for supplemental income and out of appreciation of work flexibility (Hall & Krueger, 2017; Pesole et al., 2018). However, Huws et al. (2017) find that a significant proportion of crowd workers rely on this work for more than half of their income. Moreover, gig work often forms part of an income diversification strategy, rather than a lifestyle choice (Huws et al., 2017). While gig economy work often provides flexible working hours and income diversification, pay varies significantly across and within platforms, reflecting task characteristics. In Italy, for instance, hourly pay ranges from 1 euro to 50 euros (Schwellnus et al., 2019: p. 11).

### **2.2. Insights about Platform Impacts**

The discourse surrounding the digital revolution often harbors dystopian tones, framing robotics, artificial intelligence (AI), and machine learning as potential

disruptors to job market stability (Stone et al., 2022). Developments like large language models and the proliferation of AI-driven chatbots, such as OpenAI's ChatGPT, fueled these sentiments. However, a reductionist approach that excessively generalizes initial expectations or focuses on isolated elements of the overall story, is limiting as noted by Vallas and Kovalainen (2019). This dystopian perception, they contest, is largely driven by a culture of fear, which influences public opinions about the gig economy's impact. Public discourse often amplifies dystopian scenarios, once confined to science fiction, of AI and robotics displacing human labor. This theory suggests substantial occupational segments face technological displacement risk, potentially upsetting the traditional wage labor system. Current developments like the so-called "retail apocalypse" and cashiers' replacement with self-check-out systems reinforce these views (Vallas & Kovalainen, 2019: p. 18). The existential question that emerges is how the social order will maintain itself when vast swaths of human labor become redundant (Ford, 2015). Some scholars argue that the ongoing technological revolution's repercussions are essentially political, not just economic (Paus, 2018). Addressing these challenges necessitates a new social contract to underpin a novel institutional architecture. Paus (2018) asserts that preventing dystopian outcomes from technological advancements necessitates a broad discussion involving multiple stakeholders and significant work hours or benefits redistribution. The future of work is determined by country-specific conditions, with social capabilities playing a crucial role in driving technological change and market expansion (Paus, 2018: p. 73). This discourse must include identifying suitable short and long-term institutional responses and recognizing the potential divergence from past expectations about the future, in Paus's (2018: p. 1) terms: "The future is not what it used to be". These two primary narratives frame the discourse on technology's impact on employment: the first warns of significant job displacement due to advancements like automation and AI (Frey & Osborne, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2020), while the second recognizes disruption but emphasizes new job creation (Manyika et al., 2017). Both narratives agree on substantial traditional employment displacement and the transition to a technology-based economy, thereby highlighting the crucial role of preemptive policymaking. Furthermore, digital platforms have redefined the labor market, with the personal transport sector being a prime example of this shift (Cramer & Krueger, 2016). They improve service delivery and enhance accessibility, potentially increasing consumer welfare and overall productivity (OECD, 2019). However, challenges arise, such as potential wage reduction and job displacement. Wage suppression and work offshoring may exert downward pressure on prices, potentially affecting domestic employment and wages (Schwellnus et al., 2019). The economic impact of these platforms thus warrants a comprehensive evaluation of the labor market and economy (Bessen, 2019). The influence of gig economy platforms extends beyond economics, affecting social and institutional landscapes. They challenge labor laws and social protections, instigating debates

about the classification of gig workers and their access to employment benefits. Gig workers often bear risks, including income instability and a lack of benefits such as sick leave, pensions, and medical insurance. Platforms' rating systems also introduce a new form of workplace surveillance, contributing to novel forms of job stress and anxiety. Meanwhile, their environmental impact is mixed, with some platforms increasing carbon emissions while others reducing them (Cramer & Krueger, 2016; Martin et al., 2010). In terms of impact on labor, Vallas and Schor (2020) incisively observes: "The effect, initially evident in temporary work and subcontracting, is to commodify labor time and disembody the worker from prior systems of social protection. What platforms provide, then, is a convenient, readily available infrastructure with which to limit the firm's obligation to the workforce on which it relies. From this point of view, platforms provide business organizations with yet another way of achieving what...has [been] called accumulation through dispossession" (p. 9). This underlines the need for reforms to protect gig workers and consider the varied impacts of these platforms on society, the environment, and institutions, in addition to their economic effects.

### 2.3. Platforms as Institutional Chameleons

Vallas and Schor (2020) speculatively described platforms as "institutional chameleons", noting their unique ability to adapt according to operational environments. They possess characteristics of firms (i.e., maintain control over their operational rules), markets (i.e., promote interactions between autonomous entities), and networks (i.e., they harness scale to drive their success and expansion), indicating their distinctive position in the economic structure. Despite the expectation that platforms would exhibit different behaviors in diverse environments, empirical evidence shows commonalities in their design and labor effects, suggesting that certain inherent features persist irrespective of the operating context (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Aloisi, 2015; Thelen, 2018; Wood et al., 2019). This doesn't entirely concur with the "institutional chameleon" emphasis, indicating that platforms might carry inherent traits constant across environments, and potentially shape their institutional context, a feature "few chameleons enjoy" (Vallas & Schor, 2020: p. 10). Thus, while the "institutional chameleon" concept is immensely insightful, it might not completely capture the essence of platforms' behaviour and characteristics. It, nonetheless, holds some degree of merit. In fact, instead of conforming to institutions, platforms often engage in what has been called "institutional capture" and "preemptive regulations" (Pasquale, 2016). This phenomenon describes the instances when platforms, particularly large and influential ones, shape the regulations and institutions surrounding them in a way that is favourable to their operations and growth. Bernal (2020) usefully contends that: "These businesses are the heart of the gig economy: famous for changing the way we travel and eat, as well as for offering their couriers zero contract hours, no sick pay or paid holidays – and fighting gov-

ernments in court to stop that from changing.” The “Uber files” demonstrate Uber’s global regulatory connections and its disruptive approach towards local transport regulations, favoring regulatory reshaping over strict compliance (Davies et al., 2022, Rosenblat & Stark, 2015). Similarly, Airbnb negotiates with regulatory bodies to adjust incompatible housing rules (Spangler, 2018). Platforms may also adopt “preemptive regulations” to evade stricter ones, as seen with Facebook’s privacy rules. However, such platforms’ cynicism often faces staunch resistance from local governments and unions. Ultimately, these notions question the “chameleon” metaphor and suggest that platforms, backed by major financial behemoths and influencing vulnerable social institutions, are powerful agents transforming institutional frameworks, necessitating a reassessment of our understanding and analytical models within this purview. Institutional landscapes, nevertheless, play a pivotal yet complex role in influencing gig economy dynamics, encompassing aspects like labor rights, work practices, and market structures (Kalleberg, 2018). Comparative studies, such as Thelen (2018)’s examination of Uber’s diverse impacts across Germany, Sweden, and the U.S., have provided valuable insights into how distinct institutional landscapes shape these dynamics. Concurrently, these studies have underscored the influence of cultural factors and labor institutions on worker satisfaction (Robinson, 2017; Manriquez, 2019). Recognizing these dynamics, Söderqvist (2017) championed a tailored institutional approach to better navigate the gig economy landscape (in his case Nordic), thereby emphasizing the substantial role regulatory and institutional frameworks play in directing gig economy development (Vallas & Schor, 2020). However, these studies aren’t without limitations. They are power-blind and underestimate the influence gig economy platforms can exert in their environments (i.e., “institutional capture”). Most are also centered around the Western context, potentially sidelining the unique dynamics present in various socio-economic contexts, particularly those within the non-Western contexts (Graham et al., 2017).

