From a “job for life” to a gig economy: An exploration of food delivery couriers in the UK

Jack Warner

University of Kent

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Abstract

This thesis examines the construction of gig couriership in the UK and the implications it has for the future of work. Embedded in the sociology of work, the research challenges the novelty of the gig economy by examining familiar features such as the (mis)classification of employment status or the desire for 'flexible' work. However, the thesis also posits that the disruption caused by the gig economy is indicative of paradigmatic shift in the organisation of work and society. At the beginning of this project, the gig economy was fringe and still emerging, yet today, the gig economy is the symbol of an on-demand world and it is anticipated that the majority of people will be involved in the gig economy by the end of the 2020's. We are living in a transformative time in the world of work, and even though the consequences of the gig economy are yet to be fully realised, it is difficult to overstate how important the gig economy is for work and economic life. Conducted during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, the study uses semi-structured interviews with gig couriers in the food delivery sector from across England. Contributions of this thesis include a discussion on the methodological obstacles to studying 21st century work, a novel typology that characterises gig courier work, a discussion on new ways to conceptualise organisational socialisation, waiting and the impact of new capitalism on social and economic life.

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Introduction

Jack: Did you think I was trying to troll you or something?

Maverick: *Yeah, like an elaborate troll. I've never had it, but I thought who is gonna wanna talk to a Deliveroo rider?*
Considering most people just wanna push me off my bike!

Jack: He sees me.

Maverick: *[Laughing] Yeah! He wants to!*

(Interview with Maverick, Side-Hustler, E-Bike)

Introduction

Why would anyone want to talk to a Deliveroo rider? This short interaction reflects the scepticism gig couriers often had about a stranger wanting to know all about their world. Indeed, it is common during the PhD journey to be asked *why* you would elect to study a single topic for years. An academic answer to this question is that I wanted to learn more about the gig economy because it has the potential to challenge and rewrite the norms and values of traditional work and employment. From algorithmic management and the unprecedented scalability and flexibility of digital platforms to the dissolution of worker identity and the individualisation of risk; the gig economy is a dynamic field of study that can be studied from many different angles. On the other hand, the personal and simple answer is that I like solving puzzles; and sociologists explore complex puzzles.

I chose to become a sociologist because the idea of being able to understand the logic of human experience and social systems felt empowering to me. However, the reason for this feeling only became clear during my Masters degree when I was introduced to sociology's relationship with the 'problem of order' (Shilling and Mellor, 2017:9). Shilling and Mellor (2017:9) describe the problem of order as being concerned with 'how individuals can live together without social life degenerating into destructive conflict' and 'how society is possible'. The problem of order is one of the greatest puzzles to 'solve' because there is no definite solution; and this means proposed solutions have extraordinary consequences. Therefore, I am a sociologist because it is a way to make human experience and social systems intelligible, but more importantly, it is a way to be a bulwark against social disruption and its consequences.

The problem of order is key to this PhD project because one of the most important structures in human society is the role, purpose and meaning of work. Work is a difficult idea to articulate because simple definitions are often too reductive and exclusionary to fully grasp what work is, especially when unpaid labour outside of a formal workplace is included in the conversation. Strangleman and Warren (2008:1) explain that if we limit the definition of work to 'effort which is rewarded by the payment of money… [this] excludes all sorts of work that is not formally recognised by payment of cash'. Further, focusing on the practical features of employment neglects the social significance of work, and this is important because work is often a source of individual and collective identity. Collective and individual identity is key to the problem of order because work is a form of social organisation, and this can be seen through the division of labour. Bakker (2007:541) discusses how feminist scholarship on social reproduction has developed since the 1970's and 1980's and explores how the unpaid and paid labour of women has shifted from subsiding capitalist production under Fordism to a privatisation of social provisioning under neoliberalism. Therefore, the relationship between women and the biological reproduction of the species, the reproduction of the labour force, and the reproduction of (privatised) social care continues to be an integral part of understanding work and employment.

The division of labour is also a pillar of social stability because 'work can divide people and it can unite them' (Strangleman and Warren, 2008:1), and it is for this reason that work is central to social stratification. Ultimately, work is one of the most significant parts of human experience in advanced capitalist economies because the nature and meaning of work affects us all; and when work changes the effects reverberate across society. For this reason, in the same way that classical sociologists studied what urbanisation meant for individuals and wider society (Weber and Kalberg, 2013; Weber, 2016; Marx, 2016; Durkheim, 2023), I

am interested in the digitalisation of work and the role of the gig economy as what could be considered as one of the greatest disruptions of our time.

The digitalisation of work and the gig economy in particular is a troublesome puzzle because it is a social phenomenon that has been difficult to make sense of, let alone solve. However, , the key features of the gig economy to explain are independent contractor status, digital platforms and the relationship between them, and for this reason, I adopt Woodcock and Graham's (2019:3) definition of the gig economy as 'labour markets that are characterised by independent contracting that happens through, via and on digital platforms'. As such, companion terms such as "gig work" can be understood to be the descriptor for the work undertaken by independent contractors that takes place through, via and on those digital platforms. Nevertheless, both 'gig economy' and 'gig work' are contested terms that I explore in depth later on in the thesis (*Chapter One* and *Chapter Three)*.

Clarity of definitions are important to understand a new form of work, and this is why Chapter Three: Navigating Nomenclature and the Challenge of Characterising Couriers compares the question of 'who does gig work?' to a Millenium Prize Problem (Carlson, Jaffe and Wiles, 2006). I make this comparion because answering the question 'who does gig work?' would be a significant contribution and would progress the field, yet, researchers continuously struggle to address this question because there is a lack of consensus on what a 'gig' or a 'worker' is.

The gig economy is an exciting area to research because both the subject matter and our understanding of it are constantly evolving. Therefore, this thesis is a sociological contribution to our understanding of the gig economy as it explores the world of gig couriership, the relationship it has with work and economic life, and the implications it has for the future of work and society.

Social Significance of the Project

This research took place during the transformative time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic is a key part of 21st century history that will be a milestone for all that lived through it; however, it was particularly important for my PhD because it confirmed that the gig economy was something we needed to take seriously (Healy, Nicholson and Pekarek, 2017). In the beginning, I too was a sceptic of whether or not the gig economy would be resilient enough to survive insolvency and the barrage of global legal challenges (let alone a pandemic). In spite of these challenges, it has been reported that global gig economy revenue is approximately $5.4 trillion (Staffing Industry Analysts 2022), and to put this value into context, research by industry analysts IBISWorld reported that global oil and gas industry revenue is reported to be $4.3 trillion (2023). Whilst a formidable size, the gig economy is far broader and includes more types of work than the most famous examples such as Deliveroo or Uber (I explain this further in *Chapter One*). Nevertheless, substantial changes are happening to the famous gig companies in that they could finally be set to become *profitable*, which would be a major development that could settle the debate on the efficacy of the gig economy as an economic model (Maier, 2021; Alvarez-Palau *et al.*, 2022). Together, the growth of the gig economy and its gradual settling into everyday life demonstrates that the gig economy is consolidating its position as a key feature of the global economy and the world of work.

Overview of the Project

COVID-19 was disruptive to the design of this project. The project originally intended to include an ethnography; however, in response to COVID-19 I adapted the methods of the project to focus on semi-structured interviews with gig couriers which was then supplemented with focus groups with consumers in the gig economy. The semi-structured interviews and focus groups took place in the Summer and Winter of 2020, which I discuss in detail in *Chapter Two: Studying Gig Courier Work.*

This thesis has been designed to clarify key work within the gig economy. For this reason, I have been careful in my choice of language and usage of concepts. Nevertheless, the practice of work in the gig economy is ever-shifting and the accuracy of descriptions inevitably shift over time. For example, in the current version of gig couriership, gig couriers are no longer limited to delivering food and are now able to collect other packages for customers, such as folders from a stationery shop for a teacher who is doing their 'Back to School' shop. What this means for this thesis is that the 'food delivery sector' is technically a non-exhaustive descriptor, however, the vast majority of gig courier work is focussed on the delivery of food and in the pursuit of creating useful distinctions in this thesis (and avoiding conflation with the *delivery* sector which includes work such as Amazon Flex). In this thesis, I often refer to the *food delivery sector* as a proxy to describe the particular kind of 'gig work' I am interested in. For this reason, the aforementioned gig company Deliveroo and the service provided by Deliveroo Riders is an excellent and well-known example of the kind of 'gig work' this thesis focusses on.

Research Aims and Objectives

The aims and objectives of this thesis are outlined below and they are discussed in depth in *Chapter Two: Studying Gig Courier Work*.

These aims and objectives are useful because they focus on key challenges presented by the gig economy. The first objective and set of questions relates to the novelty of the gig economy. The second objective and set of questions evaluates the usefulness of existing concepts. The final objective and set of questions consider the gig economy as the basis for the future of work.

The contribution that this project seeks to make is three-fold:

1) Develop understanding of the nature and construction of the gig economy through an empirical study of gig courier work.
2) Critically examine the lens of existing sociological literature and themes on flexible capitalism, and their usefulness for engagement with the gig economy.
3) Explore the gig economy as a foundation for the future of work

Research Questions:

1) What is the nature and construction of gig courier work in the UK gig economy?

    i) How flexible is gig courier work?

    ii) How does time and space promote a nomadic dynamic in gig work?

    iii) How does the digital platform influence gig courier work?

2) To what extent are existing sociological literature and themes on flexible capitalism useful in studying the gig economy?

   i) How can these theories and themes be refined?

3) What can the gig economy suggest about the future of work?

   i) What is the quality and meaning of gig courier work?

   ii) How sustainable is gig courier work?

   iii) What is the role of gig courier work in workers' lives?

Outline of the thesis chapters

This thesis is divided into six substantial chapters and has been designed to be read in sequence because the opening chapters provide the necessary conceptual foundation to contextualise and make sense of each empirical chapter in this thesis. In this way, each chapter is a building block for the thesis, and this means that when read together, it becomes something greater than the sum of its parts.

Chapter One: Digital Platforms and a New Economy is the primary literature review for this thesis. The main purpose of the chapter is to introduce the reader to the interdisciplinary nature of the field and show how inconsistent conceptualisation and operationalisation makes the gig economy a tricky phenomenon to research. However, in addition to a substantive discussion of the literature, the chapter also includes a meta-discussion on the relationship between the sociology of work and the gig economy which is important for the thesis because it explains what a sociological understanding of the gig economy provides.

The literature review charts the emergence, development and potential future(s) of the gig economy, and this is necessary for contextualising the gig economy historically, but more importantly, this demonstrates why the gig economy is worthy of being treated as an economic form with distinctive features and characteristics. The final aim of the chapter is to explain the relationship between the gig economy and the other sections of the platform economy. To address this, the chapter presents existing models that have been created by other researchers to categorise different forms of work in the platform economy, which is then followed by a model I have created which shows the relationship between the different layers of the platform economy. This is a contribution of the thesis as it visually draws distinctions and I revisit it in the conclusion. Through discussing existing literature and the models and diagrams that have attempted to conceptualise and make sense of the structure of the platform and gig economy; it is hoped that the scope of this research will become clear.

Chapter Two: Studying Gig Courier Work is the chapter which explores the research design of the thesis. In this chapter, the aforementioned aims and objectives of the research are explained in detail and it is here that the theoretical and methodological foundations of the thesis are presented before a discussion of the methods themselves. This chapter is useful because it highlights the obstacles to researching gig courier work. This is an important chapter for evaluating the thesis as it explains the influence of COVID-19, the rationale of the design and the limitations of the research.

Chapter Three: Navigating Nomenclature and the Challenge of Characterising Couriers is a companion to the previous chapter in that it explores the theoretical and methodological challenges associated with researching the gig economy, and in particular, gig couriers in practice. As I explain in the literature review, the interdisciplinary nature of the field means that the gig economy is challenging to research because of inconsistent conceptualisations

and operationalisation. In response, the chapter has three aims. The first aim of this chapter is to address the elusive question of 'who does gig work?'. This chapter is useful for understanding the other empirical chapters because it details how choice of language impacts the ease of navigating scholarship on the gig economy. Therefore, this chapter defends why 'gig courier work' is used instead of 'gig work' as a concept in this thesis. The second aim of this chapter is to explore the existing ways gig couriers have been understood. To achieve this, the chapter critically examines conceptualisations of gig couriers produced by other researchers and uses these as support for the presentation of my own typology of gig couriers: The Survivor, The Side Hustler and The Free Agent. The third aim of the chapter is to explain the typology of gig couriers and its usefulness for understanding gig couriers and their relationship with gig courier work.

Chapter Four: Getting into Gig Courier Work is the first empirical chapter and explores the beginning of the journey into gig couriership. The purpose of this chapter is to explain the way recruitment and 'learning the ropes' of gig couriership works using a concept I have created called "gig organisational socialisation". The chapter explores the differences between traditional organisational socialisation and gig organisational socialisation, which is followed by the 'First Shift' of gig couriers. The chapter also includes a discussion on work identity and its role is impacted by gig organisational socialisation. This is a useful chapter because it explores the idea of 'independent contractor status', and importantly, how the organisational structure of the gig economy is conducive to generating an environment that gig companies are able to thrive in. The overarching argument of this chapter is that the gig economy operates a model of 'resupply and replace' over 'investment for the future', and this is significant because it challenges the dynamics of organisational reproduction across

time which has consequences for the development of worker identity and the structure of organisations.

Chapter Five: Service on Standby: The Practice and Lived Experience of Gig Courier Work is the second empirical chapter and is concerned with the relationship between gig couriers and gig courier work. At the same time, the chapter is also interested in highlighting the processes and unique features of gig courier work that make the food-delivery sector feasible. This chapter focusses on the centrality of waiting to gig courier work, and it explores the tactics and techniques that gig couriers use to overcome waiting. The chapter is useful because it offers a conceptualisation of waiting that explains how different kinds of wait lead to different affectual responses. This is important because not all waiting is experienced in the same way, and it is the difference between the types of waits gig couriers participate in that enable the food-delivery sector of the gig economy to function. Moreover, this chapter is important for demonstrating differences in practice between the different types of gig courier, and in particular, how gig courier work is stratified by the capacity to mitigate against the negative impacts of waiting.

Chapter Six: At the Crossroads: Risk and Precarious Futures in a Gig Economy is the final empirical chapter. This chapter is special as it ties together the preceding chapters to discuss gig couriership in relation to wider social, economic and political trends. In this chapter, the theoretical frameworks of Beck's 'risk society' (1992) and Bauman's (2013) idea of liquid modernity and the 'unholy trinity' of unsafety, insecurity and uncertainty are used to explore the conditions of the gig economy and the implications this could have for wider work. I also explore gig courier work itself as a reflection of 21st century work and how it reflects a shift in the world of work. In this way, this chapter is a bridge between the micro-layer of gig courier experience, the meso-layer of the gig economy and the macro-layer of paradigms

and social consciousness. This is an ambitious chapter as it hinges on a created concept to explain why a paradigm shift in the world of work *feels* as disruptive as it does. The concept is called 'social obsolescence' and its purpose is to describe how rapid technological change has consequences for the social fabric and it is through these consequences that the nature and conditions of contemporary capitalism can be understood.

The conclusion to this thesis builds on the previous chapter and discusses the strengths and limitations of its contribution to scholarship on the gig economy, and importantly, it is here that I discuss the potential opportunities and challenges a gig economy presents to our future. The conclusion draws upon Polanyi's (2002) *The Great Transformation* and Max Weber's (2013) idea of the 'Iron Cage of Rationality' to argue that we are on the precipice of a Second Great Transformation and a Gilded Cage of Flexibility. The gig economy *could* be a welcome revolution to the world of work; however, the 'success' or 'failure' of the gig economy is related to how the geopolitical landscape adapts to the fact that gig companies and other digital platforms (such as Amazon or Google) are relevant to the global stage and are beholden to shareholders and not democracy. Ultimately, the current design of the gig economy is in need of revision because it is incompatible with an economy that works for and is accessible to everyone.

Chapter One: Digital Platforms and a New Economy: A Literature Review

Introduction: Setting the Scene

Throughout the process of this PhD, I have become an academic polyglot that can, generally, understand the many terms and devices used to grasp digital platforms and the labour that takes place on and through them. At face value, this is an expected part of working in an interdisciplinary field, however, scholarship on digital platforms includes different terms to refer to the same thing, and at the same time, will use a singular term to refer to quite different things. This is such a significant challenge to our understanding of the field that this chapter and *Chapter Three: Navigating Nomenclature and the Challenge of Characterising Couriers* have been written to address the issues directly, for example, through evaluating the role of language and the prevalence of 'Jingle' and 'Jangle' fallacies in scholarship (Van Petegem, Vansteenkiste and Beyers 2013; Casper *et al.,* 2018). Through this critical approach, I aim to mitigate against this PhD project becoming part of the problem. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the key literature on the gig economy which will act as a foundation to the literature explored in the empirical chapters.

The structure of this literature review is thematic and is based on answering three core questions to examine the emergence, development and future of the gig economy:

1) To what extent has the sociology of work engaged with the gig economy?

2) What is novel about the gig economy and how is it related to the platform economy?

3) What are the ideas and processes that make the gig economy work?

The first question is important because it establishes the story of the gig economy in relation to sociology, and the sociology of work. This section is a contribution to the discussion on the sociology of the sociology of work, and suggests that gig economy scholarship is evidence that the discipline is yet to solve its existential crisis.

The second question follows the previous section and questions 'what is, if anything, novel about the gig economy?'. Somewhat paradoxically, answering 'what is the gig economy' is a question that can only be answered once the surrounding apparatus has been explained. It is an interesting and complicated question, and so, this section is inspired by Woodcock and Graham's 'preconditions for the gig economy' (2019) which explains how the gig economy is the result of a complex mix of nine different social, political and economic factors. Woodcock and Graham's preconditions for the gig economy is a good example of the 'socio-technical' perspective (discussed shortly) in action because it shows how the gig economy is the result of both technological and social change. For example, the presence of neoliberal labour laws, the desire for more flexible working arrangements and the invention and mass distribution of the smartphone are all necessary for a gig economy to exist.

Rather than focussing on Woodcock and Graham's preconditions for the gig economy, I have instead decided to take a different path to frame the emergence of the gig economy based on disruptive technology and socio-technical paradigmatic shift. The reason I have chosen to frame the emergence of the gig economy in this way is because emphasising the idea of industrial revolution and how the gig economy is part of a wider story of socio-technical paradigm shift is necessary to argue that the gig economy (and the platform economy more generally) constitute the next industrial revolution (Johannessen, 2018; Rifkin, 2011; Rifkin *et al.,* 2008; Schwab, 2017). This is an important choice because whilst the preconditions for

the gig economy are remarkable and are important to understand for context, it is the prospect of what a gig economy could mean for the future of work and society that is crucial for this thesis. Indeed, I expect that the gig economy (and the platform economy generally) is symptomatic of social and political shift that will be similar to the adoption of the market society described in *The Great Transformation* (Polanyi, 2002) and I discuss this in the conclusion of this thesis. The structure of the gig economy is one of the most important features to explain for this thesis to make sense, and so, to make the relationship between the platform economy and the gig economy clearer, I discuss the two most prominent ways of conceptualising how the platform economy is organised: worker-led and platform-led. The section concludes by answering 'what is the gig economy' and what this means for this thesis.

