

# Making the Gig Economy Work for Workers: An Exploration of Freelancing Platforms

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**Freelancing platforms, such as Upwork and Fiverr, have enabled virtual spaces for freelancers to advertise, deliver, and charge for their services worldwide with reduced uncertainty. However, freelancing platforms, like other types of gig work, present challenges for workers such as opaque regulations, ranking systems, and power imbalances that can negatively impact workers' experiences. While research in the gig economy has gained more attention recently, most studies have looked at mainstream platforms, such as Uber, leaving other types of gig work underexplored. Therefore, my PhD will use qualitative and co-design methods to expand the understanding of freelancing platforms' issues and provide design recommendations for improving freelancers' working experiences.**

*Gig Economy. Freelancing Platforms. Work Autonomy. Flexible Work. Design Recommendations.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND RELATED WORK

The nature of work is rapidly changing due to the growth of platform-mediated work, often referred to as the 'gig economy'. While there is no agreed definition, the gig economy has been broadly described as those markets that use digital platforms for matching customers with service providers on a project or service basis (Donovan, Bradley and Shimabukuro, 2016). Arguably, there are two types of gig economy platforms: location-dependent and online gig work (Woodcock and Graham, 2020). The former refers to platforms that mediate work that is contingent on service providers and clients sharing the same location – for example, an Uber driver providing ride-hailing services in a particular city. The latter refers to platforms that mediate work occurring entirely online regardless of workers and clients' location – for example, a designer in Kenya editing photos for a client in Canada through a freelancing platform like Upwork. Research in HCI, and other disciplines such as economics, has primarily focused on location-dependent platforms, e.g. (Lee *et al.*, 2015; Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2018; Berger *et al.*, 2019), to the point that different media outlets even refer to the gig economy as the 'ubersiation of work', e.g. (Towers-Clark, 2019). On the other hand, most studies of online gig work have focused on crowdwork platforms, such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, e.g. (Martin *et al.*, 2014; Lascau *et al.*, 2019; Williams, Milland and Law, 2019). Yet, freelancing platforms remain seldom studied (Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2018).

Two primary factors shape working conditions in the gig economy. Firstly, companies' guidelines and regulations classify workers as 'independent contractors' who are not employed by platforms but instead use the technology to match with clients (Stefano, 2016). As a result, these independent workers lack crucial benefits usually available in traditional employment, such as paid leave, collective bargaining, anti-discrimination and safety rights (Bajwa *et al.*, 2018). Secondly, gig platforms shape and structure work through technological mechanisms that, in turn, raise unique issues (Sutherland *et al.*, 2019). Examples of these technological mechanisms include customer-sourced rankings, public profiles, and intrusive surveillance technologies. Studies on the implications of these technologies have revealed negative consequences for workers, such as anxiety, racial and gender biases, and power imbalances (Hannák *et al.*, 2017; Sannon and Cosley, 2019; Shevchuk, Strebkov and Davis, 2019). As the gig economy continues to grow, more research is required to understand its implications.

Freelancing platforms differ from other types of gig work in several respects, surfacing various underexplored issues. Typically, workers in the gig economy have control over their working schedule deciding when to log onto the platforms and carry out work 'on the spot' (Ticona, Mateescu and Rosenblat, 2018). By contrast, freelancing platforms require freelancers to remain available for their

clients at multiple times of the day, thereby blurring their personal boundaries (Umair, Conboy and Whelan, 2019). Another noticeable difference between freelancing platforms and other types of gig work relates to the control over their clients and wages. Gig economy companies typically use complex algorithms to adjust prices based on the supply of workers and demand for work (Lee *et al.*, 2015). On the other hand, freelancing platforms enable greater autonomy for freelancers to set their pay rates and bid for projects as well as being approached by clients privately. Recent examinations have compared this autonomy to entrepreneurial business ownership, benefitting those freelancers who are highly independent and proactive, while affecting those with lesser sense of entrepreneurship (Nemkova, Demirel and Baines, 2019). Also, studies have highlighted management features freelancing platforms use to manage workers, such as time trackers and work diaries that require further exploration to identify their benefits and consequences (Jarrahi *et al.*, 2020).

My PhD will focus on the following question:

**How should freelancing platforms be enhanced/re-designed to better support working experiences?**

Objectives:

- Investigate freelancing platforms' benefits and challenges for freelancers.
- Explore freelancers' experiences with freelancing platforms.
- Identify design recommendations that would enhance freelancers' experiences on freelancing platforms.

## 2. RESEARCH PLAN AND METHODS

My PhD will comprise of three studies. The first exploratory study is underway and aims to investigate freelancing platforms' benefits and challenges through a qualitative analysis of four freelancing communities on the website Reddit (Reddit, no date). The research question for this study is: How do freelancers discuss freelancing platforms on four Reddit communities? Three initial themes have been constructed from this data, which contrast traditional freelance work with platform-specific freelancing experiences. This study starts to unravel freelancing platform issues around work autonomy, transparency, and client relationships. Finding from this study will frame the design of the following two studies.

Work autonomy has been a prominent issue identified in study one. Therefore, study two will aim to explore freelancing platforms mechanisms that structure work autonomy through a researcher-

directed diary. This study will examine the research question: How do freelancing platform features that support work autonomy affect working experiences? This study will collect participant-generated data to explore their interactions and experiences with platform features that structure work autonomy, such as work scheduling, time tracking, and work diaries.

The third study will engage a multidisciplinary group in design workshops to explore the re-design of freelancing platform features for improving working experiences. This study will examine the research question: What design recommendations would enhance the working experience on freelancing platforms? Building on previous findings, participants will be asked to reflect on freelancing platform features and give their views on how re-designing these features can provide an enhanced working experience. The exploration of complex issues, such as client relationships and improved transparency, requires the engagement of a diverse group of freelancers, clients, and freelancing platform stakeholders.

## 3. CURRENT AND EXPECTED CONTRIBUTIONS

The first study of my PhD focuses on freelancers' experiences on freelancing platforms and how they compare with traditional forms of freelancing. I have identified that freelancers appreciate the space to connect with new clients and gain experience. However, the central tensions are associated with how platforms' regulations and technological features constrain their autonomy and client relationships. Another important finding of this study highlights the lack of transparency that, in turn, creates power imbalances between clients and freelancers. As a result, freelancers call for more transparent systems and opportunities to reject work without hurting their reputation. More broadly, this study engages the wider freelance community outside of freelancing platforms and includes their views, an approach that is seldomly taken when studying the gig economy (Dillahunt *et al.*, 2017).

Much of the current work on the gig economy has taken an approach to understand its problems. Yet, less work has attempted to re-imagine gig economy platform features that could improve working experiences. Therefore, engaging a diverse group in design workshops will aid in unpacking thought-provoking issues from freelancing platforms, while providing practical solutions to create better experiences for freelancers. Lastly, this PhD seeks to expand the knowledge of freelancing platforms as an understudied type of gig economy work.

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