## 2.4. Work-Related Themes

### 2.4.1. Gig Income

Exploring platform conceptualization and institutional power dynamics requires a detailed approach to truly understand platform labor. The following section addresses key themes identified in literature to understand gig work. By examining these themes systematically, it aims to present a nuanced view of platform labor, moving beyond general concepts to explore gig work complexities. The goal is to offer a comprehensive understanding of the gig worker’s experience in today’s platform economy. Firstly, gig income, which significantly impacts workers’ welfare and their reliance on platform work. The gig economy often appeals for its potential to provide supplemental income, offering financial flexibility (Hall & Krueger, 2017). Some engage in gig work primarily for this reason; others might use it as a safety net during traditional employment insta-



bility (Farrell et al., 2019). However, this comes with the challenge of fluctuating service demand and platform-controlled pricing, leading to unpredictable earnings (Chen et al., 2016). Gig workers typically bear business costs, such as vehicle maintenance or home upkeep for Airbnb hosts, further contributing to financial precarity (Ravenelle, 2019; Wood et al., 2019). Moreover, while gig work is often considered a “side hustle,” it constitutes a significant part of many workers’ income, rendering them vulnerable to changes in platform policies (Möhlmann & Zalmanson, 2017; Rosenblat & Stark, 2015). Scholars like Schor et al. (2020) note a hierarchical structure within platforms influencing earning potential, work conditions, and workers’ satisfaction. Such disparities can exacerbate economic precarity and reinforce income dependence. Therefore, despite the allure of flexible earnings, the reality often includes income volatility, financial burden, and power dynamics, creating a potentially precarious financial environment for gig workers. This underlines the need for a more profound exploration of income dependence and financial vulnerability in understanding platform labor dynamics.

#### **2.4.2. Job Characteristics and Control**

Moreover, it is possible to uncover complex facets by scrutinizing job characteristics and control in platform labor, which warrant careful exploration. Themes such as “Digital Taylorism,” evaluative structures, algorithmic bias, and platform authoritarianism are dominant, each bearing significant implications. “Digital Taylorism” parallels scientific management in the era of labor surveillance under optimization and efficiency. It leverages algorithms to fragment tasks into smaller units, streamlining workflows and extending control over gig workers (Parenti, 2001; Vallas & Schor, 2020). Algorithmic oversight replaces human supervision, potentially intruding into personal spaces and blurring work-life boundaries. Power asymmetry is another issue, with platforms limiting worker actions while empowering employers or platform owners (Rosenblat & Stark, 2015). For instance, food delivery drivers often can’t negotiate wages, work hours, or dispute resolution, subjecting them to platform control (Duggan et al., 2019). Evaluative structures, while aimed at assuring service quality, can transform into social control tools, pressurizing gig workers to conform to service standards, leading to high-stress environments and work intensification (Kornberger et al., 2017). The term “automating inequality” points to the risk of algorithms reinforcing sociodemographic biases. Algorithms may perpetuate societal biases and inequalities, exacerbating these disparities further (Eubanks, 2018). For example, algorithms might prioritize orders based on customer ratings, which can disproportionately disadvantage certain worker groups. “Platform authoritarianism” refers to platforms’ near-total control over their labor force, with little worker autonomy and disregard for fair dispute-resolution mechanisms (Srnicek, 2017). This skewed power structure exposes gig workers to potential exploitation and inequity. Such reflections necessitate a shift in platform la-

bor understanding, highlighting the potentially darker side of digital platforms. Despite offering opportunities and flexibility, they can foster control mechanisms, biases, and power imbalances.

#### **2.4.3. Depersonalized Human Labor**

In the gig economy, human narratives are often obscured by digital interfaces and transactional interactions. The experiences of workers interacting with customers and support personnel, and their lived experiences within these platforms, provide a vivid insight into the complex human dynamics within the platform economy. Despite the digital interface somewhat depersonalizing human labor behind platform services, it doesn't eliminate the possibility of interpersonal conflict. Gig workers, especially in customer-facing roles (e.g., food delivery apps), often face user dissatisfaction, abuse, or outright aggression, with platforms providing limited recourse (Scholz, 2017; Wood et al., 2019). Support personnel, tasked with resolving gig workers' issues, can be a primary source of human interaction. Effective support can foster community and lessen the feelings of isolation common in gig work (Bérastégui, 2021). Conversely, inadequate, or unsympathetic support can heighten workers' frustration and alienation (Rosenblat & Stark, 2015). Hence, the quality of support mechanisms in platform labor is crucial to investigate. Some gig workers have reported instances of customers manipulating platform policies against them, including false complaints to dodge charges (Ravenelle, 2019). This "weaponized" feedback mechanism highlights the power imbalance in platform work and emphasizes the urgent need for stronger worker protection mechanisms. Such perspectives underscore the need to humanize our understanding of platform labor. Amid discussions of algorithms and business models, it's vital not to lose sight of the human beings at the center of these platforms, who face an array of challenges and contradictions daily.

#### **2.4.4. Conflict and Grievances**

Platforms, primarily operating via technology and remote work, often deploy algorithms and automated systems for dispute resolution. As a result, workers face a daunting task when trying to voice concerns or resolve disagreements. The advent of digital intermediaries, such as Uber and Deliveroo, has transformed the way labor disputes are addressed. While traditional employment settings have established procedures involving human resources departments, labor unions, or legal institutions, platform labor presents a markedly different landscape. The inherent structure of platform work, typified by a distance relationship between the platform and its workers, renders traditional dispute resolution mechanisms largely ineffective. Complications arise as platform workers, labeled as "independent contractors," are often denied protections granted to regular employees, including the right to collective bargaining (De Stefano, 2015). Platforms often face criticism for the opacity and impersonality of their grievance-handling procedures. In cases of conflict, workers generally encounter a



faceless system of automated responses and algorithmic decisions, leading to feelings of frustration and powerlessness (Rosenblat & Stark, 2015). Even where platforms have dispute resolution systems, these often favor customers or the platforms, leaving workers' voices unheard. MacMillan (2022) highlight a troubling story of a South African Uber driver named Cupido, brutally attacked by local taxi drivers protesting the company's operations. Despite Uber's promise of safety, he was left without substantial company support, revealing a stark lack of assistance for distressed drivers. A comprehensive report by the Fairwork Foundation (2020) found that over half of the 100+ assessed platforms worldwide lacked clear conflict resolution policies, contributing to workers' increasing frustration and sense of powerlessness. Furthermore, less than 20% were reported to have a fair internal process for dispute resolution, underlining the magnitude of the issue (Ustek-Spilda et al., 2020). Although some platforms have introduced measures like in-app support or helplines, they often fail to adequately address labor disputes. Workers frequently recount being ignored, dismissed, or even penalized for raising concerns (Duggan et al., 2019).