The final section examines the processes of the gig economy, and this is where the human element of the lived experience of living and working in the gig economy comes to the foreground. The section discusses the connections to previous literature, such as Guy Standing's *The Precariat* (2011), or Richard Sennett's *The Corrosion of Character* (1998), but it also looks at to what extent these antecedent accounts of work and labour are able to grasp these new forms of work. The experience of gig courier work is not explored in this literature review, and instead, is discussed in the empirical chapters themselves.

The Socio-Technical Perspective

This literature review is informed and organised by what scholars refer to as the 'sociotechnical' perspective (Martin, Upham and Budd, 2015; Bockshecker, Hackstein and Baumöl, 2018). The socio-technical perspective is an approach that gives primacy to and understands the relationship between humans and non-human actors as interdependent. In

other words, the socio-technical perspective includes information systems (especially semi-autonomous ones) as an actor *sui generis* that influences and shapes human behaviour. The sociotechnical perspective is a useful approach because algorithms and digital platforms are in themselves interesting for their role in organising work in the gig economy, however, more importantly for this thesis, algorithms are often treated by gig couriers as if they are operating autonomously irrespective of whether or not this is true. Taking these points together, the socio-technical perspective is helpful way to frame the relationship between gig couriers and algorithms because some gig couriers personify or even deify algorithms, and this is mirrored by the engineers at Uber who have a 'God View' which caused privacy debates for Uber as it maintained geolocation tracking even after a user exited the application (Thomas, 2018). The relationship between human and non-human actors, specifically the algorithm, is a key part of gig courier work and this is explored in *Chapter Five: Service on Standby: The Practice and Lived Experience of Gig Courier Work.*

An additional benefit of the socio-technical perspective is that it is a useful approach to understand situations where non-human actors have influenced human behaviour in ways that the human designers might not have intended, for example, the unintended consequences of information technology are a particularly salient point in discussions on the idea of technological singularity (Chalmers, 2016; Vinge, 1993). The technological singularity represents a point in the future when technological growth becomes uncontrollable and irreversible, which is commonly defined as the moment when artificial intelligence surpasses human intelligence (Shanahan, 2015). It is important to state that the socio-technical perspective is not technologically deterministic because it does not view the development of technology as an external 'force' that is then enacted upon humans and society. On the contrary, the development of technology is the result of human action which has ebbs and flows in how it is implemented and whether or not it is adopted at all. The existence of

technology does not mean that it will inevitably make an impact. In other words, the sociotechnical perspective emphasises that humans are not subject to technology but are instead in dialogue with it, and this can be taken in the literal sense with the emergence of virtual assistant technology such as Amazon's Alexa, Microsoft's Cortana or Apple's Siri. This is a very important point for this thesis because even though algorithms can shape human behaviour, humans continue to negotiate with technology, and as I discuss later in this thesis (*Chapter Five*) human agency is a deciding factor in how the relationship between technology and gig courier manifests.

In practice, the social-technical perspective blends two approaches to understanding digital technology. On the one hand, there is the emphasis on the technical aspects of the 'digital ecosystem' (Morgan-Thomas, Dessart and Veloutsou, 2020) which includes the capacity and trends in information technology, for example, the physical limitations of Moore's Law which is the trend that computing power doubles every two years (Schaller, 1997; Williams, 2017). On the other hand, there is the discussion on the impact of digital technology on society, such as the positive and negative effects of social media (Akram and Kumar, 2017). Taking the social media example forward, applying the social-technical perspective to the phenomenon of social media would mean an appreciation of technological convergence through the smartphone as important piece of the puzzle in understanding how and why social media is a prevalent part of everyday life. As a social scientist, computing power, transistor development and the prospect of silicone adaptations are not directly related to my research questions, however, understanding their underlying role as a component of paradigm shift is. In other words, *what they are* is less relevant to my research questions than *how* they influence the lives of those who live and work in a gig economy. An example of this distinction is that whilst this literature review would include the idea of 'algorithmic

management' it would not include a discussion on the optimal combination of hardware and software to enable effective algorithmic management.

Nailing Jelly in the Quarry of Ideas: Determining Scope

Scholarship on digital platforms and their consequences for work, labour and society has largely been an unorganised, disharmonious and interdisciplinary jumble. To put this into a picture, the field can be compared to 'nailing jelly' (Huws, Spencer, Syrdal and Holts, 2016; 2017) and the scholarship can be compared to a quarry of ideas (Kocher, 2022). Over the years, the legibility of the field has increased as scholars have dived into the messiness and have surfaced with reviews that draw together different conclusions for ethics, regulation, the experience of platform work or for categorising platforms themselves (Abraham *et al.,* 2017; Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2019; Kaine and Josserand, 2019; Tan *et al.,* 2021; Vallas and Schor, 2020; Woodcock and Graham 2019). However, a common problem with the literature is that developments in the platform economy have happened so quickly that scholarship has struggled to keep pace. For example, Adam Badger referred to his PhD research as a 'product of its time' (Badger, 2021) which is useful because even though his research captures the highs of the gig courier resistance movements, his research concluded before the COVID-19 pandemic, and this means that his research captures the gig economy landscape *before* the catalytic event of COVID-19.

In a similar way to Badger (2021), the data collection for this PhD project captures a very specific moment in the development of the gig economy because it took place *during* the COVID-19 lockdowns. It is therefore important to keep in mind when reviewing gig scholarship that the temporal and situational context is key to understanding the contributions on the emergence, development and future of the gig economy. It is not to say

that contributions are destined to be snapshots, but the veracity of contributions will be challenged over time. The reason for this is because the nature and construction of the gig economy is turbulent; being a chameleon and shapeshifting on demand is an important defence mechanism against the nation state and its inquiries, for example, the Taylor review in the UK or the legal challenges to California's Prop 22 in the US (Taylor *et al.,* 2017; Ovetz, 2022; Davis, 2022). As of the time of writing, the gig economy remains a global regulatory frontier, and this means that the conditions of living and working in the gig economy, and even the unicorn gig companies (see Simon, 2016) themselves, are contingent.

Despite the complexity of the field, literature reviews such as this are useful as they distil, orientate and explain the state-of-the-art, which is particularly important for fields such as this one because of how much has changed since this project began. Fortunately, whilst it is true that the scholarship is fragmented and the gig economy is slippery by design, there has been real progress in developing an understanding of digital platforms and their consequences for work, labour and society, and also, what they might be able tell us about the future of work. For example, in 2018, as the foundations of platform economy scholarship were still being established, computer scientists Sutherland and Jarrahi explained that the majority of research had focussed on the *sharing* economy and digital platforms as a business model or an optimisable tool, and called for the future of research into these new economic forms to 'bring together social, economic and technological research in order to provide a more holistic understanding of the sharing economy' (Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2018:338). We now have plenty of empirical studies from across the globe on the lived experience of living and working in the platform economy (Zou, 2017; Dunn, 2018; Wood, Lehdonvirta and Graham, 2018; Ravenelle,2019; Cant, 2019; Goods, Veen and Barratt, 2019; Lei, 2021; Badger, 2021). For this reason, we are more equipped

than ever to claim a holistic understanding of digital platforms and their consequences for work and society.

Documenting the holistic understanding of the platform economy is outside the scope of this literature review as that is a task worthy of a PhD in and of itself, however, it is difficult to write about the gig economy without writing about the platform economy too. For example, the previous paragraph and its simultaneous use of 'sharing economy', 'platform economy' and 'gig economy' demonstrates how the boundaries in this field are blurred and this can be confusing. For this reason, the main task of this literature review is to be a clear foundation for this thesis by explaining the relationship between the platform economy and the gig economy and the emergence, development and future of the gig economy.

As the embeddedness of the gig economy in daily life increases and the participation in the gig economy increases (projections state the gig economy will account for *half* of the workforce by 2030 (Oksana, 2022)), it is unlikely that the gig companies will continue to be permitted to exploit legal grey areas for much longer, especially if the implementation of regulation on (in)dependent contractor status happens, irrespective of the conversation on whether they are a 'band aid' or not (De Stefano *et al.,* 2022; Taylor, 2019). The overarching point is, whilst this literature review is concerned with a time-period that is little over a decade, we are talking about a potential seismic shift in the organisation of work, labour and society, and we remain in the epicentre. As this model of organising work and labour ossifies, its *raison dêtre* becomes clearer and the reverberations settle, subsequent research will be able to confirm just how important the gig economy is, or was, to work, employment and society.

The Sociology of Work and the Gig Economy

At the beginning of this project, the gig economy was still nascent and was broadly received in two polarised ways: a trinket of capitalism that could safely be ignored, or a spectre that was haunting the globe. To represent sceptical scholars, 'Should we take the gig economy seriously?' (Healy *et al.,* 2017:238) is an effective example because it emphasised the role of academic analysis in soothing public debate. Furthermore, it presented the gig economy as something that needed to be dutifully checked rather than enthusiastically examined, as 'gig economy power dynamics and the way they test norms and institutions' were still worthy of note (Healy *et al.,* 2017: 238). This was an important attitude in the literature because it, among others (e.g., Crouch, 2019), clearly stated that we should not view the gig economy as a basis for the future of work because, among other reasons, it was a short-lived experiment that was set to crumble once venture capitalists decided to cut their losses. On the other hand, some contributions see these developments as a new economy, and these are well-represented by grand and optimistic claims such as *The Fourth Industrial Revolution* (Schwab, 2017) or more cautious claims such as whether the new economy was a recipe for a sustainable utopia or neoliberal dystopia (Martin, 2016). In the beginning, the sceptical and harbinger approaches were interesting to explore because of how incompatible the positions are, however, what was most interesting, or perhaps, frustrating, is that the sociology of work was not part of the conversation.

Considering the challenge that the digital platform and the gig economy pose to work, labour and society, it is important to contextualise and make sense of why the sociology of work was not a part of this initial conversation. Following the Second World War, the branch of industrial sociology was established, and this was a key development in the sociology of work. To broadly summarise 20th century history of the sociology of work, Edwards states

that the 20th century was a 'reasonably straightforward narrative of successive themes and analytical improvement, albeit characterised by debate between broadly Weberian and Marxian approaches' until the rise of post-modernism (Edwards, 2014:2). This characterisation of 20th century sociology of work history is useful, but it does not take into account the role of feminist scholarship in developing the 'fourth critique' which focussed on developing the theoretical intersection between race, class and gender (Brewer, 1989; Rege, 2003) which is very important to the development of postmodern thought and is key to contemporary sociology. By postmodern thought, I am referring to how postmodernism 'breaks its links with the ontological and epistemological premises of modernity' (Bauman, 1988:790), which means a move away from materialism to idealism and a move from essentialism to social constructionism (Lyon, 1994; Norris, 2000). This is important considering as traditional concepts such as the iron cage of rationality (Mitzman, 1971) or deskilling (Attewell, 1987) are materialist in origin, which means the rise of postmodernism was a challenge to the 'legacy' of industrial sociology' (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995:615). For this reason, the development of postmodernism is the distinction between the 20th and 21st century sociology of work because it suggests that industrial sociology and its contributions were an iterative project (or perhaps a movement) that was disrupted by the rise of a third position.

Industrial sociology was an important part of 20th century sociology and some of the most influential theoretical and methodological contributions to sociological canon came from feminist ethnographies of work, such as *Women on the Line* (Glucksmann, 1982), *Girl, Wives and Factory Lives* (Pollert, 1981) and *All Day, Every Day* (Westwood, 1984) and these ethnographies are applicable to contemporary work too (see Lyon, 2012). Despite the prominence of the sociology of work/industrial sociology in the 20th century, by the end, it was widely accepted that a gap had emerged between mainstream sociology and the

sociology of work, and there was a second argument that the sociology of work itself had become fragmented (Edwards, 2014:2). For these two reasons, the future of the sociology of work and its relationship to sociology was uncertain, and this was the beginning of the reason why the sociology of work as a cohesive movement was not among the vanguard of research into the gig economy.

At the same time as the sociology of work was undergoing internal change, Jeremy Rifkin's *End of Work* (Rifkin, 1995) posited that the turn of the millennium was a precipice for a radical shift in the way work, labour and society would be organised. This was another key moment for the sociology of work because it meant that the organisation and experience of work as it was currently understood could be set to change; which has the implication that industrial sociology would not be as applicable to a new world of work. Just over a decade after Rifkin's *End of Work,* it was acknowledged that at least to some extent a shift had occurred as 'beneath the overhyped managerialist rhetoric about 'turbo' or 'juggernaut' capitalism there is a wider understanding that something profound has happened to capitalism and its contemporary work regimes' (Strangleman, 2007:81). Aside from a potential shift in the nature of work, sociologists do not have a monopoly on the study of work, labour and the economy, and this meant they were competing with the business school and sub-disciplines such as economic sociology (Swedberg, 1991; Smelser and Swedberg, 2005; Swedberg, 2009) which contributed to the idea that work, labour and the economy were a split from mainstream sociology. This is another important aspect to consider as it is of one of the many intellectual 'turns' of sociology, one of which is the recent embracing of "activist" sociology (Dale and Kalob, 2006; Scheitle, 2018).

Between a perceived change in the nature of work and the marginalisation of labour and the economy in the wider discipline, transcendental questions about the future of the sociology

of work were inevitable. This culminated in the sociology of the sociology of work, which is an articulation of the idea that there is an unclear future or scope, and this discussion has continued into the 21st century (Castillo, 1999; Strangleman, 2005; Strangleman, 2007; Halford and Strangleman, 2009). If it is accurate to describe the sociology of work as dis-embedded from mainstream sociology and the sociology of work itself is fragmented, then it makes sense to question what exactly the sociology of work is, and what it is not. This lack of clarity led to *A New Sociology of Work?* (Pettinger *et al.,* 2006) which argued for including work outside of formal employment as well as within it, and later, *What's Wrong with Work* (Pettinger, 2019) uses an intersectional approach to discuss how formal work is often dependent on informal work (such as domestic and care work). For this reason, a sociology of the sociology of work was/is a necessary reflexive endeavour to re-orientate the subdiscipline for the 21st century and to lay the foundation for the next generation of sociologists of work.

The issue with determining the scope and purpose of the sociology of work is demonstrated well by presenting the issue as 're-thinking *sociologies* of work' (in Edwards, 2014:2). There is a clear schism in what the sociology of work should, or could look like and what should be regarded as the distinguishing feature of the sub-discipline. For example, Halford and Strangleman (2009) suggest that the sociology of work could be revived by rekindling the relationship with mainstream sociology by incorporating intersectionality and other 'postmodern' theory into analysis, however, Edwards questions whether or not 'such an integrated sociology [is] even conceivable, and, if it is, does it not set impossibly high standards against which we can only fail?' (Edwards, 2014). This is a sceptical question, but it highlights the contestation over what should be considered as the goal for a sociology of work, and also, it raises the question of whether or not the sociology of work should be embedded in mainstream sociology at all.

Amid these changes, the question is to what extent did the sociology of work manage to resolve its identity crisis and chart a new course that would be able to grasp the changes to capitalism and the organisation of work and labour fostered by the platform economy? The answer is that there is not a consensus on whether the sociology of work is even in a crisis, yet if it was in crisis, Huppatz and Ross-Smith (2017) suggest a gender-focus is the way to orientate the sub-discipline in a post-discipline world. Indeed, Huppatz and Ross-Smith (2017:1) argue that the sociology of work crisis is overstated, that those who discuss the end of work have 'served to not only marginalise work and employment sociology, but also to encourage work and employment scholars to question the longevity of their discipline', and that 'the end of work thesis is inherently sexist'. In addition, they also include points on how sociologists becoming émigrés constitutes a 'sociological diaspora' that will influence the schools and departments they find a home in (Huppatz and Ross-Smith, 2017).

The idea of a sociological diaspora, or more specifically, a diaspora of sociologists of work is perhaps the most accurate way of framing the contributions of the sociology of work in the 21st century. The point to make here is that there is a distinction to be made between an institutionalised sociology of work and sociologists of work. Despite the 'End of Work', social science continued to research and publish on labour, work and the economy, and this is represented by the UKRI theme which ran from 2008 – 2022 of "Digital Economy" (UKRI, 2022a) and the subsequent theme of 'Transformations: social and cultural dynamics in the digital age' (UKRI, 2022b). However, what is important is that this work and research often happens underneath a different banner to the sociology of work. For example, research on the gig economy that would have come from the sociology of work instead often comes from new academic homes in business and management schools (Rowlinson and Hassard, 2011), law schools (De Stefano *et al.,* 2022) or bespoke interdisciplinary centres such as the Oxford Internet Institute. This is interesting as often these scholars are trained sociologists or

have a background in the sociology of work, but instead of working in a sociology department, they have settled elsewhere. The point to make is that the gap between mainstream sociology and the sociology of work has widened to such an extent that studying work, labour and society through a sociological lens transcends the discipline. This change is beyond interdisciplinary work, and for this reason, it is useful to view the sociological study of work in the same way as how 'new capitalism' is an archipelago of related activity (Sennett, 1998). Nevertheless, unlike an organisation, sociologists are individuals and it is necessary to understand that sociologists are not transmitted into their new academic homes from the sociology department, and this means that some scholars will actively reject the label of sociologist and create new identities in their place (Parker, 2015). At face value, a diasporic sociology of work is not an issue for today, however, it could be an issue for the sociology of work tomorrow.

Whilst it is possible to share a field, the sociology of work as an institution would become a misnomer as sociologists continue to find themselves in departments other than sociology. For example, Michael Dunn is an example of an American sociologist who wrote their PhD on the career and job quality in the gig economy (Dunn, 2018), but they have since found their academic home in business (Dunn, 2017) and continue to publish in sociological journals such as *Work, Economy and Society* from there (Sutherland *et al.,* 2020). This is a problem for the future of the sociology of work because this means that undergraduate sociology students, if they are being taught the sociology of work at all, are unlikely to be taught by sociologists who built their careers studying 21st century work, however, this does not mean that older sociologists are precluded from adapting their material as the world of work changes.

As a diaspora of sociologists of work, research outputs transcend the traditional boundaries of industrial and de-industrial sociology. To draw a parallel, in Strangleman's discussion of the end of work, he considers how scholars often marginalised agency and how 'there is a real danger that the historical role of collective and individual agency is lost from view as workers are characterised as having been witnesses to history rather than active participants in it' (Strangleman, 2007: 83):

> '…the loss of the coal industry, whilst catastrophic in its multiple effects, does not create a completely barren wasteland either physically or socially. Rather there emerges a view of a myriad of different ways in which former colliers, their families and communities re-engage with the labour market, or creatively negotiate the benefits system. If the work on offer is not of the quantity or quality that created the coalfield communities this does not mean that actors are now completely individualised and passive in the face of current circumstance.'

The changing nature of work irrevocably changed coal-mining communities but these communities remained a group of individuals with shared interests, and these people managed to survive and re-enter the labour market through creative destruction. If the sociology of work factory is closing, it is important to adapt in the same way. The point of adaptation is necessary, and an example can be found in how sociologists such as Gandini (2019:1039) has argued that Labour Process Theory is an 'underutilised resource to expand our understanding of the role of digital platforms in intermediating the capital-labour relation'. The benefit of Labour Process Theory is that it has an established tradition in the sociology of work and that it sees the 'workplace as a contested terrain' (Briken *et al.,* 2017), however, the problem with Labour Process Theory is that its language and concepts were designed for a pre-digital world of work and this makes them difficult to directly transplant into the digital world. For example, the 'structured antagonism' that exists between workers and management in a factory does not correlate directly to independent contractors and an

algorithm. Further, the idea that technology is strictly a mechanism of control for management is an inaccurate reduction. This is important because digital platform algorithms are not omniscient (irrespective of God view) panopticons as there is a key distinction between data and information. Indeed, it is possible for gig couriers to play the algorithm, and as I discuss in the empirical chapters, some types of gig courier benefit greatly from the flexibility offered by digital platform technology. For these reasons, I do not think we need to leave Labour Process Theory in the twentieth century; however, the contributions of the sociology of work does not revolve around whether or not Labour Process Theory has something to offer. Labour Process Theory's utility and the debates between 'micro' and 'macro' accounts of work or the role of the 'emancipatory' researcher (Jaros, 2005:14) can be viewed as an allegory for the sociology of work's existential crisis. Solving the crisis means a sociology of work suited for the 21st century needs to be unshackled from orthodoxy and to be a broad church that encourages innovation and development. Sociologists have not been absent in their analysis of the gig economy, for example, the aforementioned work of Pettinger (2019), Vallas and Schor's research agenda review (2020) or Wood and Lehdonvirta's work on algorithmic management (Wood *et al.*, 2019; Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2019) are key examples of how sociologists can make quite influential contributions, and how even if sociologists were a few years behind the economists and lawyers, we have a vital role in synthesising knowledge and developing the understanding of the platform economy. It is through accepting a diasporic 21st century sociology of work that we are encouraged to use theories, old and new, to be a part of the conversation on the platform economy and its consequences. The point of this is that the end of work debate and the transformations of the 21st century does not have to be a threat to the sociology of work, and as I show in the next section, the sociology of work has plenty to contribute to understand the gig economy.

All that is Solid Melts into Air: Disruptive Technology and Industrial Revolution

Some of the most influential contributions from social science have been on the sensemaking of the relationship between work, technology and society. Indeed, the phrase 'all that is solid melts into air' (Marx and Engels, 2019) is an example of a prediction that has somehow managed to be both prescient and timeless. The phrase is referring to how social transformation is an inherent feature of capitalism because the capitalist mode of production incentivises innovation which inevitably redefines the relations of production (and therefore everything else). All that is solid melts into air has remained relevant for *four* industrial revolutions and has been a useful characterisation of the teleology of capitalism, social accelerationism and the experience of modernity for almost two centuries (Marx and Engels, 1848; Berman, 1983; Ballantyne and Nilsson, 2017). For this reason, all that melts into air is perhaps one of the most resilient observations of social phenomena the social sciences have ever produced. This is particularly important for a sociologist of work because this phrase remains a temporal bridge to link different epochs of work. For example, it is possible to view labour classification through the lens of 'all that is solid melts into air' by comparing the use of the term 'independent contractor' to the case of an early 20th century coal miner and the 21st century Deliveroo gig courier (Bertram, 2016). It is important to question novelty because each time a technological innovation 'reinvents' the economic base, it is often reported that 'everything has changed' (Woodall, 2000) and the implication is made that *we* need to change too; leaving our newly antiquated concepts at the door. On the contrary, through temporal bridges, such as disruptive technology, we are able to connect the novel to the established which can provide a sense of continuity, and importantly, an opportunity to revitalise theory.

Disruptive technologies are the catalyst for industrial revolution; however, technology alone is not the determinant for a paradigm shift. According to the socio-technical perspective, technology and a resulting paradigm shift is not enacted upon society, instead, it is more appropriate to frame the process as a dialectic exchange between the conditions that lead to the emergence of technology, the capacity of the technology and the receptiveness of people to change. A useful modern example of this is the idea of a Metaverse (including early projects such as Second Life (Terdiman, 2007; Cagnina and Poian, 2007)) which has been claimed as the next 'ubiquitous computing paradigm' (Mystakidis, 2022:486). However, the existence of Metaverse technology has not (yet) caused a paradigmatic shift in the way we communicate with each other or navigate the social. This is important because it illustrates how the power of capital is not sufficient alone to enact social change. Indeed, even the existence of electric cars combined with government intervention is not sufficient to persuade the public to change their behaviour (Goel *et al.,* 2021).

Technological change has often been described as dropping a pebble into a lake, and as with the pebble, the far-reaching ripples of change can have unintended consequences. For this reason, examining the social-technical relationship in previous industrial revolutions is a useful exercise to understand the gig economy because it explains how disruptive technologies in history have been the catalyst for creative destruction. Creative destruction is the process of innovation which transforms entire industries, creates new ones and influences the social evolution of a society. For this reason, industrial revolutions can be seen as benchmarks for the evolution of human society, especially if we consider theories of social development such as historical materialism (Marx and Engels, 1848) or Rostow's *The Stages of Economic Growth* (Rostow, 1959). These theories have different drivers for innovation (the Marxist has class struggle whilst Liberalism has secularism and entrepreneurship) but what they share is a perspective that states humanity develops over

time *and* that the end is determined. The paradigm shifts borne out of industrial revolution are the basis of key milestones of progression or regression in human history (Popkova, Ragulina and Bogoviz, 2019), and it is important to understand these in order to also understand the role of digital platforms as a disruptive technology.

In the first industrial revolution, the disruptive technology of the steam engine is directly connected to the dyad of industrialisation and urbanisation. What this means in practice is the shift from an agrarian based economy to an industrial based economy is synchronised with a change in the experience of and organisation of material conditions, which is identified in early urban models such as the Burgess Model (Burgess, 2015) , and this is irrespective of the debate on whether or not the model is too simplistic to capture the dynamic growth of a city (Rawding, 2019; Puttick, 2020). However, an example of an unintended consequence of the city is that they are dangerous for the incubation and transmission of disease, and this is a problem that extends into the modern day second industrial revolution builds upon the first by combining existing infrastructure such as railways with new resources such as artificial electricity to enable the assembly line, which is the requisite for mass production and the basis of a consumption society (Mohajan, 2019). Embedded in the assembly line are developments in thought such as scientific management (Taylor, 2004), which is the rationalisation of human action as policy. Taylorism and its consequences for the gig economy will be explored as a part of gig economy processes later. An example of an unintended consequence of the second industrial revolution is (neo) colonialism, and this is reflected in twentieth century models of development which argue some nations (and indeed parts of the world) were underdeveloped as a result of the actions of developed nations, however, it is important to state that the proponents of these theories would likely argue that the politics of underdevelopment were/are deliberate (Chirot and Hall, 1982; Frank, Alschuler and Bernstein, 2012).

The third industrial revolution is the emergence of information technology and this is the foundation of digitalisation, and the internet; which is the basis for e-commerce and automation. This industrial revolution provided the infrastructure for modern information technology and services which we rely on in everyday life, including the word processer I wrote this thesis on. As I mentioned earlier, the third industrial revolution is one of the reasons for Rifkin's *End of Work* (1995) debate, however, he has argued that the 21st century is host to the third industrial revolution, and that it is marked by the seeking of a sustainable future rooted in renewable energy (Rifkin *et al.,* 2008) and that the *sharing economy* is a crucial part of the pursuit for sustainability (Rifkin, 2011). Indeed, the pursuit of a sustainable future comes with new jobs in the renewable energy sector at the expense of fossil fuels, and so, it is anticipated that this will also be marked by new ways of living, such as the Ashton Hayes sustainable development project (Alexander, Hope and Degg, 2007). It should be mentioned that the literature recognises the third industrial revolution as taking place in the mid-twentieth century, and is marked by developments such as the computer and the fundamental infrastructure of the internet as a peer-to-peer network (see also, Popkova, Ragulina and Bogovtiz, 2019). The technology used by the platform, sharing, gig (or another term of choice) economy is a description of 21st century technology, and as a result, should be viewed as a component of the fourth industrial revolution.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution and emergence of the Digital Platform

For the 21st century, we have a number of disruptive technologies, however, for this review I want to focus on the *digital platform.* As I have mentioned previously, each time a disruptive technology is mobilised by industry, the debate on whether or not a new revolution is

underway is reignited (Schor, 2016; Martin, 2016). Indeed, sociologists have asserted that empirical reality must reflect these claims, otherwise, the lines between social science and science fiction will be difficult to distinguish (Wajcman, 2008). However, it is difficult to distinguish between social science and science fiction when the lines between them are increasingly becoming blurred. Just under a decade later, the book entitled *The Fourth Industrial Revolution* captures this sentiment well, beginning with:

> 'We live in exciting times of fundamental technological change. The pace and scope of ground-breaking scientific and technological advances coming from research facilities, startups and large organisations never cease to amaze me. The "science fiction" of yesterday is today becoming reality in new products and services that we won't be able to imagine having lived without' (Schwab, 2017: vii).

Klaus Schwab founded the World Economic Forum (an international NGO), and his book is an example of its intellectual reach. For this reason, it is important to take into account both the declaration of a paradigmatic shift, but also, to acknowledge where and who these declarations are coming from. The World Economic Forum is a key lobby in what is considered as the fourth industrial revolution, and this is important because as the transnational organisation/corporation continues to challenge and influence the policy of the nation state, it will become ever more important to question the stake transnational organisations have in the future.

Now, with some of the politics of the fourth industrial revolution to one side, we can focus on how the conceptualisation of the digital platform is often stumbled over for their multidimensional nature (Asadullah, Faik and Kankanhalli, 2018). However, through the sociotechnical perspective, it is useful to define the digital platform as a 'socio-technical ensemble', which is a digital organisation of technology, humans and information which work together to facilitate exchange (Bijker, 2010; Sawyer and Tapia, 2007). The digital platform

has been heralded as now omnipresent in industry and is set to revolutionise each aspect of our working lives (de Reuver, Sørensen and Basole, 2018). The digital platforms have become centrepieces of our everyday lives, for example, Facebook, Amazon and Google are all household name examples of digital platforms, but each has varying purposes and uses. Facebook is a social media platform which allows networking and communication, Amazon is an e-commerce platform, and Google, among other things, is the pre-eminent search engine, even becoming a verb to describe the act of finding information on the internet. Consequently, amid all of these changes we are granted the exciting opportunity to ask the question: Has everything *really* changed?

How do we talk about Digital Platforms?

Over the last decade the literature focussed on these changes has grown exponentially, however, as aforementioned, contributions are from a wide range of academic disciplines. Sutherland and Jarrahi's 'The Sharing Economy and Digital Platforms: A review and research agenda' (2018) provided a useful overview of existing research. The benefit of a contribution like this was that central themes could be identified and connected to one another to better understand the role digital platforms have in facilitating the new economy, however, this landmark review explicitly focussed on the assumptions made about technology in the sharing economy. This means that worker-employer relationships, classification of workers and other important issues in the other terms were precluded from the discussion. This is a good example to show how certain aspects of the new economy are more or less important depending on the discipline the scholar is coming from and on the term that is being used to centre discussion. This review was particularly useful for this project because it demonstrated that there was a dearth of sociological research on the platform economy.

The overview showed that the field was dominated by disciplines such as business and economics (35%) and computer science (27%), whereas social science only had an 8% stake (2018: 331). It should be noted that the majority of the early work was theoretical, and so it is understandable that social science had a limited contribution as projects were still being planned, or were still in process. As of 2023, we do not have a direct statistic to compare to 2018, but it is clear that the tone has shifted as annual reviews such as 'What do platforms do? Understanding the gig economy' (Vallas and Schor, 2020) have been published that take into account the issues missed by Sutherland and Jarrahi. However, as I mentioned before in the previous section, sociologists remain under-represented compared to colleagues in business or industrial psychology or law. For example, the 'sociology of work perspective' in *Introduction to a Research Agenda for the Gig Economy and Society* (De Stefano *et al.,* 2022) is written by Iain Campbell, who is based in a Centre for Employment and Labour Relations Law and he has a background in economic geography. As a result, it seems that the 'sociology' perspective on the gig economy is considered to be a necessary part of a holistic perspective, but it is often delivered by non-sociologists.

The platform economy as a field of research is subject to the same three Vs of Big Data (Hofmann, 2017): Volume, Variety and Velocity, and this means that it is difficult to grasp its nature and its construction in its entirety in a single term. For this reason, there is not, and there is unlikely to ever be, a consensus on a unilateral term to describe these new developments. Despite this, 'gig economy' is among the favourites and is the term of choice for this project to describe the work of 'independent contractors' on digital platforms. Meanwhile, we also have closely related rival terms. For example, 'sharing' (Frenken and Schor, 2019), 'platform' (Kenney and Zysman, 2016), 'networked' (Oskam and Boswijk, 2016), 'crowd work' (Huws, Spencer and Joyce, 2016), 'on-demand' (Berg, 2015) or 'digital' economy (Valenduc and Vendramin, 2016). Each of these terms is an approach to grasp the

work of independent contractors on and through digital platforms, and this is tricky as the terms are not synonymous but have clear overlaps. Indeed, each term has often been used to emphasise a different part of the new economy. For example, platform has been used to demarcate and explain form, sharing has been used to characterise labour relationships, on-demand has been used to demonstrate the role of the temporal – but each (including the gig economy) is often too narrow to fully grasp the new economy. Furthermore, some of these terms have normative value attached to them, for example, 'sharing economy' implies harmony and equality of exchange, and this is the main reason why I do not use the term to describe the work of independent contractors on digital platforms. Consequently, there is not a 'correct' term to use, and instead, it is a matter of preference and perspective, which as mentioned previously is an obstacle for the progression of the field and is discussed more in depth in *Chapter Three: Navigating Nomenclature and the Challenge of Characterising Couriers.*

As there is no umbrella term to describe the new economy, over the years a patchwork conceptual quilt has emerged. Indeed, scholars will often preface their discussions with 'so-called' before their term of choice to demonstrate hesitation, or for some, they use so-called as a means to not 'reify' or legitimise the economy and to demonstrate their opposition towards it (Badger, 2021). A conceptual patchwork quilt is troublesome as there is often limited consistency, however, this seems to be a necessary by-product of the process of creating the aforementioned holistic interdisciplinary knowledge on the new economy. As a result, it is important to reiterate that the term deployed depends on the scholar.

Typologies of the Platform Economy

Now that I have introduced the contestation over the terms, I am able to introduce the different ways that scholars have presented the platform economy. Similar to the choice of which term to use, scholars have created typologies which emphasise different aspects of the platform economy. First, I introduce the 'platform perspective' and then I introduce the 'worker-perspective'. For the platform perspective, one of the most influential contributions is from Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn (2019) who created the following platform perspective typology:

Table 1. Typology of crowdwork platforms.

		Type of remuneration	
		Paid work	**Non-paid or speculative work**
Initiating actor	Requester-initiated	*Type A* Online task crowdwork	*Type B* 'Playbour' crowdwork
	Worker-initiated	*Type C* Asset-based services	*Type D* Profession-based freelance crowdwork

Figure 1.1 Typology of Crowdwork Platforms (Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2019: 25).

The two variables of *initiating actor* and *type of renumeration* are interesting ways to classify these kinds of digital platforms. Furthermore, classifying platform work in this way allows a synoptic link to ideas of *piecework* which is a concept that has long history in the sociology of work (Roy, 1953) and this has been used by other scholars to examine the work on digital platforms (Alkhatib, Bernstein and Levi, 2017; Lehdonvirta, 2018). To make matters more confusing, each of these platform types *can* be considered as part of the gig economy, however, the kinds of work represented by the platforms are qualitatively different. It should

be reiterated that the emphasis of these authors is on classifying platforms, not work on platforms, and this is part of the reason for their breadth. However, it is in the breadth that we find limitations. One of the greatest weaknesses of this model is that it is unclear where social media influencers and content creators who work in what has been called the 'attention economy' (Marwick, 2015a; 2015b) would be classified. A content creator's work is 'worker-initiated' and it is 'prospective' labour, however, their labour is an anticipatory *response* to their audience, or for the more adept, to their data analytics and the algorithm of the respective platform. Nevertheless, it is important to remember this is an early model of platform work and as I have mentioned, it is difficult to account for all aspects of the platform economy in a single iteration.

To explain the model, Type A represents workers on digital platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk (Lehdonvirta, 2018; Keith, Harms and Tay, 2019) and includes work such as completing transcriptions, identifying images to help train AI, or even answering surveys for sociological research (Shank, 2016). Type A is useful because it captures how this kind of 'crowdwork' has also been called 'cloudwork' (Woodcock and Graham, 2019) to emphasise its spatial implications, and to demarcate it from labour that is 'geographically tethered'. Type B 'Playbour' platforms are useful because it taps into key ideas such as 'aspirational labour' (Duffy, 2016) and this is a useful conceptual bucket for characterising work that is prospective with the *chance* of being paid and for unpaid work. For this reason, Type B work includes commercialised hobbies as well as work that is completed for exposure or for experience in the same fashion as what would be expected in an unpaid internship. This *could* be the type to place YouTubers and other content creators, but I would argue this is a reduction. Type C is entitled 'Asset-Based Services' and this includes all forms of work which involve the mobilisation of (underused) existing assets. This is the conceptual bucket for the types of platforms and work my project is focussed on. Asset Based Services will capture

work that is geographically tethered, paid, and will be 'initiated' by the worker, however, there is a qualitative difference between the transport of goods (delivery services such as Deliveroo), the transport of people (ride-sharing services such as Uber) and the rental of property (hospitality sector such as Airbnb). For this reason, this is another broad category which is useful to classify platforms, but is not very useful for understanding the kinds of work that takes place on these platforms. Type D is a category that is closest to consultancy/contracting and is well-illustrated by the 'handyman' platforms such as Jobber or TaskRabbit. Once again, one of the key differences between Type A and D will be that the work will be geographically-tethered, *and* a key difference between C and D is that the work will be commissioned on the basis of *skill* not an asset. In other words, you would primarily pay a plumber for their knowledge, not for their pipe wrench.