#### **2.4.5. The Effort-Bargain**

Furthermore, platforms frequently utilize gamification strategies and nudging to stimulate workers' engagement and productivity. This effort bargain involves inducing workers to embrace game-like meanings and sustaining their effort through the workday with continuous nudges (e.g., apps notifications) (Manriquez, 2019). The platform labor model brings with it unique strategies to induce and nudge workers to perform certain behaviors or increase productivity. These tactics, often labeled as "effort-bargains", which like its counterpart in traditional employment, involve a complex interplay of incentivization and control, leveraging the power of algorithms, gamification, and pity incentives. For example, platforms like Uber and Lyft are known to use dynamic pricing models that incentivize drivers to work at peak hours or in high-demand areas by offering increased fares, commonly known as "surge pricing" (Hall & Krueger, 2017). This strategy not only meets the companies' need for a readily available workforce during high-demand times but also leverages the desire of workers to maximize their earnings. Additionally, platforms often use these gamification techniques to induce work. For instance, badges, streaks, and leaderboards are used to encourage competition and to increase work hours. These techniques capitalize on the human inclination toward achievement and social comparison, thereby subtly nudging workers to increase their effort (Deterding et al., 2011). However, these inducement strategies have attracted criticism for perpetuating a form of "soft control" over workers. These techniques often mask the exertion and precarity associated with gig work under the guise of flexibility and autonomy, creating an illusion of choice while subtly pushing workers toward specific behaviors (Wood et al., 2019). Furthermore, such "nudging" strategies can blur the boundaries between work and leisure, leading to overwork and potentially con-

tributing to the burnout phenomenon among gig workers (Kaine & Josserand, 2019). Thus, the inducement strategies of platform companies highlight a key aspect of the gig work model that often falls under the radar, the subtle, yet pervasive, mechanisms of control and influence that shape workers' behaviors and experiences.

#### 2.4.6. Social Mobility

Moreover, development and social mobility warrant a closer look within the context of platform labor. When contemplating career growth and upward mobility, the platform economy presents an unconventional landscape that differs considerably from traditional employment structures. For one, platform labor is often characterized by the absence of a standard career ladder. Unlike traditional jobs where employees may progress through structured promotions, platform work often lacks these formal avenues of advancement (Wood et al., 2019). Gig workers, despite accumulating experience or demonstrating high performance, may find limited opportunities for upward progression within these platforms. Supporting this, Kalleberg (2011) articulates that a lack of career progression can engender feelings of stagnation and powerlessness in workers. Drawing upon his work, it's plausible to argue that similar effects may manifest in gig workers. The platform economy, largely characterized by its flat structures and lack of promotional pathways, may inadvertently contravene an intrinsic human yearning for growth and advancement. This notion is not exclusive to traditional employment structures; it's just as pertinent in the digital platform context. Further, Schor et al. (2016) posits that such stagnation may not only have psychological implications but may also engender social mobility issues. Without the promise of upward progression, gig workers may find themselves confined to their current socio-economic stratum, unable to break out of low-income cycles. It's thus evident that the design of platform labor poses potent questions about the future of work and the social mobility prospects it offers to its workforce. Yet, a counter-narrative exists, albeit with insufficient evidence or trivial repercussions, where platform labor is seen as a launchpad toward self-employment and entrepreneurship. Lehdonvirta (2018) provides evidence of workers using their platform work experiences as steppingstones, leveraging their acquired skills to establish their own businesses. The dichotomy presented above underscores the complex nature of career development and social mobility within the gig economy. Is platform labor entrenching a new class of workers in low-wage employment (e.g., the "precariat" (Allen & Ainley, 2011) or "cybertariat" (Huws, 2014)), or does it offer a viable path toward self-sufficiency and upward socio-economic mobility? These questions warrant further scrutiny and substantial research.

#### 2.4.7. The "Gig" Moral Economy

Historically, the "moral economy" concept, introduced by historian E.P. Thompson, refers to a shared understanding of economic justice and the norms that

govern fair transactions within a community (Thompson, 1971). In the gig economy, it signifies the collective norms and understandings guiding workers in asserting their rights against exploitative practices. Despite the control exerted by platforms, workers often display resilience, fostering a moral economy that challenges the platform's structures. For instance, gig workers develop informal resistance strategies to counter the platforms' manipulative tactics and maintain some control over their work (Wood et al., 2019). Collective action and unionization are other key resistance strategies. Examples include Uber drivers' strikes for better pay and working conditions, and food delivery couriers forming unions to push for labor rights (Rosenblat, 2020, Cant, 2019). Digital spaces like online forums and social media groups offer a counterbalance to the platform's power, allowing workers to share information, discuss strategies, and mobilize collective actions (Gandini, 2019). This suggests that over time, workers learn to resist platform strategies (Shapiro, 2017; Rahman, 2021). Although gig workers may feel powerless and isolated due to algorithmic management, they're far from passive victims (Anwar & Graham, 2020). They can be active agents capable of asserting their rights and resisting exploitative platform practices. This indicates the evolving norms, values, and practices that workers utilize to resist systemic challenges. However, the decentralized and transitory nature of gig work poses significant challenges to these resistance efforts.

## 2.5. Gaps in the Literature

Current research on the gig economy is predominantly focused on developed, high-income countries, overlooking the unique characteristics of gig work in developing or low-income regions. These regions have distinct socioeconomic structures, cultural nuances, labor laws, and digital infrastructures, which can shape gig work differently (OECD, 2019). Factors like high unemployment rates, weak regulation, or low digital literacy could impact the perception and engagement with gig work in these areas, which might not align with the "flexibility" narratives prevalent in wealthier nations (Graham et al., 2017, Hunt & Machingura, 2016). Moreover, issues like income inequality, labor rights, and social security could be amplified due to weak institutional support and labor regulations. Hammer and Ness (2021)'s research highlights that labor precarity persists across numerous global regions, and the gig economy's unpredictability could worsen these conditions. These unique non-Western contexts, complete with specific socio-economic and cultural dynamics, require a profound investigation. Further, we need to explore how digital platforms interact with existing informal labor sectors in these regions, rather than merely disrupting traditional industries. This research shortfall limits our understanding of the global gig economy impact and how platforms can address local challenges in lower-income countries. Moreover, research on the gig economy often focuses on major players like Uber, Amazon, or Airbnb, potentially limiting our understanding of this diverse sector. This focus obscures the numerous smaller platforms, which also signifi-

cantly contribute to the gig economy. Platforms such as Toptal, PeoplePerHour, or Clickworker, catering to freelancers in creative and technical fields, possess distinct labor processes and offer different job control levels and payment structures (Brawley & Pury, 2016). The critique extends to the overemphasis on larger, often Western-centric platforms. To capture the gig economy's scope more comprehensively, attention must be given to smaller, geographically, or sector-specific platforms. For instance, worker-owned platforms or cooperatives challenge the mainstream narrative centered around corporate giants. Examples include a driver-owned taxi-hailing platform in Portland, Oregon, and Modo Cooperative, North America's first ride-hailing co-op (Jansen, 2011; Schor et al., 2016). Niche platforms serving specialized sectors, such as ShiftKey for health-care workers or Tongal for creative professionals, also warrant exploration (Reed & Mulvaney, 2022). Investigating these lesser-known platforms can provide a more nuanced understanding of the gig economy and highlight the need for differentiated regulatory and policy responses. Exploring these platforms could also reveal alternative labor organization models within the gig economy, contributing to a more equitable sector. According to Vallas and Schor (2020), the lack of research into the systemic relationship between traditional firms and gig platforms impedes understanding of the gig economy's trajectory and broader labor market impact. Traditional firms indirectly subsidize gig workers' income, allowing platforms to offer low pay yet still attract workers. There's a potential cyclicity within this relationship, they argued. As firms increasingly opt for casualization, outsourcing, and other forms of flexible employment, they could indirectly create a growing gig worker pool for gig economy platforms. These workers might feel compelled to join the gig economy due to limited stable job alternatives, providing a steady labor supply for gig platforms. This cycle could undermine standard employment further, promoting a "vicious circle" (Vallas & Schor, 2020) where the precarious gig economy model overtakes traditional work structures. If gig platforms gain enough legitimacy to lead as a paradigm (Silver, 2003), we could reach a state where gig work is imminent and gig platforms' use and their associated precarity become normalized within standard employment, all through potential significant socioeconomic consequences, including the erosion of workers' rights, job security, and quality of employment (Wood et al., 2019). The observed imminence of gig work could amplify these concerns. It's vital to understand in detail the systemic interplays between gig platforms and traditional firms, especially if the gig economy starts to infiltrate public services, a sector traditionally responsible for safeguarding societal well-being and delivering critical services. However, such a transformation is yet to be observed, as noted by Schwellnus et al. (2019). Lastly, there is a perspective in the literature that encourages a stance of watchful waiting before enacting regulatory changes in response to the gig economy, which mirrors past cautionary attitudes that potentially risked more harm than good. Such perspective can still be exhibited by excellent scholars nonetheless, for example, Vallas and Kovalainen (2019) con-