Overall, the model is effective for a macro-classification of platforms. An important point to make on this typology is that Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn present the field through the lens of 'crowdwork', which is an important decision. Crowdwork is a term that emphasises the outsourcing of work to a labour pool of independent contractors accessed through a digital platform. Indeed, the idea of 'crowdwork' has an affinity with the established literature on the flattening of organisations, and it is an important piece of the puzzle in understanding how the organisational structure of the gig economy can be considered as a digital iteration of a 'machine bureaucracy' (Mintzberg, 1979) because of how *human* middle management is delayered entirely and is replaced with an algorithm. However, this will be contested by the proponents of the argument that the gig/sharing economy is a network of peers engaging in collaborative exchange and that the algorithm is a functionary coordinator/facilitator of parties rather than a manager.

Compared to a platform-led typology, a worker-led typology will focus on the work that is done on/through the platform. An effective contribution is from Vallas and Schor who adapted a study from the EU to create a worker-led typology of work in the platform economy. Their variables of choice include 'skill and complexity' and 'spatial dispersion' which is useful to show the breadth of the types of labour underneath the umbrella of the platform economy. Unlike the previous model, this explicitly includes content creators:

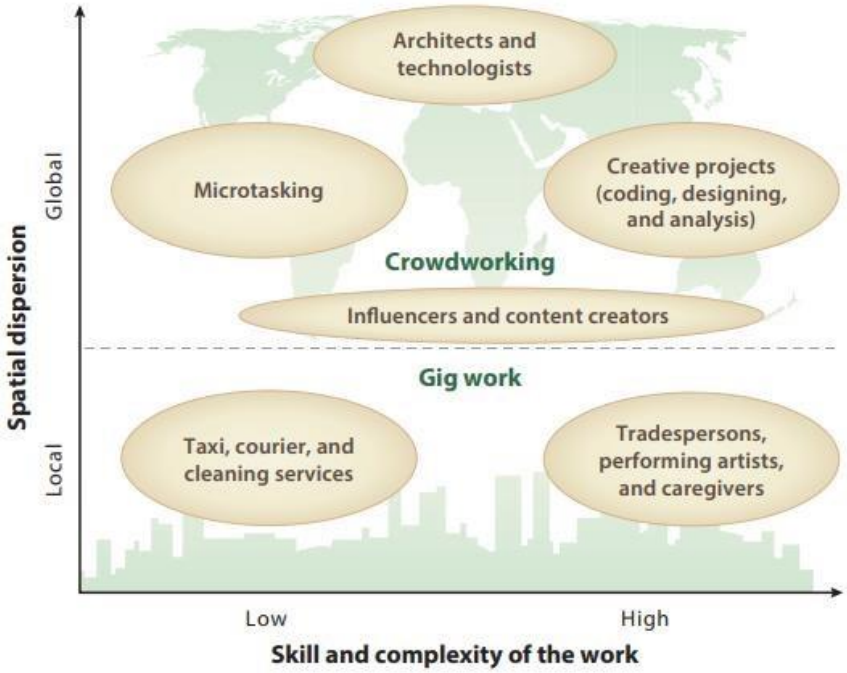

Figure 1.2: Types of Work in the Platform Economy (Vallas and Schor, 2020:4)

This model is useful because it emphasises the distinction between work that is geographically-tethered and work that can be completed remotely. In a similar way to the previous typology, this typology is necessarily broad. The Type A can be plotted on 'microtasking', Type B can be plotted on 'creative projects', Type C can be plotted on 'taxi, courier and cleaning services', and finally, Type D can be plotted on 'Tradepersons, performing artists and caregivers'. However, as I mentioned previously, there is a key qualitative difference in the types of work between the transport of people and goods, and

also, although it is not mentioned in this typology, the hospitality sector. As a result, this typology has similar limitations to the previous which are caused by trying to fit all aspects of the platform economy into a single typology. Including 'content creators' as a separate group is a fair decision and makes sense considering they are difficult to place in the previous typology, and including architects and technologists is a useful inclusion because it acknowledges the work that goes into the development and maintenance of the digital platforms themselves.

Vallas and Schor (2020) make an interesting decision to use 'skill and complexity' as a variable as it creates homogeneity in the groups where there is little. For example, the point of microtasks is that they are 'Human Intelligence Tasks' which means a computer is unable to perform them reliably, which could include many different kinds of tasks ranging from the simple such as performing Captcha tests, to answering a call for participants for a research survey. If a computer is unable to perform the task, it is an indicator that the task does have complexity to it but it might be low-skilled. The point to be made here is that the binary of low/high skill and low/high complexity is reductive and tells us little about the work within these groups. Indeed, the cultivation of skill is a key determinant of success for *some* types of gig couriers, which demonstrates how the breadth of a typology often limits how well it can account for variation in these 'groups'. The same can be said for the influencers and social media creators which captures a vast group of people of varying incomes, and also, it is important to remember that these creators often have people working for them too which means they are closer to entrepreneurs than 'workers'.

Now that I have demonstrated two approaches to categorising platform work, I am able to illustrate the relationship between the focus of this project and the wider platform economy. To achieve this, I have created a simple diagram that shows how the platform economy can

be understood to be similar to a matryoshka doll whereby each ‘container’ has another ‘container’ within it.

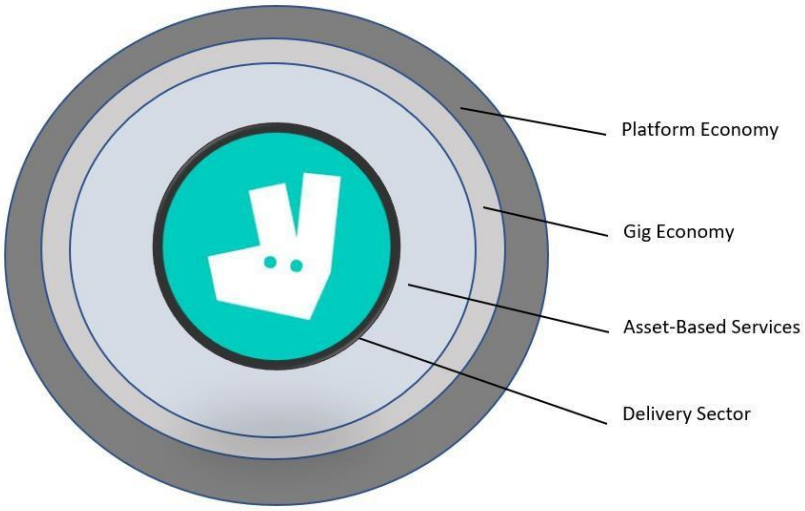

Figure 1.3: Layers of the Platform Economy

This diagram simplifies the relationship to show how the ‘Platform Economy’ is the main container, followed by ‘Gig Economy’. Within the Gig Economy exists ‘Asset Based Services’ or Taxi, Courier and Cleaning Services, and within this container exists ‘Delivery Sector’. Platform Economy is the largest form and includes any and all platform-enabled labour. The next layer is Gig Economy which includes work and income conducted via a digital platform on a project to project or per task basis. Asset Based Services includes work and income that is dependent on mobilising existing assets, such as a car, bicycle or a holiday home. The final layer is the delivery sector, and this represents the services offered by gig companies such as Deliveroo, UberEats and Stuart. As I have shown, the boundaries and the placement of different services is a matter for debate, and this debate is one of the reasons why the delivery sector has

proven tricky to research, legislate and regulate because it is difficult to know what is included and what is excluded in a discussion of the gig economy. *Chapter Three: Navigating Nomenclature and the Challenge of Characterising Couriers* is essential for exploring the reason why this is the case, and sets the stage for subsequent chapters by exploring how we understand individuals and their lives in relation to gig courier work. I will return to this diagram and its contribution in the conclusion to this thesis.

What is the Gig Economy, and how does it work?

In the beginning of the thesis, I introduced Woodcock and Graham's definition of the gig economy as 'labour markets that are characterised by independent contracting that happens through, via and on digital platforms' (2019:3). The reason I use this definition of the gig economy is because it is clear and it captures the two most important features of the gig economy: digital platforms and independent contractor status. Making sense of the structure and form of digital platforms themselves (as discussed above), is more straightforward and less important than the definition of an independent contractor. This is why, even after a decade, there is still no clear consensus on what constitutes a 'gig economy' or 'gig work', and this is due to the fact that independent contractor status is fundamental to how the gig economy is able to function.

In the literature, the use of the independent contractor label is commonly referred to as part of the misclassification of labour. This is a component of what Zwick (2018) calls the 'neoliberal playbook', and is an exercise in race-to-the-bottom economics in a landscape that has deregulation as policy. The use of the term independent contractor has been described as a strategy, or a tactic for gig companies to avoid responsibility. Independent contractor status is a well-recognised feature of the gig economy and it has sparked national court cases and strikes by gig couriers (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2017; Cant, 2019). The main

reason this tactic has been deployed is that it enables the lucrative opportunity for a gig company to avoid the responsibility of an employer whilst maintaining the benefits of having employees. The gig economy is not unique for possessing a workforce that has an ambiguous employment status. Behling and Harvey (2015) have written previously about 'bogus self-employment' in reference to the construction industry, explaining that misclassification exists within 'confused law' and a 'bespoke fiscal regime' which sets out to reduce the liabilities of employers and to enable tax evasion. Despite the ubiquity of independent contractor status in the gig economy, it is important to note that the idea of misclassification in the gig economy has not gone unchallenged.

In the UK context, the Taylor review of modern working practices was an important milestone for examining to what extent workers in the gig economy are independent, and also, to what extent existing regulations are fit for the purpose of being applicable to the gig economy (Taylor *et al.* 2017). When considering regulation, court cases against a single company will not apply to all those who work in the gig economy in the UK. For example, in the case against Uber in the 2016 London Employment Tribunal the following was said: '…the notion that Uber in London is a mosaic of 30,000 small businesses linked by a common "platform" is to our minds faintly ridiculous…' (in Davidov, 2016; Butler, 2021). However, even if Uber drivers in the gig economy are reclassified, this ruling would only apply to the UK context, it would only apply to Uber, and it can be challenged (as it has been by Uber). The ongoing battle between gig companies and the state is an important piece of the puzzle to understand because it means that Uber drivers in the UK are *currently* granted worker status. Worker status is a special type of employment status in the UK which entitles an individual to more rights than independent contractors, but less rights than an employee, for example, 'minimum wage, holiday pay and non-discriminatory protection' (De Stefano 2018:2). This is very important when comparing the experience of those who work in the gig

economy because Uber drivers in the UK will have a different employment status (and therefore a different experience) to an international counterpart despite doing the same work. Similarly, Uber drivers and Deliveroo gig couriers in the UK may be grouped together under the umbrella of 'taxi and courier work' but the employment classification is a key distinction between them because this impacts how they are compensated and the other protections they will be entitled to. This example is one of the many reasons why the classification of employment status in the gig economy is a point of contention that matters for discussion of the gig economy and its implications for work and society.

Federal systems have particularly struggled to grapple with the gig economy, for example, the European Court of Justice determined in 2017 that member states should regulate the gig economy themselves (Koutsimpogiorgos *et al.,* 2020). As a result, national or state courts do not use the same frames of reference for what constitutes employment. In the UK, a 'worker' is its own employment status set with its own rights and responsibilities, whereas in the United States they have a dichotomous system which is split between employed or self-employed. The reason the United States, and often California in particular, are relevant to legal discussions is because of Silicon Valley and the fact that many technology companies who develop the proprietary software have their headquarters there.

There are a few key areas of contention for the courts on the classification of status question. One key area of contention for the courts is whether or not the ability to choose hours is grounds for self-employment. For some courts, it will be sufficient, however, some courts will claim that this choice is an illusion of self-employment. Another area of contention relates to the opportunity to appoint a substitute, and this is one of the main reasons that has led to gig couriers remaining classified as independent contractors. It is not necessary to be a lawyer to appreciate the presence and outcomes of these legal debates.

For non-legal scholars, these debates primarily highlight how our legal and economic structures have been (and continue to be) disrupted by the gig economy because the frames of reference are tethered to a world of work with clear employment relationships. Indeed, the laws created for an employer/employee world of work were designed to regulate organisations, the people within them and the interactions between them, however, the gig economy is marketed as a form of exchange between individuals facilitated by digital platforms, and this enables gig companies to thrive in legal ambiguity. For all of these reasons, the misclassification of status question is the main reason I do not refer to those who work in the gig economy as gig workers because it would only add ambiguity to the situation. Despite the legal ambiguity of the gig economy, it is important to note that the traditional employment relationship has been challenged for decades. Indeed, the trend towards individualisation is not new, and it should not be considered as a by-product of the Great Recession either. The trend towards individualisation has long been studied and has been identified as a key aspect of what has been described as 'flexible' or 'new' capitalism, for example, Weil's (2014) work on *The Fissured Workplace* or Synder's (2016) *The Disrupted Workplace.* These trends are important to understand the nature and construction of the gig economy and are explored in Chapter Six through Ulrich Beck's (1992) 'risk society' and Bauman's (2012) 'unholy trinity'. In this way, it is possible to see the gig economy as a continuation (or perhaps rationalisation) of pre-existing capitalist strategies to reconfigure responsibility and ownership.

One of the most popular characterisations of contemporary economic forms is 'new capitalism'. New capitalism is known for placing flexibility as the centrepiece of the economy. Flexibility is certainly a key part of the gig economy, and attached to this is the idea that an individual can engage in the gig economy at their discretion. For this reason, the gig economy is a challenge to the idea of the 'job for life'. However, as a non-traditional

employment relationship, the decline of the idea of the 'job for life' is not a new idea. At the turn of the millennium, now over twenty years ago, Richard Sennett (Sennett, 1998) noted that the motto 'no long term' was altering the very meaning of work. For the executives in Sennett's interviews, jobs were framed as 'projects', and this demonstrates the emerging contingent nature of the workplace. Projects are short-term by definition and as such do not have much in common with the idea of a lifelong career. For this reason, even the idea of a career itself becomes flexible, and this is visible through the idea of the 'portfolio career' (Cawsey, 1995; Templer and Cawsey, 1999). From here, it is possible to view a gig economy as conducive to a portfolio career, whereby individuals are able to engage and disengage from the labour market at will. Indeed, if the trademark of new capitalism is that a 'flexible corporation should be an archipelago of related activity' (Sennett, 1998:23) then is it logical to extend this to the individual and their work.

The gig company is an interesting case of an archipelago organisation. On one hand, a gig company is extremely decentralised, however, it is also has very powerful mechanisms of centralising power. Gig economy giants such as Uber, AirBnB or Deliveroo have mastered the art of the archipelago corporation ensuring that the digital platform, or the 'app', is the ultimate island. This is demonstrated through the simplified work process of food delivery couriers in Figure 1.4.

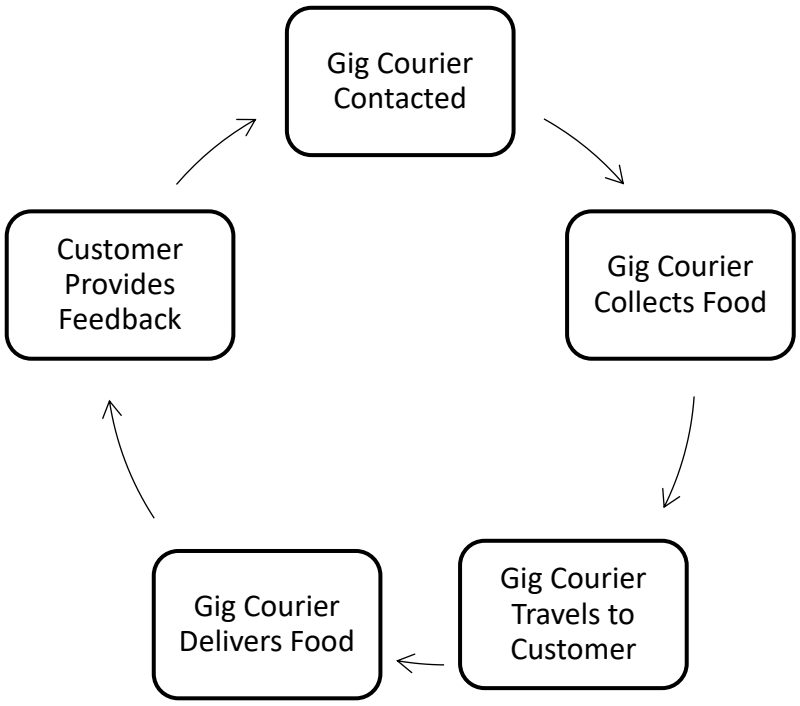

Figure 1.4: Gig Courier Process of Work

In its simplest form, the work of a food delivery courier follows a cyclical process. The primary objective of a gig courier is to transport their designated package from the restaurant to the customer in an efficient and timely manner that does not damage the food contained within. Before the gig courier process of work begins, other processes have already taken place. First, a restaurant has activated their availability on their version of the app which means that customers are able to place an order for delivery, and by extension, create a job for a gig courier. From here, a gig courier is contacted through their mobile phone (s) on their gig courier version of the digital platform, and this message will contain details of the job such as the restaurant, the pay offered for the job and the location of the customer (however this information is not always present for all platforms). At this stage, the gig courier who has been offered this job must choose whether or not they would like to accept it. If the gig courier declines this job, it will be offered to an alternative courier. On the other hand, if they accept the job, they are now tethered to that order and are now unable

to receive new offers for work and must now travel to the restaurant to liaise with the restaurant staff to pick up the order. At this stage, depending on whether the gig courier is mid-shift or is beginning their shift, their proximity to the restaurant will be different, and this means that gig couriers will need take this into account to ensure that they are able arrive at the restaurant promptly so that their order is not left waiting. Once a gig courier has arrived and is inside the restaurant, gig couriers will have their status verified, the order will be exchanged, and the gig courier will secure the order in their delivery boxes. Next, the gig courier will return to their vehicle and will prepare for their journey. Each digital platform has different policy for how a delivery should take place, however, each platform will suggest a route to the gig courier that takes into account the layout of a zone (the location the gig courier is working in) as well as real-time information such as traffic conditions. Nevertheless, the gig couriers themselves dictate the route they take to get to their destination, and as long as they are able to arrive at the destination in a similar time to the estimated arrival time, the platform will permit this. Once the gig courier has arrived at the customers address, the customer will be notified to collect their order either through a notification on their version of the platform or through traditional methods such as ringing a doorbell. During COVID, no-contact deliveries were a part of policy, and this meant that the order was commonly left on a doorstop or where the customer specified within the app. Once the order is collected by the customer, the gig courier will mark their order as complete on the app, and they will either conclude their shift in the app, or they will wait to be notified of another job to begin the cycle again. At the end of a delivery, customers will have the opportunity to appraise the gig courier within the app, and this will be added to the permanent record of the gig courier.

Whilst this process is happening, the digital platform is monitoring the progress of the order at the restaurant, tracking the location of the gig courier, and displaying this to the customer

in real time. Following the completion of an order, the platform collates the feedback from the customer, and processes it so that all of the data from this single chain will be used to benefit future delivery jobs. First, the platform has learned what the customer wanted, which results in bespoke notifications to them from the app. Second, the platform has also gathered data on the time it took for the restaurant to make the food, and also the length of time it for the food to be delivered. This means that a more accurate estimated time of delivery can be displayed to the customer. All of these processes are made possible through a single platform, and it should be remembered that this supply chain is simultaneously replicated hundreds or thousands of times in over 800 cities around the globe (Iqbal 2023). The efficiency of co-ordinating and measuring this many variables across space and time is something that would have been within the realms of science fiction for scientific management. As the ultimate island, a digital platform like Deliveroo is able to offer a localised service on a global scale: A *glocalised* service (Robertson 1994; Robertson 2018). For example, some platforms like Deliveroo or Uber combine the universality of their platform with *surge* or *dynamic* pricing which adapts to local demand (Chen and Sheldon 2015). This also means that Deliveroo riders are able to take 'stacked' orders, and receive a bonus for doing so. Meanwhile, other gig companies are taking advantage of this technology to push their product into the hands of as many customers as possible. The sheer scale, the convergence of technology and the networked economics of the gig economy make it worth noting as a development in capitalism itself rather than a sharpening of new capitalism. For this reason, it is interesting to view the gig economy as a synthesis between Fordism and Toyotism to become 'Mass Just-In-Time production'. From here, it is necessary to explain the conditions that enable Mass Just-in-Time production. A gig courier is a human being and this means that, unlike the digital platform, they cannot be suspended in time and space. As a

result, even though at face value interactions between customer and courier take place over a matter of minutes; pace and convenience are only for the customer. In other words, a timely and convenient service for a customer is dependent on a gig courier being willing to *wait* for an order. The process of waiting is an important aspect of being a gig courier, and is a key part of *Chapter Four: Getting into Gig Courier Work* as well as *Chapter Five: Service on Standby*. As a result, dependency has meant that the concept of precarity, and the idea of a 'precariat' (Standing, 2011; Standing, 2014) can be applied to understand aspects of the labour force of the gig economy, however, as I have mentioned, it is inaccurate to assume homogeneity in the gig economy, and so, it is also inaccurate to portray gig couriers as a kind of underemployed underclass. As I demonstrate later (*Chapter Three*), gig couriers are a heterogenous group from a variety of backgrounds, and so, it is important to make clear that whilst some of our theories are applicable to the gig economy and those who work in it, many aspects such as labour classification or the heterogeneity of those who work in the gig economy clash.

Conclusion

This literature review has focussed on answering three core questions in order to explore the emergence, development and future of the gig economy. Regarding the relationship between the sociology of work and the gig economy, I have argued that it is underdeveloped. I have also argued that this is an existential threat for the sociology of work because it means that study of labour and the economy will become even more marginalised in the discipline, and that this could have consequences for the next generation of sociologists. The second section emphasised organisational structure and this was necessary to show the relationship between the different layers of the platform economy. The final section was on processes, and focussed on the use of independent contractors and

the trend of flexible or new capitalism. The literature in this review is important as it provides the foundation for the empirical chapters, however, the empirical chapters explain and develop these ideas further.

Chapter Three explains and addresses the role of nomenclature in this field and uses this as a means to explain further why an interdisciplinary field is difficult to navigate. This chapter also explores different typologies that have been created to understand gig couriers and uses these as a foundation to introduce a typology I have created to grasp three types of gig couriers. Chapter Four dives deeper into the organisational structure of the gig economy and focusses on the organisational socialisation of gig couriers. This chapter emphasises 'getting into' gig couriership, and explores how gig couriers 'learn the ropes. This chapter compares traditional organisational socialisation to the organisational socialisation in the gig economy, and uses this to posit how the gig economy is the next iteration of a "flexible firm". Chapter Five explores the practice of gig courier work and takes forward the ideas of precarity and temporal subservience. This is an important chapter for explaining further how the sociotechnical ensemble of digital platforms functions and provides a timely and convenient service. The final chapter, Chapter Six, furthers the idea of flexible capitalism and uses the ideal types to explore how the 'unholy trinity' of capitalism can be applied to understand the social conditions of contemporary capitalism. We can now turn to the methodological and theoretical foundations of this thesis.

Chapter Two: Studying Gig Courier Work

Introduction

Chapter One demonstrated how scholarship on the digital economy and its branches (such as the gig economy) are difficult to understand, however, whilst the field is complex and its interdisciplinarity means boundaries are blurred, a continuous obstacle for the field is an inconsistent operationalisation of concepts. For this reason, this chapter and *Chapter Three: Navigating Nomenclature and the Challenge of Characterising Couriers* are designed to mitigate against contributing to the problem by addressing it directly. For example, 'what is a gig worker?' is a key question addressed in the following chapter. The overarching purpose of this chapter and the next are to demonstrate the research design of this thesis, and also, to ensure that the scope and demarcation between concepts in this thesis are clear and that they can be understood by sociologists and non-sociologists alike.

This chapter explores the methodological foundations and design of this thesis. The chapter begins explaining the original design of the project and how adjustments needed to be made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is followed by outlining the epistemological and ontological position of this thesis, a reintroduction of the purpose, research questions and then a discussion on the theory, methodology and methods used in this thesis to study gig couriership.

Time-Bound Research and the impact of COVID-19

The original proposal for this PhD project was written in the final year of my undergraduate studies in 2016/2017 and intended to use a combination of ethnography, semi-structured interviews and focus groups to study a nascent form of work that was relatively fringe which

had interesting characteristics that challenged established norms and values in the world of work. Since then, the development of the gig economy has been nothing short of extraordinary. A useful way to demonstrate the growth of the gig economy is through the statistics on labour market participation. As of March 2023, the number of people regularly engaged in the UK gig economy is now estimated to be 7.25 million, which is 22.1% of the total UK workforce (Fennell, 2023); and according to the Office for National Statistics projections, there will be 14.86 million people involved in the gig economy by 2026 (in Fennell, 2023:1). If these projections hold true, we are not far away from an economy in which the majority of people are involved in the gig economy. Consequently, the subject matter for this PhD project has changed significantly since it began back in 2016.

The rapid development of the gig economy is one of the reasons that research on the gig economy is difficult because of how time-sensitive research into the gig economy is. For example, the first iteration of this chapter was written in March 2020 which was just before COVID-19 measures were enacted. The COVID-19 measures meant that the original design of this project and the opportunity for co-present research was impossible. Before the pandemic, I had plans to access the world of gig couriership in a similar way to Adam Badger (2021:120), who demonstrated the value of 'ride-along' or the 'cycle-along' interviews which meant 'following couriers at work throughout the day and discussing what was happening when we had the chance'. I was excited at the possibility of being able to link the practice of work to the practice of researching work together, yet, the closest I managed to get was when participants slotted me in-between a shift, or just after they had finished. Whilst this meant that the shift was still fresh in their memories, it meant that the data generated would be always be different to an in-situ interview.

In terms of the planned ethnography, it should be made clear that I despite my efforts I was unable to gain access to work as a gig courier myself. I applied to join the gig economy in October 2019, yet, my application was not acknowledged and I was never onboarded. At the time this was frustrating and was unexpected; however, once data collection began it was revealed to be a key part of the way recruitment works in the gig economy, which is discussed in *Chapter Four: Getting into Gig Courier Work.* At the same time, a delay in gaining ethical approval meant that the project was temporally suspended, which, in hindsight was eventually useful for conducting the interviews and for producing the conceptualisation of waiting and the idea of being On-Standby (*Chapter Five*). These are very important for questions of access and I discuss this more in the specific opportunities and challenges section. The point to make clear here is that whilst all social research is temporally situated, not all fields and projects will be impacted by time in the same way. For this reason, temporality is a necessary part of research design to be considered irrespective of whether temporality is a central feature or a variable in a social science research project (Maggetti, Radaelli and Gilardi, 2012).

When evaluating research on the gig economy, and in particular, this thesis, it is useful to recognise how gig couriership can be understood to exist in different time-periods. A simple distinction that will now apply to many fields will be Pre-COVID, during COVID and Post-COVID, however, this is not the only way to order the 'epochs' of gig couriership. For example, the Council of the European Union is currently seeking to tackle employment classification in the platform economy, and this will inevitably impact the UK irrespective of our membership in the European Union (2023). The (mis)classification of employment status has been a central point of contention of the gig economy, and if 'gig workers' are assumed to be employed by digital platforms by default, then the nature of the gig economy will

irrevocably change. This is very important for this research because it means being a gig courier will be qualitatively different should these reforms arrive.

In a similar fashion, being a gig courier during the COVID-19 lockdowns was a different world to the pre-COVID and post-COVID world due to the changes to the practice of work, for example, the inclusion of cleaning the equipment, the redefinition of space to facilitate social distancing, and of course, the risk of COVID-19 exposure before full vaccination was available. Consequently, it is important to make clear that because the data collection for this thesis took place during the pandemic, it captures a very specific period of time in the development and demographics of the gig economy.

Due to the restrictions on in-person interactions, the planned face-to-face interviews were replaced by online versions instead. This was a necessary change for the project to remain feasible, however, this meant that unique challenges now needed to be taken into account. For example, Jones and Abdelfattah (2020) advise interview candidates that technical issues such as internet connection and audio-visual equipment (microphones and webcams) can be disruptive or are able to prevent conducting an online interview entirely. Moreover, they note that mimicking aspects of the social environment of an in-person face-to-face interview can feel unnatural within an online environment as simulating eye-contact is achieved by looking at the camera, not at the person who you are speaking with (Jones and Abdelfattah, 2020:733).

From the perspective of conducting interviews for the purposes of research, the main emphasis in the literature was on the efficacy and the ethics of online interviews in the midst of the pandemic as a methodological compromise (Roberts, Pavlakis and Richards, 2021; Self, 2021; Samuk Carignani and Burchi, 2022). On the other hand, there has also been discussions on how digitalising interviews can be perceived as a form of innovation, and how

the necessary shift to virtual interviews could be reframed as an opportunity to 'demonstrate scope for longer-term, beneficial digitalisation of both traditional and emergent interview methods' (Keen, Lomeli-Rodriguez and Joffe, 2022:1). For example, Keen and colleagues (2022: 2) emphasise how traditional barriers such as geographical distance or cost of travel are negated by online interviews. In this way, adopting online interviews can also provide benefits to research projects by offering the potential to increase the scope of a sample. In practice, this meant that I was able to source gig couriers from across England as during data collection there were points I was unable to leave the area (due to lockdown restrictions), and even if it was permitted it would have been difficult due to the time and cost involved in travelling to the different parts of England.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic had an important impact that altered the conditions of gig courier work and determined the methodological approach that I could take. Online sampling of gig couriers was a difficult, time-consuming and unreliable process of obtaining access to participants which resulted in a number of participants that was less than intended in the original design of the project. The nature of gig couriers and the conditions of conducting research during COVID-19 conditions meant that despite a limited sample size of 18 gig couriers, it was necessary to move on from data collection rather than attempt to seek additional participants. Conducting research during COVID-19 was an unforeseeable challenge that disrupted the foundations of this project, however, by remaining adaptive, flexible and shifting to online interviews, I was able to complete a data collection phase whilst the world of work was in lockdown.

Methodological and Theoretical Foundations

The contribution that this project seeks to make is three-fold:

1) Develop understanding of the nature and construction of the gig economy through an empirical study of gig courier work.

2) Critically examine the lens of existing sociological literature and themes on flexible capitalism, and their usefulness for engagement with the gig economy.

3) Explore the gig economy as a foundation for the future of work

Research Questions:

1 What is the nature and construction of gig courier work in the UK gig economy?

i) How flexible is gig courier work?

ii) How does time and space promote a nomadic dynamic in gig work?

iii) How does the digital platform influence gig courier work?

2) To what extent are existing sociological literature and themes on flexible capitalism useful in studying the gig economy?

i) How can these theories and themes be refined?

3) What can the gig economy suggest about the future of work?

i) What is the quality and meaning of gig courier work?

ii) How sustainable is gig courier work?

iii) What is the role of gig courier work in workers' lives?

These aims and questions can be approached in many different ways; however, I decided that a qualitative approach was effective for a project which seeks to generate empirical data on gig courier work and evaluate the implications it has for the future of work. Moreover, a

qualitative approach was particularly necessary in the beginning as the field was more contested and empirical research was still emerging, yet, as of 2023, we now have access to rich completed accounts of gig courier work from across the Global North and South, for example, the United States (Popan, 2021), Germany (Heiland, 2021), Italy (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020), Australia (Orr *et al.,* 2023), Norway (Newlands, 2022), Great Britain (Christie and Ward, 2019), China (Lei, 2021), Malaysia (Uchiyama, Furuoka and Akhir, 2022) and India (Veluchamy *et al.,* 2021). Although varied and useful, as discussed in the literature review, the gig economy will manifest differently depending on the country due to the differences in factors such as labour laws, but also, in factors such as terrain, weather and the demographics of those who participate and the reasons for participation in the gig economy. For example, the majority of those who participate in the gig economy in India are economically dependent on the work, whereas this is the opposite in the UK and the rest of the Global North. In addition, the majority of these studies were completed *before* the pandemic and the transformative legal battles (such as Prop 22 in the United States or the EU reforms) which are shaping the gig economy today, which means generating data and insight into the nature and construction of gig couriership is an iterative process that will develop over time.

The research questions themselves could be addressed in different ways too, however in this project, I determined that an inductive and abductive approach would be effective. For the first research question on the nature and construction of gig courier work, an inductive approach is useful because of its capacity to 'explore a phenomenon, identify themes and patterns and create a conceptual framework' (Mitchell, 2018: 272) view, sociology is an underrepresented voice in the literature *and* the boundaries between the different types of work in the gig economy are blurred and this makes the development of a consistent and meaningful conceptual framework difficult to achieve. Generating a sociological

conceptualisation was important because it meant that the research would be focussed on practice of work and lived experience rather than a goal to optimise business processes or evaluate the efficacy of hardware in the gig economy. In addition, an active decision was made to conceptualise *gig courier work* rather than 'gig work' in order to build a distinction between the different types of work in the gig economy. This distinction is carried throughout this thesis to be a ground-clearing exercise to address definitional ambiguity in the field.

Another way to approach this project (especially if the project was being designed today) would be to take an abductive approach wherein existing conceptual frameworks could be deployed to see if they are able to be transplanted into different versions of the gig economy, for example, Ravenelle's typology (2019) in a UK context; which could then be modified and refined accordingly. Alternatively, an abductive approach could also be useful if the project intended to test the construction and nature of gig courier work in relation to the efficacy of applying existing theory to discussions on worker identity or for alienation theory (Yuill 2017; Petriglieri, Ashford and Wrzesniewski 2018).

Overall, even as the field has developed, an inductive approach remains important to understand gig courier work because of its context-dependent nature and the fact that cause and effect relationships remain relatively indeterminable. For this reason, deductive research into the gig economy has, and will continue to be, difficult to draw meaning from. For instance, the previous statistic on labour market participation is impressive (or frightening), but it tells us little about *how* or *why* people are actually engaging in the gig economy. Considering that the field is contingent; it remains important to generate data, insight and conceptual frameworks that contribute to an evidence base so that effective measurements (or regulation and policy) can be made.

For the second research question, an abductive approach was suitable as it requires using existing theoretical frameworks with the intention to evaluate their efficacy and refine their capacity to study new forms of work. The results to this research question were anticipated to emerge organically during the analysis of the data generated by the empirical components of the project. This was a success and was key to the development of the empirical chapters. This type of research question is often used in response to a phenomenon that is surprising, novel and/or unexplainable (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012), and so gig courier work is a prime candidate to borrow from literature and theory that was used to understand 20th century work. The pre-existence of theories and accounts of work means that research can be conducted '…by working iteratively between theory and data' (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2018: 589). Therefore, an abductive approach is also conducive to the tenet that 'in a qualitative study, research design should be a reflexive process operating through every stage of a project' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 24). By tweaking and optimising the research design as it unfolded, the theoretical frameworks and ideas I developed are hopefully as dynamic as the field they seek to explain.

Another advantage of the abductive approach is that whilst it is a systematic evaluation of an idea, it avoids the pursuit of nullification that would be required with Popper's falsification (2005). This is important because with phenomena such as the gig economy, projects will struggle to categorically determine 'truth'. Indeed, as I discuss throughout this thesis, the practice of work between gig couriers can differ significantly depending on their individual relationship to gig courier work, but also, the places and spaces they use to do it, and this is important because a perfect representation of a specific group or absolute generalisations are unnecessary benchmarks to generate meaningful knowledge. The gig economy (and its food delivery sector) is a vast and varied phenomena which means qualitative social research is necessary to grasp and make sense of a complex system. For

this reason, abductive reasoning is an important part of this project because it enables meaningful and useful explanatory power to be generated about fields of study that are difficult, if not impossible, to deductively examine.

The third research question concerns the future of work, and it another question that is effective to answer through an inductive approach. The sub-questions in this research question could be included in research question one, however, as their direction and purpose looks beyond the gig economy, it was necessary to have their own research question. As with the first research question, the sub-questions should be approached inductively because theory-generating data is necessary at this stage in the development of the field, and also, because cause-and-effect relationships are relatively indeterminable. An approach designed to identify cause-and-effect relationships is incompatible with the goal of this thesis to generate meaningful knowledge about quality, meaning-making and the wider role of the gig economy in peoples' lives and their orientation to the wider labour market. The future of work is a particularly interesting question because it is a discussion of the present and how it relates to the future, and for this reason, an inductive approach was the most effective way to generate insight into the implications of the gig economy for the future of work.