tend: “Key are the assumptions commonly articulated throughout this entire genre: the notion that technology inevitably replaces human labor, that the pace of such displacement has been accelerating, and that it seems imminently poised to reach a tipping point. Confronting these assumptions with scholarship drawn from the history of technology...show precisely how unfounded these assumptions would seem to be.” (p. 18). However, in a rebuttal to this, consider the precedent of climate change: long before the incontrovertible evidence of human-induced global warming, scientists like James Hansen raised alarms about the trajectory we were on (Hansen et al., 1988). Sceptics and moderates argued for patience, for waiting until the evidence was conclusive. However, the undeniable reality is that delaying action has exacerbated the problem, and the world is now grappling with the effects of climate change on a massive scale, struggling to implement remedial measures fast enough (Masson-Delmotte et al., 2022). Similarly, the case of tobacco use provides a stark lesson. Despite early suspicions and emerging studies suggesting a correlation between smoking and lung cancer in the 1950s, a definitive consensus was delayed by a culture of scepticism and the powerful lobbying of the tobacco industry. This resulted in millions of preventable deaths (Proctor, 2013). Applying these historical lessons to the gig economy indicates that a proactive approach may be beneficial. Preemptive regulations should be considered to safeguard workers’ rights, especially in a landscape characterized by rapid innovation and change (De Stefano, 2015). We are aware that these platforms are already using them. In fact, Vallas and Kovalainen (2019), urged us to assume a moderate perspective on the matter shortly before citing the tale of 400 Uber lawyers hired to preempt regulation globally in favor of the company. This is not to say that action should be rash or uninformed, of course, an understanding of the potential risks and benefits is crucial. However, waiting for comprehensive evidence could potentially lead to the entrenchment of unfair practices and the acceleration of inequality within the gig economy. Furthermore, efforts to cultivate institutional capabilities are necessary to manage this transition effectively. This could involve enhancing labor unions, promoting social dialogue, and improving regulatory enforcement (Berg et al., 2018). Instead of maintaining a culture of detached observation, the historical precedence suggests the need for informed, proactive engagement with the gig economy. Merely because past predictions about technology’s detrimental effects on employment have not fully materialized, it does not guarantee they will continue to be incorrect in the future. By the time the “perfect” evidence is available, the damage may already be done.

### **3. Institutional Framework**

The present research endeavored to examine the lived experiences of gig workers, focusing on the effects of institutional landscapes on their working conditions and platform behaviors. Using the “institutional chameleon” perspective (Vallas & Schor, 2020), after having distilled and critiqued its various limita-

tions, it investigates the impact of platform operations, power structures, and remuneration systems on gig workers in two contrasting contexts. Platform behavior includes user engagement strategies, employment policies, dispute resolution mechanisms, terms of service, and payment structures (Minter, 2017; Rosenblat & Stark, 2015). Influenced by socio-economic settings, regulatory frameworks, and business models (Kenney & Zysman, 2016; Srnicek, 2017), platform behaviors significantly shape gig workers' lived experiences. Delving into these experiences provides vital insights into the dynamics of the gig economy and the future trajectory of digital labor (Prassl, 2018). The research is conducted in two contrasting institutional contexts: the United Kingdom, with a visible and relatively established gig economy, and Saudi Arabia, an emerging non-Western market with a less explored gig work environment. This dichotomy offers a rich ground for probing the adaptability of similar platforms, namely food delivery apps, to different regulations and socio-economic conditions. Moreover, this juxtaposition allows us to delve deeper into the influence of institutional contexts on platform behavior, contrasting what is, with what we thought we knew about gig workers' experiences. Within this framework, it develops and explores open questions related to the "institutional chameleon" metaphor, which portrays platforms' adaptive behavior in different institutional environments. These questions are explored through qualitative research involving gig workers in both the UK and Saudi Arabia.

### 3.1. Varieties of Capitalism Approach

Theories of institutions are varied and multi-faceted, each endeavoring to capture complex industries of reacting factors and evolving phenomena. One notable example of a socio-economic framework is the Varieties of Capitalism (VOC) approach. The approach is a significant socio-economic framework, developed by Hall and Soskice (2001), that offers a unique perspective on institutional landscapes. It broadly classifies national economies into Liberal Market Economies (LMEs) and Coordinated Market Economies (CMEs), each characterized by distinct business coordination and industrial relation practices. The approach underscores "institutional complementarity," illuminating how interconnected institutions within an economy can impact each other. Despite its insightful categorization, the VOC approach isn't flawless. It simplifies diverse employment relations into a binary distinction, often overlooking intra-group differences and the dynamic nature of economies. It also exhibits a Western-centric bias, questioning its applicability in non-Western contexts. Nevertheless, the VOC approach is a valuable analytical tool to examine institutional landscapes and their impact on economic factors like platform behavior and gig worker experiences. While recognizing its limitations, this article employs the VOC approach cautiously, complemented by extensive insights obtained from the literature review, to explore the complex dynamics of the gig economy in two different countries.



### 3.2. UK Context: Liberal Market Economy

The UK is a prime example of a Liberal Market Economy (LME), a flexible labor market that encourages the gig economy to thrive due to deregulation and yet exercises influence over it through its well-established workers' rights and labor institutions (e.g., Trade Union Congress and others). As of 2018, around 2.8 million (or 4%) of the UK's population were participating in the gig economy, a number that had nearly doubled to 4.4 million by 2021, signaling significant growth, arguably influenced by the sweeping changes triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic (Lepanjuuri et al., 2018; TUC, 2021). Lepanjuuri et al. (2018) suggests UK gig workers are mainly young (One would add men) and based in London. Gig work, while flexible, often provides low income. A significant proportion of workers earn less than £7.50 per hour with the majority (65%) indicating gig work represents under 5% of total income. Despite these financial drawbacks, gig work is attractive for its autonomy. Prominent digital platforms like Uber, JustEat, and Deliveroo significantly shape the UK's gig economy landscape. In 2022, the UK and Ireland segments of JustEat demonstrated a prominent profile of nearly 19 million customers and 76,000 riders. Uber operates with around 60,000 drivers across 40 locations and has about 5 million regular users, while Deliveroo utilizes over 50,000 riders nationwide (Heywood, 2020; Mellino et al., 2021; JustEat, 2023). Despite this expansion, Deliveroo drivers often grapple with insecurity and low pay, with nearly half earning less than the National Minimum Wage (TUC, 2021). As Mellino et al. (2021) notes, "Deliveroo riders can earn as little as £2 an hour during shifts". This rapid expansion of the gig economy within the UK's market-oriented LME context presents ongoing challenges regarding job security and wage fairness, pointing to a pressing need for policy interventions. Moreover, according to Broughton et al. (2018)'s study, gig workers' experience in the UK resembled a diverse landscape. Most valued flexibility and control, considering it a fair trade-off for security and employment rights. The UK's gig economy is in a state of flux with limited national statistics or census data (ONS, 2021). Unclear gig worker definitions contribute to inconsistent research methodologies. While platforms like Deliveroo offer some transparency, systemic data is often lacking. Key influences include institutions like TUC, regulations such as the National Minimum Wage, and evolving governmental guidance on worker classification and employment status (BEIS, 2022). In addition, gig platforms operating in the UK may face regulatory pressure or display concern over the legal landscape surrounding their operations. Deliveroo's 2021 independent auditor statement, for example, highlighted the potential for "regulatory scrutiny" and investigations of the company's workforce operations (Deliveroo, 2022: p. 140). Despite the UK's LME status, the country's labor institutions can exert positive pressure, demonstrated by Deliveroo's provision of free accident and third-party insurance and sick pay for its riders, as highlighted in their 2021 annual report.