Researching Gig Couriers

In total, I conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with gig couriers. Semi-structured interviews were selected as a method because they are a staple of sociological research that engages with the idea of 'if you want to know how people understand the world and their lives, why not talk with them?' (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: xvii; King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2018). In terms of data saturation, it has been argued that thematic saturation can occur in

as little as six interviews (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006). This was true of this case and has also been reported by others who have researched the gig economy (e.g., Christie and Ward, 2019). For this reason, 18 interviews with gig couriers were sufficient to create a thematic matrix which could then be deployed to construct a typology to reflect the different relationships gig couriers have with the work.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed my fieldwork. Besides managing to generate rich data to address my research questions, I also had very interesting conversations throughout with the gig couriers because they come from a variety of backgrounds which meant each participant was often quite different from the last. Most interviews with gig couriers lasted over 1 hour 30 minutes, the shortest interview was 54 minutes and the longest interview was 2 hours and 30 minutes. As mentioned above, interviews were held remotely via Zoom due to COVID-19 restrictions and whilst technology issues were present at points, the interviews were relatively undisruptive and any issues were managed through patience and persistence. As mentioned in the impact of COVID-19 section, video interviews were effective as they eliminated travel (which was impossible under COVID-19), were cost-effective (very helpful for a PhD project) and were synchronised in time and space (Saarijärvi and Bratt, 2021).

The debate on video interviews and their relation to time and space has progressed since online interviews became the default (Saarijärvi and Bratt, 2021). Not all online interview formats are identical, and for this reason it is important to emphasise that the video interviews I conducted were more similar to a face-to-face interview rather than the asynchronous video interviews used in modern hiring practices (Lukacik, Bourdage and Roulin 2022; Roulin and Bourdage 2023). In the view of the time/space collaboration matrix (Kim *et al.,* 2010) the interviews I conducted were in the same time-zone which meant

synchronisation was straightforward; which enabled an online interview that could provide real-time responses despite the fact that we were in different spaces geographically. However, limiting the conceptualisation of synchronous space to the 'physical' world is less applicable in an increasingly digitalised world. My Zoom meeting room was a private space that controlled access to, and once participants were granted access and settled in, we shared the space together. It would have been challenging to recreate the same private environment in the physical world. Despite the benefits of the online interviews, the time and space of interviews has an impact on the dynamics of the interview and the ability to build and maintain rapport.

Fortunately, all gig couriers (except one) were willing to enable their cameras for the interview which meant we could see each other and this helped with the goal to build and maintain rapport (Abbe and Brandon, 2014; McGrath, Palmgren and Liljedahl, 2019). Video cameras are quite important because it is the feature that facilitates a research environment that is most similar to a face-to-face interview. Indeed, the main benefit of a face-to-face interview is that emotion and body language can be gauged, which is something that is lost in a telephone interview or an email-based 'e-interview' (Burnard, 1994; Bampton and Cowton, 2002). Creating an environment where my participants felt safe and free to share their experiences was my goal because I wanted to ensure that that gig couriers felt comfortable to discuss the more personal (and often negative) impacts of gig couriership on their lives. After the formal interviews finished, I would stay in the Zoom room with gig couriers to answer their questions, which often included my research and its implications, or life under COVID-19. These conversations often ended with gig couriers offering luck (and their condolences) for transcription and the rest of the project, however, sometimes these conversations generated additional data. These conversations felt ethically important too, as they were a kind of debrief to reassure gig couriers that their contributions to my research

were safe and that I cared about them as individuals and was not simply 'extracting' their experiences from them. In this way, I was taking more of a participatory approach to 'work *with'* rather than 'work *on'* participants to generate data (Sinha and Back, 2014:475).

I made the decision to transcribe interviews manually rather than use software to automate the process. Bolden (2015: 276) describes the transcription of interviews as a 'crucial research activity rather than a step preliminary to research… [as] researchers become analysts rather than simple observers of interaction'. Bolden (2015:276) also argues that machine-transcribed data enables a researcher access to 'vast banks of data' but this encourages researchers to engage with data they are unfamiliar with, which can lead to an incomplete understanding of the data and an analysis that could miss something important. Furthermore, Bolden (2015:277) explains how transcription is more than 'just writing down what you hear' and argues that even though transcription is a very time-consuming process that is often described as 'grunt work' or a task for the novice, 'the analytic and educational payoffs are hard to overemphasise'.

As a PhD *student,* the overarching objective of this project is to be examined on research rigour and to demonstrate that I can be an independent researcher that can conduct and defend high quality scholarly research (Goodman, Robert and Johnson, 2020). For this reason, the time I spent revisiting the recordings of the interviews and typing up over 200,000 words was a very valuable part of my research training because it enabled me to know my data and my participants well. Whilst it took a very long time, this was when I felt I had turned a corner in the PhD research and that I was making progress. The process of working through the recordings and re-experiencing each interview was a crucial aid to the inductive and abductive approach to identify patterns and themes, confirm data saturation,

develop and refine theory and concepts, and feel confident that my analysis was solid and defensible. The completed transcriptions are evidence (and the trophy) of this process. Recruitment for interview participants took place across two phases to try and capture the impact the seasonal aspect of gig courier work; from sunshine and ice-cream to darkness and black ice. Two phases were particularly necessary because of the high-turnover of gig courier work, and the idea was that by interviewing in two phases I would guarantee that I would not only have those who experienced gig couriership in a single season in my sample. This was an effective strategy as the majority of my participants had only been involved in the gig economy for less than three months (some even weeks) and this meant that I could have missed them had I only recruited during one season. Indeed, after data collection took place and I moved into analysis and the drafting of empirical chapters, I since learned that a few of my participants stopped their participation in the gig economy altogether which further emphasises the time-sensitive nature of sampling in the gig economy. The semi-structured interviews included topics such as the reasons for engaging in gig courier work, their onboarding experience, their relationship with the platform and the future of work (see appendix for full list).

Sampling: Gig Couriers

As this was a PhD project, I did not have the resources to use a field work company to generate a sample of gig couriers; nor did I have the budget to use Pay-Per-Click advertisements which use cookies and browser history to target only to those who are believed to be involved in the gig economy (see Christie and Ward, 2019). Being unable to use these resources meant I needed to devise a strategy that would enable access to gig

couriers as the original plan of going to the places they congregate or waiting outside a restaurant was forbidden under COVID-19 measures.

Gig couriers in the best of circumstances are a slippery and a hard-to-reach group (Chamberlain and Hodgetts, 2018; Badger and Woodcock, 2019). As a result, gig couriers are already resistant to traditional sampling techniques which means obtaining interview participants during the COVID-19 pandemic was always going to be very difficult. In the scenario of a hard-to-reach group, snowball sampling is often the suggested methodological response because a sample could` be generated by obtaining initial 'seed' participants who would then recruit other participants based on their existing networks (Parker, Scott and Geddes 2019). As an outsider to gig couriership, I thought that snowball sampling would be an important part of the sampling process as I was unable to become a gig courier myself. It quickly became clear that irrespective of whether I was able to become a gig courier or not, snowball sampling was an ineffective method to gain gig courier participants. As Badger's (2021) research also demonstrates, being embedded in gig couriership does not enable access to a pool of gig couriers who are willing to be interviewed. Badger's (2021: 122) sample of 10 gig couriers were all involved in the trade union movement, and all non-union gig couriers declined to be interviewed. This is interesting because it demonstrates how Badger's sample of gig couriers reflects gig couriers who are already operating and behaving in a different way to the majority of gig couriers who are either actively against or ambivalent towards unionisation. On the other hand, in my sample, none of the gig couriers were involved in the unionisation movement and this means that our samples of gig couriers are quite different at least in the attitudes they represent.

One of the reasons gig couriers are difficult to access is because an official sampling frame is inaccessible, which means that generating a sample of gig couriers will inevitably be limited

in scope and representativeness. Another challenge is that an official sampling frame (if one even exists) would be in the control of the gig companies, and also, the sampling frame would not be able to distinguish between who is and who is not active in their participation in the gig economy. For example, Li and colleagues (2023) explored wellbeing of 'sharing economy' workers during the pandemic and used online forums to access their participants, however, not all workers will use online forums. For this reason, unofficial sampling frames are a practical alternative, and even though not all gig couriers are members on an online forum, this still enables purposive sampling.

Purposive sampling is useful in qualitative research because it is an approach that allows the researcher to use their judgment to select participants based on pre-defined criteria (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2016). My primary inclusion criteria were whether or not the participant was working in the gig economy food delivery sector, however, I also attempted to recruit gig couriers based on perceptible social characteristics (such as ethnicity, sex or age) and geographical location in order to bolster the diversity of the sample. I managed to gather a wide range of ages of white males from across England (full demographic table is in Chapter 3), but I struggled to recruit gig couriers from minority groups, and despite my efforts, I was unable to secure an interview with a female gig courier at all. I suspect my positionality as a researcher impacted my ability to recruit female gig couriers. The female gig couriers I tried to recruit were the most sceptical of my intent and often rejected my call for participation outright or ignored me altogether. I also attempted snowball sampling to gain access to female gig couriers, but this failed too.

This has consequences for research on the gig economy because as Badger (2021:59) explains, a gendered analysis of food delivery gig courier work has the potential to be significant. For example, Milkman and colleagues' intersectional analysis of 'Gender, Class

and the Gig Economy' (2021), predominately focussed on women in the US gig economy which showcases the experience of 'gig work' from a gendered lens. Besides highlighting the role of gender in the gig economy, the research is also useful as it demonstrates how important geographical context is to understand the nature of gig courier work. For example, Badger (2021:59) refers to the experience of work and the barriers to entry as being different for female gig couriers because bicycle couriership is a hyper-masculine environment. This is important for understanding specific contexts of gig courier work because if the infrastructure is built for cars (as it is in the US), this means that unless you are working in a dense city, a bicycle (even an e-bike) would be challenging to use to complete the work. In contrast, England, and especially London, are densely populated (and relatively flat) which means a bicycle or e-bike is more feasible.

The majority of female gig couriers use a car or a scooter to complete their deliveries which means the US lends itself to car gig couriership. Furthermore, a car gig courier is more isolated than the bicycle or scooter gig courier, which means on-the-street recruitment would be more difficult to identify unless they are carrying their delivery bag. Whilst it is outside the scope of this chapter, it feels important to note that there is something interesting in the fact that female gig couriers are relatively equal to male gig couriers in the US, but males dominate the driving/taxi sector (Milkman *et al.,* 2021). Both forms of work in the US lend themselves to using a car, but the key difference is that a taxi requires a person to enter your car whereas this is not the case for food delivery. I suspect the reason for this is safety, and I would suggest safety is one of the reasons that female gig couriers did not want to speak with me. After all, even the politest and professionally crafted message was still coming from a stranger.

Indeed, gig couriers are difficult to access in general because they are sceptical or perhaps frightened to be placed in the spotlight because of the potential consequences this could

have. When I was attempting to gain access to online forums, I had to prove I was a legitimate researcher. My proof was my researcher profile on the university website coupled with an explanation that the project was funded by the ESRC. Essentially, I needed to persuade and convince these gatekeepers that I was not a spy for one of the gig companies. As I discuss throughout this thesis, the threat of termination is very real because unfair dismissal does not exist, and this means that these online communities are often a sanctuary space where rules and access is determined by gig couriers *for* gig couriers. For this reason, even though I had the paperwork to prove I was a researcher, this was insufficient for some gatekeepers on the grounds that I was not a gig courier. Consequently, access and the importance of 'insider' status depending on the community, and fortunately, the largest had formalised procedures for gaining access for research purposes.

Gaining access to forums to post a call for participation was the first step of recruitment, however, obtaining the trust of participants was more challenging than I anticipated. Recruiting gig couriers from online forums meant spending many hours trying to convince prospective participants of who I was (despite my verified researcher status), why I was interested in their experience as a gig courier and that I did not have malicious intent. The majority of gig couriers ignored or rejected me outright, others were unconvinced and politely declined, and some actively disagreed with the entire premise of the project and decided to make it very clear that they would not participate. This was such an obstacle for the research that even gig couriers who I managed to successfully schedule an interview with (I stopped counting how many did not eventually show up) were sceptical about my intentions and what I wanted from them. For example, Maverick is a prominent gig courier in this thesis and he openly told me that 'when I got that message, I thought you were going to be a prick. I thought this was going to be a wind-up. That's what I thought'. Before his interview, I spoke to Maverick for hours because I wanted to convince him that I was genuine

and that I was competent enough to not waste his time. Indeed, quite a few gig couriers (especially the veterans), would ask me questions to test my knowledge, which I think was a blend of a competence test and curiosity. Fortunately, I managed to pass these tests and received very pleasant feedback such as 'it's like you're one of us!', or my favourite, Maverick's assurance that I was 'very good at my job' and that he would have told me otherwise. Consequently, considering these were my 'successful' interviews with gig couriers, this provides an insight into the practice of sampling gig couriers and how it was a time-consuming and difficult process which carried over into a successful interview.

Ethical Considerations: Gig Couriers

The ethical considerations for this project have remained important throughout as the design of the project changed. In the beginning, Fincham's ethnographic work into bicycle couriers (2006; 2007; 2008) was the foundation for how I could navigate interacting with gig couriers in order to foster rapport and trust. Gaining 'insider status' would mean that participants would feel 'as if they were talking to another "insider" with whom they have an affinity' (Becker, 1951; Becker, 1963; Fincham, 2006:191). However, as discussed previously, gig couriers are very reluctant to speak with even those who have achieved insider status, let alone a researcher (Badger, 2021). One of the reasons for this scepticism is because one of the core power dynamics within gig courier work is that gig couriers can be terminated without cause. For the vulnerable gig courier who is economically dependent on the work, being terminated would mean that access to the platform and the chance to earn income would immediately cease. Even though I made it clear in my information sheet and consent form that their data would be anonymised and pseudonyms would be used, it is

understandable that gig couriers (especially the vulnerable) may not want to increase the risk of being terminated by admitting in an interview to behaviour and practice that is against the terms of service. As gig couriers often admitted to illegal activity or behaviour that was against the terms of service, it was important to keep data secure. If the gig couriers read this thesis (I encouraged them to only read the empirical chapters) they will likely be able to identify themselves, but they will be unable to identify each other, which is ideal because it means a gig company will be unable to either.

Another ethical dilemma was whether or not to pay gig couriers for their time. This issue was discussed at length with my supervisory team and I made the decision to compensate each gig courier with a £10 Amazon voucher. It was felt that as each gig courier gave time that they could have spent earning money instead, it was at least a gesture to show respect to their time. Whilst I acknowledge that renumeration for interview participation (especially with vulnerable groups) can be ethically troublesome (Head, 2009; Surmiak, 2020), a financial incentive was helpful (perhaps even necessary) for recruitment purposes. However, it should be mentioned that quite a few of the gig couriers were hesitant to take the voucher until I made it clear that it was not 'my money' and that it was instead coming from the 'research pot'. As a young PhD student, the gig couriers knew I had little resources or power in the world, and this meant that the power dynamic was less than it would have been if I was researching the gig economy as an established academic, and was much smaller than if I was working on behalf of a gig company. Another way that the power dynamic was lessened was through how I had attempted and failed to gain access to work as a gig courier as it meant that I demonstrated a similar vulnerability which meant I could empathise with features of the world of gig courier work even though I had not personally worked as a gig courier.

Analysis

The empirical data generated from this project took the form of interview transcripts. I transcribed the data manually which meant I converted the audio-visual data into a consistent format which was text. The approach to transcription was mainly denaturalised, however, I decided to include pauses and actions such as laughter, tonal shift or body language where I thought it was particularly meaningful, yet, this was written in standard prose using parentheses and took place on an ad hoc basis rather than a decision of protocol (Oliver, Serovich and Mason, 2005). I uploaded each transcription into the software package NVivo as this enabled cross-coding that could be identified in a single form (Braun and Clarke, 2012; Gibbs, 2007).

I used 'In Vivo' coding which was useful because it used the participants verbatim words to influence how codes are formed, which was important because it included the role of language and subculture into the analysis. For example, 'multi-apping', 'going stealth' or 'car' were codes generated from gig couriers. Car is a good example because it had the dual-meaning of the actual vehicle, but more importantly, the distinction between cyclist gig couriers and car gig couriers. Coding was emergent and was hierarchal in nature. A hierarchical approach enabled the identification of patterns and themes to be specified in terms of their relationships with one another which meant analysis could happen on a multigranular level (Castleberry and Nolen ,2018). For example, a higher-order code was 'relationship with platform' which then included 'algorithm', 'app' or 'rider support' as subcodes.

As Castleberry and Nolan explain (2018: 808), it is important that the data is arranged so that it tells the story of the data and not in a way to support a researcher's theory, and as such, when I was compiling the themes in level of importance, I was careful to ensure that I

was not forcing a narrative. Indeed, it was important that the analysis was an iterative process that took place throughout data collection and beyond. This meant that the capacity of existing concepts and theoretical frameworks could be examined for their applicability to the empirical data. During fieldwork, this was useful for refining the way interviews were conducted in that questions became more refined as data collection went on, and afterwards, it was useful because I would return to analysis I had conducted previously to update and refine it with new ideas. As a result, each of the empirical chapters has a concept that has been developed or refined through this process.

Focus Groups with Consumers

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, I also conducted three focus groups with consumers (19 in total) in the gig economy. The focus groups were always intended to be supplementary evidence. As the focus groups took place during the COVID-19 pandemic too, the options to recruit participants were limited. I decided to use convenience sampling to recruit the consumers and I used Zoom to hold the meetings in a similar way to how interviews with gig couriers were conducted.

Each group was designed to focus on a different demographic. One group was with fellow PhD students in the UK, another was with people in South East England who were all employed and used the gig economy frequently, and the final group was international and was intended to act as a comparison between being a consumer in the UK to being a consumer in the USA. The focus groups lasted over an hour each. Compensation was not offered in the same way as gig couriers as I had pre-existing personal relationships with these participants which meant recruitment for focus groups was much more

straightforward. Participants were provided with information sheets and consent forms and we discussed the construction of the gig economy, the values of the gig economy, and the future of the gig economy.

In the end, the data from the focus groups did not readily fit into an empirical chapter which means it is not explicitly discussed in this thesis. However, the data was interesting and it was important for shaping ideas on the conditions and consequences of living and working in a gig economy. For example, the PhD students spoke of the strain between ethical consumption and the convenience and 'crutch' of using the gig economy. This was important for the relationship between consumer and gig couriers because the gig courier being the 'crutch' was dependent on them being temporally suspended, and this was important for the development of *Chapter Five: Service on Standby: The Practice and Lived Experience of Gig Courier Work*. Similarly, each focus group detailed how whilst the gig economy could be a 'get out of jail free card', it also had negative impacts such as enabling unhealthy eating. This was useful as it was corroborated in interviews with gig couriers who explained that some people were vulnerable and relied on them to get their groceries, but at the same time, they would have regular customers who would buy alcohol or fast food which made some gig couriers uncomfortable. Moreover, this sentiment is echoed in other aspects of this project in that the gig economy is a useful phenomenon as long as it is a resource rather than something to be dependent on.