### 3.3. Saudi Arabia Context: Patrimonial Capitalism

Saudi Arabia presents a compelling challenge to Hall and Soskice (2001)'s VOC framework, as it starkly differs from both LMEs and CMEs. Scholars have grappled with this, given the country's unique history and socio-economic context. An excellent attempt, widely recognized, was that by Hanieh et al. (2011) groundbreaking work, assessing the country's socio-economic landscape and productively linking it to the global political economy. In a review of Hanieh's work, Dahi (2012) provocatively reflected: "What if capitalists in a particular country could draw on a reserve army of semi-skilled labor that includes hundreds of millions of noncitizens whom they could import, hire, fire and expel at will, without worrying about laws, regulations, and collective action?" (p. 147). Saudi Arabia presents a unique context for the gig economy through its model of "patrimonial capitalism," an adaptation of the VOC framework aptly described by Hammer and Adham (2022). In this system, the state plays an instrumental role in managing wealth and resources, thereby shaping labor markets, economic policies, and institutional relationships. A key characteristic of the Saudi labor market is the heavy reliance on expatriate labor (nearly 60% of the labor force), necessitated by demographic factors, job types, and societal norms (SaudiCensus, 2023). "Tasattur"—an unofficial but tolerated practice—allows businesses to use expatriate labor without assuming the full legal responsibilities typically required for formal sponsorship (Adham & Hammer, 2021). According to the latest census data by SaudiCensus (2023), there are 13.4 million foreign nationals in Saudi Arabia (or 42% of the overall population). This context presents distinctive challenges for the gig economy, including a lack of labor institutions protecting workers' rights, an expatriate workforce vulnerable to exploitative practices, and stringent labor policies. Though Adham and Hammer (2021) emphasizes the severity of these conditions, concerns for workers' welfare are acknowledged by the Saudi government, which is proactively seeking to improve conditions and elevate the economy (Rutkowski & Koettl, 2020). Notably, the expatriate workforce in Saudi Arabia operates under restrictive labor policies dictating entry and exit, employment mobility and conditions, and job terms. Despite forming a large portion of the workforce, these workers wield minimal influence over policy-making due to their noncitizen status. With limited access to direct government services and no capacity for collective representation or organization, they often depend on intermediaries, usually their employers or "Tasattur" entrepreneurs, to navigate and manage their expatriate status (Adham & Hammer, 2021). Nationals are often employed by the state and major business corporations with some participation in the gig economy but with limited overall prospects. Consequently, Saudi Arabia's labor landscape starkly contrasts with Western contexts, necessitating a tailored perspective when examining the gig economy in the country. Like most other countries, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for the gig economy in Saudi Arabia,

propelling it from relative anonymity into the spotlight. The gig economy landscape here exhibits fewer dominant players in contrast to the UK, where the ecosystem is more diverse and segmented, featuring a broader spectrum of platforms from small to large. The state actively facilitated the growth of delivery platforms, such as Jahez and HungerStation, among others, providing vital delivery services during the height of the pandemic. Jahez, in particular, emerged as a significant player, transforming into a Saudi joint stock company with an expansive corporate profile today. Government discourse around this period underscored entrepreneurialism and job creation for Saudi nationals, painting an overly optimistic image of the gig economy, contrasting markedly with the narratives of precarity observed in Western contexts. Regulations introduced in May 2020 by the Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC), the official regulatory body for digital platforms, set out operational standards for these services, recognizing three stakeholders: service providers, beneficiaries, and “agents”, those fulfilling orders on platforms (CITC, 2020). However, noticeably, these guidelines made no mention of the obligations of platforms towards their “agents” or primary workforce (i.e., safety, working conditions, grievances, etc.), hinting at an unchallenged acceptance of the “independent contractor” status, a topic widely contested in other regions, including the UK. The rapid growth of the gig economy in Saudi Arabia is further illustrated by a report from Salloum (2021), indicating a monthly average demand of SR1 billion (\$266.6 million) in the delivery segment during Q1 2021, an annual increase of 45%. Jahez’s impressive 2022 performance reflects this trend, with collaborations with around 11,000 merchants, over 2.8 million active users across 90 cities, an average monthly order rate of 4.8 per user, and a network of more than 60,000 delivery “partners.” Similarly, HungerStation, the first application of its kind in Saudi Arabia, reported 35,000 restaurants and partner stores, 800,000 “delivery agents” across the Gulf countries (of which it can be estimated approximately 250,000 - 400,000 agents are in Saudi Arabia), 20 million application downloads, and 300 million gross customers’ orders from 100 cities with an average of 100,000 orders daily (SaudiGazette, 2022). Notwithstanding these impressive figures, the exploration of the Saudi gig economy remains notably limited, with little systemic research attempting to unpack its complex dimensions (i.e., gig workers’ experiences). This mirrors gaps observed in other global contexts where the gig economy has recently surged. The prevailing narrative in Saudi Arabia, championing the unqualified virtues of digital labor platforms, seems to be a hasty acceptance without rigorous examination of potential ramifications, notably labor precarity, and disruption to traditional employment. The optimistic assumption that these platforms will significantly boost national employment contrasts starkly with the pre-existing labor practices. Here, extensive use of expatriate labor, often within a semi-legal context of practices like “Tasatur,” may permeate the gig economy sector and subsequently raise pressing

questions around the compatibility and intersection of these old and new forms of labor opportunities for workers in Saudi Arabia. As the country navigates this terrain, it must grapple with the balancing act of fostering economic innovation and facilitating national employment, a feat that could be challenging, particularly within a system that heavily leans on expatriate labor.

#### 4. Research Methodology

To achieve the research aims and substantiate the research questions, this research took place within the empirical settings of the UK and Saudi Arabia, two contrasting institutional landscapes, enabling a rich comparative exploration of the gig economy and gig workers' experiences. The investigation leaned heavily on qualitative interviews conducted with gig workers in these two distinct contexts. Primarily those work for food delivery platforms. In the UK, it drew on the experiences of gig workers in this landscape, where the labor market is characterized by its flexibility, extensive legal and regulatory frameworks, and established labor institutions. The interviews provided nuanced insight into how the UK gig workers navigated the precarious balance between the flexibility, autonomy, and entrepreneurial opportunities that the gig economy offers and the challenges of insecurity and low pay. In Saudi Arabia, the context differed starkly. Here, the gig economy is an emerging field, shaped significantly by a socio-economic landscape marked by a heavily expatriate workforce and restrictive labor policies. Gig worker interviews in this context allowed for an exploration of the lived experiences of workers operating within this unique socio-economic environment. The experiences of gig workers here revealed how they navigate the opportunities and challenges within a rapidly evolving gig economy, against a backdrop of pervasive labor practices and a lack of labor institutions.

##### 4.1. Methods Applied

The methodology of this research incorporated a triangulated approach to ensure a robust and comprehensive investigation into the gig workers' lived experiences in the UK and Saudi Arabia as proposed by [Bryman \(2006\)](#).

**Qualitative Interviews:** were the cornerstone of the research that provided an in-depth understanding of gig workers' "subjective realities" in both economies ([Seidman, 2019](#)). Semi-structured interviews, guided by themes from the literature, were conducted with 21 gig workers from both contexts (11 from the UK and 10 from Saudi Arabia), enabling nuanced exploration of the research aims and working questions while ensuring adaptability to emergent themes. Interview notes and comments were meticulously collected to generate the bulk of data for analysis and interpretation. Interviews lasted between 20-35 minutes with a few of them lasting a bit shorter than that. The interviews were conducted between June and July 2023 in Riyadh and London. Interview guidelines were integral to the success of the qualitative data collection, underpinning every step of the process from preparation to post-interview analysis. This structured yet

flexible approach enabled the researcher to gather rich, detailed insights into the study's subject matter, contributing valuable perspectives and depth to the research findings.

**Primary Sources Review:** In addition, key primary sources, including gig platforms' published reports and statements and pertinent regulatory documents were assessed and analyzed to gain insight into the platforms' perspectives and the wider industry and regulatory context they face. The assessment and analysis were conducted on the annual statements for the period 2020-2022 for gig platforms like Jahez, Deliveroo, and JustEat (including annual auditors' opinion). In addition, guidance on the gig economy provided by government bodies, including the UK's Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and Saudi Arabia's Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC), was also scrutinized. These publications and statements, numbering more than 10 in total and encompassing hundreds of pages, were made publicly available during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Participant Observation:** Complementing interviews and the primary sources review, the participant observation method was applied to grant the researcher firsthand exposure to the working conditions and daily routines of gig workers. Observations encompassed all stages of a delivery gig task, including idle times around restaurants and fulfillment of delivery to customers, which offered invaluable insights and possibly uncovered subtleties overlooked in interviews or documents. Through this triangulated approach, the distinct methods mutually reinforced each other, mitigating potential individual weaknesses and enhancing the research's richness and reliability.

## 4.2. Sampling

Due to a limited understanding of the full scope of the gig worker population and practical access constraints, this research employed a convenience sampling strategy (Etikan et al., 2016). This approach offered a cost-effective and speedy method for data collection, selecting participants from accessible delivery locations, networks, and local communities in the UK and Saudi Arabia based on their availability and willingness to participate. Despite potential selection bias and limited generalizability, this technique overall still offered valuable insights into the experiences of these workers.

## 4.3. Data Analysis

The collected qualitative data from interviews, primary sources review, and participant observation were subjected to a thematic analysis. The analysis served to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data, thereby uncovering the nuanced realities of gig work in the UK and Saudi Arabia. The thematic analysis commenced with familiarization with the data, which involved detailed notation of interview content and notes. Extensive reading and re-reading of the notes occurred to immerse the researcher in the data, fostering an intimate under-

standing of participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following this, initial codes were generated in an iterative process, guided by the research aims and working questions. These codes, derived from repeated patterns and significant elements in the data, were then sorted into potential themes. Themes were subsequently reviewed, refined, and defined to ensure they represent distinct aspects of the data and adequately relate to the overall research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The results of the thematic analysis were continuously checked back with the raw data to ensure an accurate representation of participants' experiences. This iterative process helped ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis, preserving the integrity of the participants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The final step of the analysis involved the writing of a detailed report in the next section that weaved together the identified themes with existing literature, thereby offering insights into gig workers' experiences in these contrasting contexts and fulfilling the aims of the present article.

#### **4.4. Ethical Considerations**

The research received ethical clearance from the relevant ethics committee of affiliated institution and abided by stringent ethical standards. Prior informed consent (mostly verbal) was secured from all participants, assuring voluntary involvement, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time. Personal identifiers were not collected to uphold confidentiality, with data access restricted to the research team and securely stored per data protection regulations. The research respected participant dignity, rights, and welfare, and accurately and sensitively represented their experiences.

### **5. Results and Discussions**

#### **5.1. Preliminary Findings**

The initial findings of this study highlight the impactful role of institutional landscapes in the UK and Saudi Arabia in shaping gig workers' experiences. Gig work in the UK, bolstered by supportive labor policies, tends to provide a safe and reliable income source, resulting in more relaxed, lengthy worker tenures. Conversely, in Saudi Arabia, the challenging environment, particularly for expatriate workers, forces many to turn to gig work as a survival strategy amidst institutional barriers and scarce job alternatives. The celebrated flexibility and autonomy of gig work manifest differently in these contexts, though their appeal is almost universal. In the UK, workers appreciate control over their schedules, viewing it as genuine autonomy. Meanwhile, in Saudi Arabia, flexibility is seen as a survival mechanism, allowing workers to endure long hours to maximize earnings. Regulatory environments play a significant role in shaping the gig economy platforms, particularly concerning workers' rights and protections. In the UK, a proactive regulatory climate promotes better working conditions and stronger worker protection, while the lack of regulation in Saudi Arabia exacerbates precarious conditions and disparities among gig workers. In the UK, subtle



pressure from vigilant institutions gently guides gig platforms towards fairer treatment and a balanced power dynamic. Conversely, Saudi Arabia's absence of comprehensive labor protection policies and reliance on expatriate labor exposes gig workers to challenges, such as extended work hours, lack of safety equipment, and low wages. The type of workers attracted to the gig economy differs notably between the UK and Saudi Arabia, revealing the influence of socio-economic contexts on gig work experiences. In the UK, gig work attracts those seeking supplementary income, flexible hours, or financial resiliency, such as settling overseas debt or funding education. However, in Saudi Arabia, the gig economy primarily serves as a refuge for expatriate workers with limited job opportunities and limited prospects for the future. These divergent trends underscore the essential role of socio-economic circumstances in shaping the unique experiences within the gig economy. Taken together, these preliminary findings underscore that while the gig economy offers certain opportunities, it also magnifies the challenges faced by gig workers, reflective of their unique socio-economic and institutional landscapes. Hence, the enticing promise of flexibility and autonomy in the gig economy warrants careful critique, considering the starkly different realities experienced by gig workers across divergent contexts. The next section discusses the most significant themes that emerged from the analysis and interpretation, with the aim to ground them in the respective literature and construct and contrast them. For details, [Table 1](#) summarizes the characteristics of participants from both contexts.

## 5.2. Perceptions of Flexibility, Security, and Worker Identity

The interviews challenged prior assumptions about gig work, revealing a divergence between workers' lived experiences and conventional narratives surrounding job insecurity, autonomy, and worker identity. Interviewees generally appreciated the autonomy and flexibility of gig work, negating concerns about precarity. As an example, Gerson, an ex-IT engineer, prized his ability to control his work hours, which diverged from the notion that gig work is a last resort ([Friedman, 2014](#)). He described: "I used to have a traditional IT job but I could not take it anymore and one day I went to my boss and said I quit and started doing deliveries, it just gives me peace of mind and even pays more money. I have been doing it for 5 years." This preference for autonomy was prevalent, especially among UK interviewees. Conversations about job security also contradicted prevailing narratives about lack of stability ([Kalleberg, 2009](#)). Many interviewees exhibited no major concerns about instability, boasting considerable gig work tenures. This suggests that the UK's gig economy landscape might offer more reasonable working conditions and earnings, possibly due to regulatory practices, platform policies, and market factors. The research also found workers' detachment from their gig platform identities. This disassociation, a form of capital accumulation through dispossession for these platforms ([Harvey, 2007](#); [Vallas & Schor, 2020](#)), can undermine collective action efforts ([Rosenblat & Stark, 2015](#)). Many, such as Raul, see gig work merely as an interim stage while