Methodological Shortcomings/Limitations

The methodological shortcomings of this thesis are mainly centred around the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the nature of the field itself and my positionality and status as a researcher. As aforementioned, recruitment techniques were disrupted by COVID-19 which

meant an already a hard-to-reach group became even more challenging to access. Even though sampling of gig couriers is challenging even without the addition of COVID-19 conditions, it is important to restate that the sample of gig couriers used in this project is limited. Furthermore, the sample generated only represents gig couriers working in England which has significant variance in itself. This is important because findings are tethered to the English gig economy and its specific temporal context.

The absence of female couriers in the sample is a weakness of the sample. It should be restated that the influence of sex and gender on gig courier work is sociologically meaningful to understand the nature and construction of gig courier work and its role in living and working in a gig economy. For example, Badger (2021: 59) explains how the 'scheduling flexibility allowed women to balance paid labour and domestic caring labour' compared to other types of work such as retail. The role of gig courier work in the lives of the gig couriers was central to this thesis, and as I only have men represented, this thesis partially captures those who participate in the food delivery sector of the gig economy.

Another important aspect to highlight is how high turnover and intermittent participation in the gig economy inevitably impact the composition of a sample of gig couriers. I discussed earlier how I recruited gig couriers in two stages to broaden the sample, however, it is necessary to emphasise the importance of migrant labour in the gig economy and how this influences a sample of gig couriers. To be clear, by migrant labour I am referring to both foreign national workers who came to the UK and work in the gig economy, but also, the idea of gig courier work itself primarily being populated by people who have an intermittent or temporary relationship with the work.

For the impact of foreign nationals, a recent study by Abkhezr and McMahon (2022) on the impact of migration on app-based work in the gig economy notes that migrants from the

Global South to the Global North often come seeking decent work and prosperity but find that post-migration can place them into a more vulnerable position due to the 'complex, systemic and structural constraints and challenges that migrants face with their career development after migration' (Abkhezr and McMahon, 2022: 45) which is related to factors such as unfamiliar labour markets and language barriers. For this reason, these individuals find that the gig economy, and in particular the food delivery or ride-hailing sector are the 'quick pathway to self-sufficiency and financial independence that it appears to offer' (Abkehezr and McMahon, 2022: 46). This is important because the vast majority of participants in the sample are British citizens which means that the gig couriers who are the most susceptible to the precarious conditions of the gig economy who are also likely having this experience compounded by the conditions of post-migration are under-represented in the sample. For example, later in the thesis I discuss Nasir and how his UK spouse visa complicates his relationship with the gig economy, however, at the same time, it should be noted that being a foreign national is not the sole factor in determining an unfavourable precarious relationship with the gig economy, which is described well by David (Ireland) or Piotr (Poland) who had favourable relationships with the gig economy. In sum, whilst the sample of gig couriers used in this project is limited and a partial reflection of the experience of gig couriership in England, it was sufficient to provide enough data to contribute to an understanding of the practice and the lived experience of gig courier work.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the research design of this thesis and shown how it is effective to study the food delivery sector of the gig economy. The first section begins by explaining the influence of COVID-19, the time-bound nature of research on the gig economy and the

impact this had on this project. This is important for contextualising research on the gig economy, and for evaluating it in relation to what was happening in the gig economy (and the world) at the time. For example, the idea of gig organisational socialisation I introduce later (*Chapter Four: Getting into Gig Courier Work)* could be used as a framework to study other forms of work in the gig economy, or alternatively, it could be used to understand how other sectors (such as Higher Education) are becoming more precarious. This chapter explained the choice of methods and detailed the strengths and the limitations of using online interviews to study gig couriers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter also discussed the limitations of this project, in particular the sampling, and how whilst this was heavily influenced by both the nature of gig couriers and COVID-19 conditions, the limited sample of gig couriers in this project means that the findings have important limitations related to the sex/gender and the role of migrant labour in the UK gig economy.

Now that the theoretical and methodological foundations of the thesis have been established, it is possible to turn to the issues of conceptualisation and operationalisation in the gig economy. The next chapter focusses on making sense of gig couriers as a 'group' through the language and categories used to describe them. The shared goal of this chapter and the next is to establish the basis for this thesis, and make the language and contours of the gig economy more accessible and clearer.

Chapter Three: Navigating Nomenclature and the Challenge of Characterising Couriers

Introduction

Chapter One provided an overview of the key contributions on the debate on how we conceive and grasp how digital platforms have created novel economic forms and practices. The debate on how we should refer to these forms and practices is ongoing; however, I have adopted the 'gig economy' as my umbrella term of choice to describe these overarching forms and practices. As I argued in Chapter One, 'gig economy' is useful because it offers a description of the 'employment' relationship between actors (unlike 'sharing economy') and because it has connections with 'traditional' structural processes and ways of organising work and labour. To restate, the gig economy is an umbrella term because it refers to a wide range of economic forms and practices. Chapter One explored some typologies that have been designed to describe the ranging types of platform-related work, and I explained that I am focussed on the 'asset-based' (Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2019) or 'through-the-platform services' (Zukerfeld, 2022). Furthermore, I am interested in a particular part of that sector, which is transportation of goods, not people, and so I am focussed on work related to delivery platforms such as Deliveroo, UberEats and Stuart.

The boundaries and the placement of different services is a matter for debate, and this debate is one of the reasons why the delivery sector has proven tricky to research, legislate and regulate because it is difficult to know what is included and what is excluded in a discussion of the 'gig economy'. This chapter is essential for exploring the reason why this is the case, and for setting the stage for subsequent chapters by exploring how we can understand individuals and their lives in relation to gig courier work.

The structure of this chapter has three sections: *The Challenge of Who Does Gig Work, How Can We Define Gig Couriers?* and finally, *A Gig Courier Typology*.

This chapter has two core aims. The first aim is to address the question that has dominated sociological inquiry into the gig economy: 'Who does gig work?'. This question is essential to address because it acts as the foundation to understanding the theoretical and methodological challenges of conceptualising gig work and its workers. The second aim of this chapter is to examine existing conceptualisations of gig couriers and use them to support a typology I have designed which reflects the three 'ideal types' of gig courier: '*Survivors*', '*Side Hustlers'*, and '*Free Agents*'.

In summary, this chapter seeks to demonstrate the theoretical and methodological challenges of conceptualising gig workers and offer a typology that helps to grasp and explain the distinctions in the relationship different gig couriers have with their work.

The challenge of Who Does Gig Work?

The question of 'who does gig work?' has been one of the most important questions because it is similar to a Millennium Prize Problem (Carlson, Jaffe and Wiles, 2006) in that if solved it would mark significant progress in our understanding of the gig economy, gig work and those who work in the gig economy; providing researchers, politicians and other key stakeholders the information they need to develop conceptual frameworks and policies in response. However, much like the Millennium Prize Problems, or perhaps, pulling Excalibur from the stone, many researchers have tried to conclusively answer this question but each has struggled with the volatility, variance and fast-changing world of gig work. For this reason, the question of 'who does gig work?' is useful to discuss because it has proven to be a theoretical and methodological challenge.

Notably, Huws and colleagues (2017) described how, once again, researchers interested in the gig economy were exploring a socio-economic phenomenon which was both 'undefined' and 'rapidly changing'. This was an important moment because these researchers contextualised the challenge, making comparisons between the process of researching teleworking in the 1990's and the attempts to measure the gig economy today. As Huws and colleagues state:

> '…the definition of a teleworker was not a simple either/or variable but rather a constructed variable in which a number of different features (the place of work, the nature of the technology used, the extent to which the work required this technological underpinning to be completed successfully, the proportion of time spent working in this way and so on) were cross-tabulated with each other to form specific definitions' (2017:14).

The idea of a 'constructed variable' is important because it shows how the ascribed meaning of new terms is contingent and is subject to the fashion cycles of academic and nonacademic use. For example, in the beginning of teleworking research, there were many competing terms to describe those who engaged in this form of work. Terms such as 'digital nomad', 'telecommuter' and 'networker' would have been used to refer to a particular case, however, eventually, the nomenclature of choice became 'teleworker', and now, following the events of COVID-19 and the lockdowns it could be argued that 'remote worker' has replaced 'teleworker' (Hardill and Green 2003; Nickson and Siddons 2012; Phillips 2020). The point to be made here is that the language we choose to document, describe and discuss socio-economic phenomena is important and has real consequences for the development of knowledge in a field. Language can be expected to shift and morph over time, however, in the beginning when a field is nascent and researchers are still trying to determine the linguistic tools to grasp subject material, the lack of shared concepts and guiding definitions

makes it difficult to craft theory because the foundation is unsettled, which has the effect of clouding the meaning of some contributions over time.

A helpful example of this clouding-over-time can be found in Hardill and Green's article (2003:212) where they discuss how 'cyberspace' and remote working marked the dawn of a new economy which would challenge established temporal and spatial norms of work. They explained how 'cyberspace' had the potential to liberate commuters and allow them to have more leisure time. In this example, the theory that temporal and spatial forms of work are being disrupted is undermined by using the term 'cyberspace'. Even in 2003 'cyberspace' was an ontologically troublesome choice because it predated the internet and has its roots in science fiction rather than technology, and 20 years later, cyberspace is not synonymous with "the internet" but instead has specific applications to discuss the notional environments or 'virtual worlds' that the internet takes place in (Koepsell 2003; Ozcan-Deniz 2022). In other words, the language used in 2003 seems odd or incorrect because it does not hold the meaning it once did as the meaning of language has shifted. This is important because it captures the acceleration of change in the world of work. Industrial sociology has a lexicon that is applicable to centuries of labour and capital organisation, meanwhile, the language used to describe the platform economy is resistant to even a decade.

Time is not the only barrier to designing effective nomenclature. A key issue with 'who does gig work?' and gig research in general is it has not been an interdisciplinary endeavour, and this has led to isolated research outputs. It is clear that gig researchers have primarily found comfort in their own disciplines, and understandably, have focussed on connecting the gig economy to them. For example, Alice Brawley (2017:687) began her article on 'The Big Gig Picture: We Can't Assume the Same Constructs Matter' with 'I am concerned about industrial and organisation (I-O) psychology's relevance to the gig economy'. However, this

does not mean that there is a consensus within disciplines, as Watson and colleagues (who are also industrial and organisational psychologists) note:

> '[definitional ambiguity] is an obstacle to the progression of the literature as using different definitions of gig work limits accumulation of knowledge across studies and creates redundancy in literature where multiple terms refer to the same phenomenon' (Watson *et al.* 2021).

The consequences of this fractured approach have been far-reaching for scholarship on the gig economy, as it has meant that instead of accumulating knowledge in a 'big gig project', we have reached a position where each discipline (and even individual researchers) have developed their own separate ways of understanding and explaining the gig economy. This means it has been difficult to know if two contributions from the same discipline (let alone two contributions from different disciplines) are talking about the same issue. This situation has made it difficult to conclusively answer 'who does gig work?' because the lack of consensus has exposed research outputs to Jingle-Jangle fallacies.

Jingle and Jangle fallacies are explained well by (Reeves and Venator 2014) in their discussion of terminology used to describe 'non-cognitive factors', but their explanation is helpful here too. A Jingle fallacy describes an instance where 'a single term describes a multiplicity of quite different things' whilst the Jangle fallacy describes when 'different terms are used to describe the same thing' (Reeves and Venator, 2014:1). Contemporary gig economy research remains exposed to the Jangle fallacy as terms such as the 'Platform Economy' (Drahokoupil and Piasna 2019), 'Sharing Economy' (Chai and Scully 2019),or 'Crowdwork' (Gerber and Krzywdzinski 2019) remain popular in the literature, however, if a researcher has been exposed to the field for long enough, it is possible to navigate and decipher these contributions in the same way as a colour-blind person can train themselves to know that what they perceive as the colour 'red' is actually the colour 'blue'. On the other

hand, the term ‘gig worker’ has a similar level of explanatory power as the word ‘job’ due to the Jingle fallacy. Even as of 2023, we still do not have an exhaustive definition on what exactly a ‘gig worker’ is. Instead, attention has been placed on what a gig worker is *not,* and even this has remained a legal quagmire for years. In essence, the problem with ‘who does gig work?’ is that two workers can have little in common besides their label. For example, the asynchronous and remote software engineer based in Vietnam working for Silicon Valley once a month is just as much as gig worker as the Uber driver in California who works 12 hours a day, 6 days a week.

Fallacy Type	*Meaning*	*Examples*
Jingle	A single term that describes different things	Gig Worker and Gig Work Fruit and Vegetables
Jangle	Multiple terms that can describe the same thing	Sharing Economy, Crowdwork and Gig Economy Juvenile, Teenager and Young Adult

Table 3.1: Jingle and Jangle Fallacies

To complicate matters further, the research agenda and the gig economy itself continues to grow, emboldened by the heightened role of the gig economy during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in particular, the designation of gig workers as ‘frontline’ or ‘key workers’

during national lockdowns (Cherry and Rutschman 2020; Quigley *et al.* 2022). These labels given to gig workers have led to discussions on whether the pandemic has meant that the status and public perception of gig work has now irrevocably changed; moving from a position of 'expendable' to 'essential' labour (Cherry and Rutschman, 2020; Katta *et al.* 2020; de Jesus 2021; Agrawal *et al.* 2022). Viewing the gig economy (and its workers) as 'essential' is a particularly key theoretical development for the field because the debate on whether or not we should take the gig economy seriously now seems to be settled firmly in favour of the gig economy being treated as a permanent and important feature of the UK, if not the global economy (Healy, Nicholson and Pekarek 2017b; Crouch 2019; Broda 2022). The stance that treats the gig economy as a permanent feature of the UK economy is bolstered further by market research which claims involvement in the gig economy has tripled in the last five years, meaning now '4.4 million people (14.7% of working adults) are working with gig economy platforms at least once a week' (Trade Union Congress 2021:5). The reason this makes matters worse for 'who does gig work?' is because the gig economy's development and its gradual embeddedness in everyday life could suggest that a paradigm shift has occurred, or is at least underway. In other words, it could be the case that our initial question of 'who does gig work?' which was once designed to investigate the novel is set to be replaced by 'what gig work do you do?' in the same fashion as 'do you have social media?' became 'which social media do you have?'.

These issues mean it is time to challenge whether 'who does gig work?' is a meaningful question to ask anymore. Jingle and Jangle fallacies have complicated matters significantly and have created an explanatory barrier, and for this reason, this thesis discontinues the use of 'gig work' and 'gig worker'. In the place of 'gig work', my work will instead use 'gig courier work' or 'gig couriership' to describe that I am explicitly referring to the delivery service offered by companies such as Stuart, Deliveroo or UberEats. In the same way, 'gig courier'

explicitly refers to the individuals that are engaged in this form of work. The only term that I maintain is 'gig' as it remains the most theoretically consistent and value-neutral way to express this form of work and labour as part of a wider economic system of production, distribution, exchange and consumption. Consequently, whilst this thesis concedes that it too is unable to answer 'who does gig work?', it is certainly able to contribute meaningfully to 'who does *gig courier work?*'.

How can we define a gig courier?

Shelving the Jingle-Jangle terms means we are finally able to ask the interesting questions about gig couriers and their work. After explaining the importance of language, it is essential to avoid recreating Jingle-Jangle terms, so in the spirit of trying to mitigate definitional ambiguity we must first ask: 'what is a gig courier?'.

Currently, in the UK a gig courier is offered *supplier agreements* by digital platforms such as Deliveroo, Stuart or UberEats. The idea behind these supplier agreements is that they grant individuals access to a digital platform's 'supplier pool' as long as the individual continues to meet the terms and conditions. The supplier agreement and the supplier pool are very important pieces of understanding the construction of the gig courier, but they will both be explored in depth in the gig organisational socialisation section. For now, these agreements can be seen as the document that represents the relationship between gig company and gig courier. The exact specifications of these agreements have changed across time as rationalisation and regulation have shaped the gig economy, however, the flavour of these documents has remained relatively consistent ever since Deliveroo submitted their evidence to the Work and Pensions committee in Parliament (Deliveroo 2017).

The task of a gig courier is to collect food, drink or other goods from local restaurants or supermarkets and then physically deliver these via bicycle, scooter or car to customers. At this point, it is important to demarcate what a gig courier is *not,* as it is reasonable to ask how a gig courier is any different to a bike messenger/courier. The key difference that separates the two couriers is found in the employment relationship and the application of technology. A bike messenger is an *employed* form of work, meanwhile, each gig courier operates autonomously as a self-employed supplier (also known as an independent contractor) and acknowledges that their position is neither representative of an employee nor a worker within the meaning of any UK employment rights legislation (Deliveroo, 2017). The technological distinction is found in that although bike messenger work can be augmented by technology, it is not platform-based. A bike messenger might use an app to navigate the city or to keep track of their deliveries but this is not the same as the employment relationship and practice of work that exists between gig couriers, the digital platforms and the gig companies. Despite their differences I have noted here, bike messengers/couriers are not homogenous groups and the explanatory value of presenting 'gig courier' and 'bike messenger' as dichotomous is only intended to explain 'what is a gig courier?'. Indeed, it is true that gig couriers do have aspects in common with image, identity and community formation in bike messengers, for example, the idea of 'edgework' (Fincham 2006; Fincham 2007a; Fincham 2007b; Fincham 2008).

As an object of study, the gig courier has been crafted by gig companies to be slippery to grasp. At the structural level, the form, practice and responsibilities of the gig courier has changed over time as digital platforms have rationalised their organisational models, or occasionally, adapted them in response to protest, policy or legal challenges from unions (Healy, Nicholson and Pekarek 2017a; Schiek and Gideon 2018; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2017). Meanwhile, at the level of the individual, each gig

courier's relationship with their work is often multi-faceted, and this makes generalisations difficult to make. Also, the process of documenting individual journeys within gig work does not provide much insight over the long-term because amid the capriciousness of policies, practices, and the known inconsistency of involvement in gig work, demographically, gig workers are expected to have a short lifespan. In this project for example, since data collection, the policies and practices of gig couriership have shifted multiple times, and also, it is likely that many of the participants have altered their relationship with gig couriership or have ceased their involvement entirely. For these reasons, characterisations and typologies that seek to explain gig couriers and gig couriership need to be approached and constructed with care, otherwise the volatility of the gig economy will mean that research outputs will be limited in their effectiveness.

No typology can be expected to be perfect representation, however, Dunn's (Dunn 2020) typology of 'gig workers' is useful to show how gig couriers do not lend themselves to straightforward categorisation, and also, it shows that the effectiveness of a typology is impacted by how it has decided to allocate breadth and depth of representation. Dunn's (2020) typology elected to include both the delivery and rideshare sectors which shows how a large framework that tries to account for multiple sectors can find it difficult to account for variance *within* a type. Dunn's (2020) metrics to categorise gig workers included: 'orientation to gig work', 'voluntary or involuntary' participation, 'platform characteristics' (skill-ceiling for entry) and 'motivation and strategies', which led to the creation of five 'types' of gig worker: 'Searchers', 'Lifers', 'Short-timers', 'Long-rangers' and 'Dabblers'.