**Table 1.** Participants' characteristics from the UK and Saudi Arabia samples.

Research Participants (N = 21)		
Demographic/Category	UK (N = 11)	Saudi Arabia (N = 10)
<b>Type of gig work</b>		
Food delivery apps	11	10
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	11	10
Female		
<b>Education</b>		
No education		2
Secondary and below	6	7
Diploma		1
Bachelor	4	
Master	1	
<b>Age group</b>		
18 - 24	1	
25 - 29	2	3
30 and older	8	7
<b>Legal status</b>		
Resident	6	10
Immigrant	4	
Temporary	1	
<b>Tenure in gig work</b>		
1 year or less	3	3
1 - 3 years	4	3
3 - 5 years	2	3
5 years and above	2	1
<b>Working hours per week</b>		
1 - 20 hours	1	
21 - 40 hours	2	1
41 - 60 hours	5	3
61 - 80 hours	4	6
<b>Dependence on gig income</b>		
Main source of income	10	8
Supplemental income	1	2
<b>Income range per week in British Pounds</b>		
100 - 250 pounds	1	6
250 - 500 pounds	3	4
500+ pounds	7	

they scout for improved opportunities, he stated: “I see gig work as just a steppingstone, not my final destination. The flexibility and independence it offers is okay. I don’t identify myself as a ‘gig worker’ but more like someone in transition, trying to find a better opportunity. It’s just a matter of time before I move on.” This identity detachment is deeply embedded within the workforce psyche and is little challenged if at all, necessitating further exploration of its implications for workers’ identity, agency, and capacity for collective action. These insights, however, are not universal. Factors like cultural differences, personal objectives, resilience, and external circumstances can significantly shape individual experiences.

### 5.3. Navigating Platform Policies and the Power Imbalance

The strategies employed by gig platforms in the UK and Saudi Arabia offer a unique comparative insight. In the UK, platforms like Deliveroo, JustEat, and UberEats have adopted a calculated approach towards balancing supply and demand, controlling the issuance of work IDs to limit the number of active gig workers. This proactive measure safeguards worker earnings by avoiding oversupply, thereby preserving the job’s appeal and maintaining an interested, yet not fully engaged, workforce that can be readily utilized when needed. Contrarily, Saudi Arabian gig platforms lack such control measures, leading to an oversaturated market flooded with delivery riders. During fieldwork in Saudi Arabia, a common sight was of idle delivery riders awaiting orders in the intense Saudi summer heat, often exceeding 43°C (110°F). Workers frequently lamented this issue. One worker, Ali, lamented: “It used to be much better now it is really horrible. Look at me for example, I swear I have been working from 8 am and it has been 12 hours now, do you know how many orders I managed to deliver? Only 3 making 37 riyals...” His comments reflect the widespread discontent due to the unlimited supply of workers, which erodes the attractiveness of these jobs and disregards worker welfare. Moreover, this corrosive policy parallels how safety equipment or platform uniforms are distributed sparingly. Another striking distinction lies in Saudi platforms’ policy of discriminating between workers based on their citizenship. Gig workers reported that being identified as a Saudi national provided access to better-paid tasks. Consequently, non-Saudi gig workers resorted to using Saudi IDs to reap these benefits, echoing resistance tactics variously described by many scholars (Shapiro, 2017; Anwar & Graham, 2020; Rahman, 2021). For instance, Salman, a Yemeni national, recounted: “I use the rider ID of my Saudi sponsor because it is much better. You should do the same, look for a Saudi ID to avoid bad delivery tasks and poor level of pay and you will do just fine. Of course, I am lucky to have such a sponsor. I have been working with him for 10 years.” This discrimination practice may have given rise to a minor black market for Saudi IDs, as outlined by Ram, another gig worker who described: “You can obtain a Saudi-based ID from an office nearby for 150 riyals a month. They can track your activity and completed tasks because they can

control the ID and know how much to charge. Some say they charge 5 riyals per order. You have to show them your resident ID and license before they accept you.” While there have been similar reports from UK workers regarding international students who have no permission to work as delivery riders but who nonetheless illegally obtain delivery IDs, there is no evidence of a fully visible ID market or institutionalized discrimination, likely due to less restrictive labor policies. The existence of a market for Saudi-based rider IDs may be unique to Saudi Arabia due to its highly restrictive labor policies and challenging work conditions that force expatriate workers to find workarounds. This phenomenon surprisingly mirrors a gig economy version of the “Tasattur” entrepreneurial activities, alluded to and vividly described by [Adham and Hammer \(2021\)](#). Therefore, these distinct platform policies, absent any clear benefits to the business model, point to a strong institutional influence and necessitate further scrutiny. In a surprising deviation from the common practices of gig platforms, one Saudi Arabian platform has chosen to directly employ a significant portion of its workforce, capitalizing on the readily available, low-cost expatriate labor. These directly employed riders perform traditional delivery jobs, with the added protection of work contracts and a company’s obligation towards their welfare. While this strategy contradicts a fundamental principle of the gig economy, namely, to avoid direct employment, it exemplifies how these platforms can adapt their models to benefit from unique circumstances. Even though this approach is relatively uncharted and diverges from gig economy norms in other contexts, it isn’t necessarily detrimental to the workers. However, these directly employed individuals, despite working within the gig framework, cannot be classified as independent gig workers. Yet, a potentially negative consequence of this practice arises when the platform starts favoring its directly hired workers over independent gig workers, prioritizing them for task allocation. This active discrimination has been noted by many workers, causing them to opt for rival platforms that do not differentiate between directly hired and independent workers. This fascinating situation underscores how gig economy rules aren’t as rigid as we may think. They can flex, adapt, and even break, based on the specific context and time, challenging our understanding of the gig economy and signaling the need for a more nuanced view of its operation. These findings present an intriguing deviation from the mainstream discourse in gig economy literature, which often paints a picture of gig workers as generic victims of precarious employment and exploitation. The reality, as highlighted in these interviews, is a complex interplay of factors, such as job flexibility, autonomy, worker profile (education level, immigration status), and platform policies, all of which contribute to shaping the experiences of gig workers in different ways across different geographical contexts.

#### **5.4. Long-Term Implications of Gig Work: We Want out**

Despite the general satisfaction and long tenures in gig work, most gig workers

expressed an intention to leave the gig economy within the next year but many will likely not. It is telling that very few envisaged a future within this sector, indirectly hinting at their possible feelings of precariousness and instability, which they still did not voice directly. Even those who have been part of the gig economy for as long as five years expressed feelings of guilt, shame, and even laziness, perceiving their involvement in the gig economy as a hindrance to their career progression and future planning. One gig worker Louai complained: “This job makes you lazy you know; makes you aim down. Some days I don’t work at all because I don’t feel like it. I am lazy I feel I should push myself and work a real job and not live like this.” Strikingly, some even voiced feelings of boredom, an emotion typically associated with the familiar and taken-for-granted aspects of life. These responses could suggest an impending “retirement” from the gig economy, reinforcing the perspective [Lehdonvirta \(2018\)](#) offered that views the gig economy as a launchpad for other career paths and life trajectories. The literature often places a heavy emphasis on the unstable nature of gig work, at times overshadowing the possibility that these jobs could still offer relative stability and security when compared to traditional employment. However, caution must be exercised in generalizing these observations, considering that we are merely three years removed from the major event that is the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly propelled gig economy activities. The persistence of these patterns in the future remains an open question. This research strongly suggests platforms act as “institutional chameleons” ([Vallas & Schor, 2020](#)), adapting to and exploiting diverse institutional contexts, with behaviours ranging from benevolence to predatory. Both bear significant implications for the future of work. Benevolent platforms leverage their power imbalance to provide fair opportunities and decent working conditions. Yet, as [Harvey \(2007\)](#) and [Vallas and Schor \(2020\)](#) imply, the lure of capital accumulation could cause these platforms to abandon benevolence, undermining worker protections and economic fairness. Predatory platforms exploit specific institutional aspects to create seemingly attractive work opportunities that mask exploitative cycles of low pay and high workload. UK platforms like Deliveroo and JustEat control worker supply to protect earnings, yet a power imbalance risk shifting towards worker exploitation. In contrast, Saudi Arabia’s institutional context allows platforms to exploit the unrestricted workers supply, reducing earnings and increasing idle time, leading to cycles of exploitation and irrelevance. Regardless of whether benevolent or predatory, platforms’ chameleon-like adaptability and inherent power imbalances continually threaten gig economy work’s sustainability and fairness.

### **5.5. Labor Protections and Its Absence**

Labor protection is critical in every work context, however, the way it is enforced and practiced varies widely across different economies. This is particularly evident in a comparative analysis of the gig economies in the United Kingdom and

Saudi Arabia. In the UK, labor protection manifests in numerous ways within the gig economy. Though most gig workers were not part of unions or aware of their activities, the existence of these organizations still serves as a robust pillar of labor protection. These unions persistently challenge gig platforms, advocating for worker rights and inciting legal battles when necessary. Consequently, an atmosphere of accountability pervades, fostering a sense of “doing good”. It culminated in some of these platforms offering third-party liability insurance coverage for their riders. Moreover, the UK gig economy prioritizes worker safety with an emphasis on vital safety gear such as helmets and jackets for riders, who all wear them almost with no exception. This practice, even in the absence of legal obligation, demonstrates a tacit commitment to workers’ well-being. Additionally, the UK ensures a level of financial security for its gig workers through carefully structured pay rates and the voluntary nature of tasks. In stark contrast to the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia’s gig economy illustrates the implications of absent labor protection. Safety gear provision is inconsistent, leaving workers exposed to considerable risks. This becomes glaringly problematic with the recent allowance of bike deliveries, which were previously prohibited (CITC, 2020). Now, many delivery riders navigate traffic without necessary safety equipment, courting potential hazards. Financial insecurity is another pressing issue, as Saudi Arabia’s gig economy lacks the minimum wage pressures found in the UK. Furthermore, gig tasks, while seemingly optional, carry a subtle element of coercion. Workers who reject assigned tasks face lengthy queues as a penalty, while mistakenly accepting and subsequently rejecting a task incurs a fine—double the order’s value. Compounding this, the labor supply and customer orders remain unregulated, and no assessments are made to determine the reasonableness of the tasks. For instance, riders often bear the risk of orders that send them beyond city borders, at no additional compensation. These practices amplify the precariousness of gig work, stressing the need for labor protection. Deepening these labor inequities is the policy favoring Saudi-national-based IDs, which further marginalizes non-Saudi workers. Meanwhile, unlike the UK, Saudi Arabia’s gig economy lacks the power of union advocacy. Without these groups and in the absence of critical public discourse, there’s no impetus to maintain an atmosphere of “doing good” that’s evident in the UK. In essence, the disparities between the Saudi Arabian and UK gig economies underscore the critical role of labor protection. These two contrasting narratives highlight the importance of ensuring safety, financial security, and equity for gig workers, reinforcing the need for international standards that cater to the unique challenges of the global gig economy.

### **5.6. Rhetoric vs. Reality: The Saudi Gig Economy**

The scaling up of digital labor platforms in Saudi Arabia in early 2020 was initially lauded as a vehicle for national employment and economic growth. However, three years on, several trends raise serious concerns. Firstly, the gig econ-



omy in Saudi Arabia has proven to be unattractive for nationals, falling short of providing the quality jobs and incomes they expect. Secondly, as expected, expatriate labor has dominated the gig economy, using these platforms to circumnavigate restrictive labor policies. Thirdly, the way gig platforms operate has led to a decline in job quality and earning potential. Lastly, the gig economy has, regrettably, become a gateway for illicit activities, posing substantial risks for participants. For example, expatriate workers with expired residency permits may resort to engaging “Tasattur” entrepreneurs to participate illegally in the gig economy. Despite measures to prevent such exploitation, some platforms enable workarounds. Gig worker Othman noted: “You don’t need a banking account; you can still be paid...or buy special credit cards from supermarkets and charge your balance in the app. So, you can survive even if they block your bank account.” His quote illustrates the concerning trajectory of the Saudi Arabian gig economy. If unregulated, the gig economy risks becoming an exploitative structure for importing and trapping expatriate labor in precarious, dangerous, and low-quality jobs. This potential outcome emphasizes the urgent need for robust governmental intervention and regulation, to prevent the gig economy from deviating further from its original promise of providing decent employment opportunities and economic prosperity for all.

### **5.7. Implications and Limitations**

The comparison of the gig economy in the UK and Saudi Arabia reveals several implications. It underscores the urgent need for modernized labor protections reflecting digital age challenges and the diverse models digital labor platforms may adopt in different socio-economic contexts, necessitating region-specific regulations. The study also highlights the crucial role of worker organizations in managing gig economy power dynamics and the necessity of government oversight to prevent worker exploitation and illegal activities on these platforms. Lastly, it stresses the need for future-proof labor laws to address the evolving nature of work. Therefore, managing the complexities of the gig economy requires adaptable, robust, and context-specific labor protections to ensure decent work opportunities. Moreover, there are some limitations of note regarding the present research. It focuses on delivery platforms, a segment of the gig economy, which might restrict the generalizability of its findings. The results are also time-sensitive due to the rapid evolution of this sector. Additionally, direct comparisons between the two countries’ gig economies are complex due to their distinct cultural, legal, and socio-economic contexts. Identifying these specific influences is a complex research endeavor. Finally, potential biases may arise from self-selection and convenience sampling, as the experiences of the interviewed workers may not wholly represent the broader gig workforce in these countries.

## **6. Conclusion**

Notwithstanding the various limitations and shortcomings, this paper endea-

voured to shed light on the complex interplay between the socioeconomic and regulatory contexts and the lived experiences of gig workers within the UK and Saudi Arabia. The study has spotlighted the adaptive “institutional chameleon” behaviours of gig platforms, evidencing their potential to adapt to diverse environments, though not always favoring the welfare of the workers. While the future trajectories of the gig economy and its digital labor platforms remain an intriguing open question, one can’t help but note that the current platforms may not be destined for longevity, due to various inherent contradictions. However, their experimental models and remarkable, albeit transient, successes are priming capitalism’s engine with fresh accumulation pathways. In the foreseeable future, these platforms may morph into new forms of gig economy entities, armed with insights on what and how to dispossess and disembody for capital accumulation. History reminds us, these entities are not immune to Smith’s “vile maxim<sup>1</sup>,” and expecting consistent benevolence would be naive. The future of work for gig economy workers is contingent upon the evolving pathways these platforms will adopt as they mature. Given this evolving landscape, it is paramount to update labor protection frameworks and develop future-proof legislation to address the unique challenges of digital labor, ensuring a fair and equitable gig economy for all.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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<sup>1</sup>“All for ourselves, and nothing for other people, seems, in every age of the world, to have been the vile maxim of the masters of mankind.” (Smith, 1776: p. 334). By “masters of mankind” he referred to the “owner” class of early capitalists and manufacturers of 18<sup>th</sup> century England.

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