By focussing on only the first two types it is possible to demonstrate the issues with this approach to characterise 'gig workers'. According to Dunn (2020:239), a 'Searcher' represents the most precarious worker whose relationship with the gig economy is

temporary and unvoluntary whilst they search for permanent work, meanwhile, a 'Lifer' has a permanent and voluntary relationship with the work for they 'embrace the freelance lifestyle and see gig work as a lifelong career'. The essential problem with these characterisations is that they are too restrictive. 'Searcher' has a reliance on the idea of 'temporary' (which is undefined) and also has the requisite that these individuals are looking for alternative work, meanwhile, the 'Lifer' requires that engagement is 'permanent' and that these individuals are invested in the gig economy as an alternative career ladder. A key issue is that Dunn's typology is too rigid, and crucially, it does not take into account the role of migrant labour in the gig economy (Ziegler *et al.* 2020). For example, from my own research, Fred is from Poland and is an example of precarious migrant labour in the gig economy, however, he emphasised that he did not want his interview to be perceived that he was 'moaning' about the work. Fred wanted to make it clear that there was something uniquely special and rewarding about working in the gig economy:

> 'I'm super grateful for doing this job. I work in cafes, I've worked in bars, but there's no other job that is as flexible, and there's no other job that I've enjoyed as much. Even in the hard times when you do 7-hour shift and then you wake up in the morning, go to the lecture and be knackered, I still love it because I love an active lifestyle. It just amazes me that you can get paid for cycling around with a backpack. Back in Poland, I worked summers. I worked in a posh restaurant waiting tables, I worked in a production line, agriculture, and it was never something. It was never… it was just a part-time or a full-time job. Just a job to pay bills. But with Deliveroo, and cycling it was never like that. I just enjoy doing it. I'm really grateful it exists, I didn't have to go to uni and work in these restaurants waiting tables, or in a nightclub doing nightshifts. That to me is crazy. I know it's another sacrifice, you work nights and you're knackered the next day, and some people enjoy it. At least you're guaranteed money, and with Deliveroo you don't get that. I wouldn't change anything though. I'm really grateful I didn't have to get other jobs, and I could live off it'.

Fred worked hard and for a long time to manage to save enough money to come to study in the UK and so it is important to take note when Fred essentially dismisses the set-backs about inconsistent pay and instead focusses on the unprecedented flexibility, an active lifestyle that he adores, and the fact that you make a living off 'cycling around with a backpack'. Instead of feeling disadvantaged or downtrodden by the gig economy, Fred feels lucky that the work exists. Throughout my interview with Fred, I did think it was important to challenge him on how flexible his work *really* is and we discussed whether or not it was an illusion (which he believed it was), but the point is, even though Fred has had what we might consider a precarious existence, he remains voluntarily engaged in the gig economy and is not seeking alternative work. This puts precarity into perspective because it is important to remember that Fred is accustomed to Polish wages for working tough manual labour positions for approximately £1.50 an hour, meaning the chance to make upwards of £16 an hour (irrespective of the frequency) in work that he actually *enjoys* is life-changing.

As a result, Dunn's 'Searcher' cannot account for the courier that has a 'permanent' and 'voluntary' relationship with the gig economy *because* of the low-skill requirements of the job, the inherent 'flexibility' of the job and the relatively high earnings it has compared to wages in their home countries.

Similarly, the 'Lifer' cannot account for individuals who embrace the values of the gig economy as it is reliant on the gig economy as an alternative 'career'. Treating the gig economy as an alternative career ladder is troublesome because the 'career' cannot be directly transplanted into the structure of the gig economy. Firstly, the 'Lifer' struggles to hold *any* gig courier because promotion does not exist. There is no formal process to 'progress' to a higher position because each courier is an independent contractor and length of service is irrelevant. Second, if we used 'Lifer' to describe those who treat their gig courier work as an entrepreneurial endeavour, it could be possible to frame progression as their

‘profit’ and the mastery of their craft across time, however, this has a depreciating return because of the distinction between ‘entrepreneurship’ which implies self-employment and business creation whereas gig couriers still work within the confines of the supplier agreement. Further still, ‘Lifer’ excludes couriers who engage with the gig economy on a permanent but intermittent basis as a means to fund extracurricular projects or lifestyles abroad rather than as an alternative ‘career’ trajectory. As a result, Dunn’s typology of ‘gig workers’ is useful to show us that gig couriers are a heterogenous group that do not lend themselves easily to categorisation.

In a similar way to Dunn’s typology, Ravenelle (2019) created a typology of New York gig workers across different sectors. These three types of gig worker included ‘Strugglers’, ‘Strivers’ and ‘Success Stories’. The main problem with the three types is made clear by Wilson who states:

> ‘Ravenelle does not fully flesh out her classification scheme, [so] we never learn what factors determine who is placed into which category, how her sample is distributed among these categories, or what the trajectories are for individuals placed within each category’ (Wilson, 2021:1).

This means that Ravenelle’s types have the opposite issue to Dunn in that there are not enough criteria to characterise the lived experience of couriers. Ravenelle (2019:1) describes the different types as ‘Success Stories, who have used the gig economy to create the life they want; Strugglers who can’t make ends meet; and Strivers, who have stable jobs and use the sharing economy for extra cash’. This is a very limited set of variables to categorise the lived experience of gig couriers which is also hindered by the political undertone of the “sharing economy”. Even though Ravenelle’s typology of New York gig work is underdeveloped, it remains useful because it leaves room to be expanded upon and I found similar themes in

my own fieldwork. For this reason, Ravenelle's three types are also applicable to describe the state of gig couriership in England, and supports what I found in my fieldwork five years later, however, my typology does intend to respond to Wilson's critiques and explain sample distribution, key factors and the trajectory of gig couriers.

A Gig Courier Typology

Before I introduce how I have conceptualised gig couriers, it is useful to explain how I am achieving something different than the existing typologies I have presented. The first distinction is that existing classifications have focussed on including multiple sectors, whereas my typology only includes the delivery sector of the gig economy. As a result, the scope of my typology is smaller, and this means that it is able to grasp gig couriership well because the typology is not muddied by the practices and conditions found in other sectors. For example, since 2021, Uber drivers in the UK must be treated as *workers,* which means they are not independent contractors, and this means they are subject to a different 'employment' relationship. The environment is fast-changing, and this means that as policy continues to shape the conditions of gig courier work, the practices and experiences of the work are inevitably going to change across time. However, what is important is that the three types I have identified are representative of gig courier experience in 2020 and they continue to be relevant in 2023.

Ideal types are not designed to be a classification matrix and this is helpful as the lives of gig couriers do not lend themselves to neat categorisation. The benefit of ideal types is that I am able to distil disparate experience into a representation of shared traits and behaviours. Indeed, I have stated that a gig courier's relationship with their work and their experience of that work is often complex and that generalisations carry the risk of being reductive. For this

reason, the aim of my gig courier typology is to act as a heuristic device to scaffold a discussion of the construction and lived experience of gig courier work. In practice, this means that I have been able to identify three types amidst the heterogeneity of my participants. A particularly interesting part of using ideal types couriers will be well-represented by the characteristics of a type, but some will sit on the boundaries and exhibit traits of the others. For this reason, the typology is a useful device to annotate the similarities and differences in gig courier experience.

My typology emphasises the relationship individuals have with their gig courier work and the role it has in their lives, and as a result, I suggest that three types of gig courier experience exist: 'Survivor', 'Side Hustler' and 'Free Agent'. Below is a table that summarises the three types of gig courier and their relationship with the key variables of gig couriership. 'Income' describes how important money is to the type. 'Symbiosis' describes the dynamics of gig courier work in life and is correlated but not identical to the amount of time an individual spends working as a gig courier. 'Gig Values' describes how important ideas such as 'flexibility' or 'freedom' are to the type. 'Engagement' describes how often the type works as a gig courier. 'Why Work' describes intention and rationale behind involvement of each type in gig couriership. As I explore each type, these variables and key traits will be elaborated on in their respective sections. I also have included a table that summarises the demographic data of my participants, and this is in itself useful to demonstrate their heterogeneity in age and background, although, all of my participants are male and the majority of them are British. The demographic table includes the participant's pseudonym, their nationality (which is indicative of the relationship to needing a UK VISA and the constraints around accessing gig courier work), Age, Highest Educational Achievement, the location they are based in, the vehicle (s) they use to conduct gig courier work, whether they

have anyone who is dependent on them, and finally, the type that best describes their relationship with gig couriership.

Type	*Income*	*Symbiosis*	*Gig Values*	*Engagement*	*Why Work*
Survivors	Dependent	Obligate	Illusionary	Continuous	Accessibility, Need Money
Side-Hustlers	Top-Up	Facultative	Unimportant	Intermittent	Hobby, Pocket Money, Exercise
Free Agents	Secondary	Can be both	Integral	On-Demand	Freedom and Flexibility, Entrepreneurship

Table 3.2 The Gig Courier Typology

Fred	Polish	24	Level 6	Leicestershire	Bicycle	No	Survivor/Side-Hustler
Robert	British	19	Level 3	Kent	Bicycle	No	Side-Hustler
David	Irish	31	Level 7	Hampshire	Bicycle	No	Side-Hustler
Chris	British	39	Level 6	Berkshire	E-Bike	No	Free Agent
Nasir	Indian	29	Level 6	Greater London	Scooter	Yes	Survivor
Sam	British	18	Level 3	Kent	Bicycle	No	Side-Hustler
James	British	26	Level 6	Nottinghamshire	E-Bike	No	Free Agent
Maverick	British	38	Level 5	Hampshire	E-Bike	Yes	Side-Hustler/Free Agent
Piotr	Polish	21	Level 3	Nottinghamshire	E-Bike	No	Free Agent
Thomas	British	25	Level 6	Kent	Bicycle	No	Side-Hustler
Jim	British	33	Level 3	Devon	Car	Yes	Side-Hustler
Cameron	British	33	Level 7	Leicestershire	Car	No	Side-Hustler/Free-Agent
Matt	British	32	Level 3	Nottinghamshire	Bicycle/Motorbike	No	Side-Hustler
Ben	British	37	Level 5	Hampshire	E-Bike	No	Side-Hustler
Dominic	British	26	Level 2	London	Bicycle/E-Bike	Yes	Free-Agent
Michael	British	39	Level 3	Surrey	Bicycle	Yes	Side-Hustler
Nigel	British	21	Level 2	Nottinghamshire	Car	No	Side-Hustler
Oliver	British	44	Level 3	Nottinghamshire	E-Bike	No	Free-Agent

Table 3.3: Gig Courier Demographic Data

Survivors

The data that informs the Survivor type stems from the interview I had with Fred (24, Polish, Bicycle, Leicestershire), however, the type is also heavily informed by an interview I had with Nasir (29, Indian, Scooter, Greater London). Fred and Nasir are the only gig couriers in my sample who have experiences that are well-represented by the Survivor label, however, they also included the experiences of other couriers they knew that had a comparable relationship with gig courier work in their interviews. A small sample of Survivors is a limitation but this is to be expected because the Survivor is the hardest type of gig courier to access. When trying to access Survivors, it might be expected that the recruitment challenge is due to something superficial such as language barriers, however, there is a much greater, more threatening challenge which would continue to exist even if I could speak their languages.

An essential obstacle to recruitment in general, whether it is a conspiracy or not, is that gig companies have been accused of sending spies to investigate and disrupt courier organisation by terminating supplier agreements of gig couriers. This is a frightening environment for any gig courier because in the gig economy the word of the gig company is law; and this means that the termination of a supplier agreement is purely at the discretion of the gig company. Nasir stated '…you don't realise but one day you just get an email that you're not allowed to work anymore, not have access to the account, and you don't get a say'. Explaining the threat of termination further Nasir stated:

> 'That's the big insecurity throughout since I've started working for Deliveroo. This is the biggest thing I've worried about, even if it's not my fault I can still lose access to the work. It might be a fake customer complaining or sometimes the customer receives the food and they say we never received the food - they lie. Sometimes it might be their flatmates who took it, but we don't know. We don't have the photo to identify customers, we just go to the

> right address. It might be your husband, son, whoever. It's a big worry, if your account gets closed, even if it's not your fault, you will have no access to work'.

'Fault' is irrelevant if the gig company has moved for termination because the processes of unfair dismissal and an employee tribunal do not exist in the gig economy. For this reason, the threat of termination is Nasir's "least favourite" part of gig courier work because there is no appeal process and no independent body that evaluates supplier agreement terminations. Termination is the Sword of Damocles that hangs over all gig couriers; however, it is important to understand that this vulnerability is exaggerated for Survivors because they are set to suffer the most from losing access to gig courier work as their livelihoods are dependent on it. For example, without gig courier work Fred would have been unable to fund his stay in the UK, and for Nasir, he would be unable to support his family. For this reason, it is understandable that a decision might be made that it is just not worth answering recruitment calls just in case I was an informant for the gig companies. Indeed, to try and mitigate this I spent a considerable amount of time during my recruitment phase of fieldwork trying to prove to moderators of gig courier forums and couriers themselves I was a researcher and that I was not an informant for gig companies, and still, on many occasions I was rejected as I was an outsider. Terminations and their role as a mechanism of gig organisational socialisation are discussed in further depth in Chapter Four.

The relationship between Survivors and gig couriership can be described as *obligate symbiosis.* Symbiosis is a biological term that means 'living together' and explains a mutually beneficial relationship, however, obligate symbiosis explains a relationship whereby one or multiple parties depend on each other for survival. Using the concept of obligate symbiosis allows the interesting power dynamic between Survivors and gig couriership to be embedded in the description. This is an important part to include because, theoretically, the Survivors are dependent on gig couriership to house and feed themselves and their families

but the gig delivery service is dependent on Survivors to fill the function of ensuring *someone* will take the order. Survivors are the baseline of the service and this means that even though they are a small proportion of gig couriers, they act as the safety net of the gig delivery service. This is interesting because Survivors have a latent capacity to disrupt the sector; however, the capacity to disrupt is directly related to the Survivor's capacity to organise en masse which is tempered by gig organisational socialisation and the liberal use of termination. In practice then, the Survivor is the dependent actor, and the more financially dependent they are on gig courier work, the more their waking moments will be dominated by gig courier work. In the situations where a courier is completely financially dependent, a courier will enter *survival mode*.

The following extract from Fred's interview helps to provide insight into the 'tough times' of Fred's gig courier work:

> 'When I look back, it was tough times. Survival mode for sure. For the last 5 years the summer periods I was working all the time to save money. Just from the part-time job you're not making enough to pay your bills. What I'd have to do was work the whole summer, 2/3 months full-time doing 50/60-hour weeks. I did some work at summer camps, but last summer I would work for Deliveroo full time. I would do 5 or 6 days a week on the bike for the whole day. 10am til 11pm. That's pretty tough as well. I've got data from this last summer that I did it, I kinda wanted to do it as well, to see if I could get fitter than I am already. I took it as a challenge, and I quite enjoyed it but it was intense. Cycling around 130/40km a day. Eating loads of food in-between. It's quite tough'.

Survivors spend the majority of their waking hours working and this means social time, and disposable time in general, are out-of-reach luxuries. Interestingly, Fred explained that his time as a Survivor was unforced because he *chose* to come to the UK, which means 'he put himself in the situation', however, he expressed sympathy for those who 'are forced to do the job due to a lack of opportunities'. For example, Fred cares for car couriers who he says

do the job “all the time”. Once again, it is interesting to put the experience of precarity into perspective, as according to Fred, working 10am to 11pm 5 or 6 days a week does not qualify as ‘all the time’. Fred was particularly interested in one car courier who ‘had a really nice car’ and he wondered how the car courier managed to have it by working for Deliveroo. The response of the car courier was that ‘you just have to work hard’. Just work hard is a classic throwaway phrase of meritocracy, denoting that effort and skill are supposed to beget reward, however, when Fred explains the lifestyle of the car courier, the glamour and achievement of the ‘nice car’ fades quickly:

> ‘He told me about how for 3 years, he’s been working for Deliveroo pretty much all day every day. Seven in the morning he logs in and he works until 11pm. He has a break around 2pm to go to the gym and eat something. It’s like living in the car essentially. It’s just the strategy he has to earn as much money as possible. He knows that there will be times where he’s sitting in the car not earning any money, so that’s why I have to work all day otherwise I won’t earn enough. He saves all that money by living very frugally. His social life is going to the gym, but there’s nothing else you have time for because the wages are not that high.’

I was not satisfied with the narrative that the sacrifices and the acquisition of the ‘nice car’ were driven by Survivors just being a ‘hard worker’ in the gig economy, especially when the intensity is this extreme. There is a discernible dissonance between ‘tough times’ and ‘I quite enjoyed it’. For this reason, I think this is good evidence to show that Fred strategised ways to reconcile the suffering he endured during the tough times as a coping mechanism, with the key example being the gamification of ‘can I get fitter than I already am?’. This also became particularly clear when later on in the interview he stated despondently in what was an otherwise upbeat interview that ‘…it is possible to make it but I wouldn’t want to do it again. I’m not going to lie’.

Fred’s despondence meant there was another factor that was motivating behaviour, and I was sceptical that the difference between Survivors and the other types was that Survivors

were just willing to put hard work in. Fred and the car courier are undoubtedly determined people with a lot of willpower, but I thought it was pertinent to ask Fred if he thought you needed to be a particular type of person to be able to do Deliveroo. What followed was a sophisticated response that did an effective job of showing the actual source of a Survivors capability to function:

> 'I want to say, me being trained in psychology and behavioural psychology, we love to talk about mental toughness and resilience and all that stuff. You have to be tough minded, and persevere. But actually, studying more like sociology this year, and being trained in qualitative research I'm actually starting to think its necessity. I think anyone can do it but it's a matter of necessity. I didn't have another choice you know? When I first started, I was doing it in a city that was hilly. I was doing it on a bike that only has one gear, single speed. I remember after 6 months, I don't know what its called [Gestures using a handlebar] was bent like this because I was standing up trying to get up the hills. Now I have a road bike with like 18 gears so its different. But you know, it was really hard. It was just something I had to do. I think certain people just, they are put in certain circumstances where they have to toughen up, they have to go. It's not a matter of me being a unique individual being able to do it. I was forced to do it, and I had to get used to it.'

Fred captures the crux of the relationship between Survivors and gig couriership. Fred's ability to channel willpower and determination did not come from him being an exceptionally motivated individual, they were the by-product of the strive to survive. It is this strive to survive and the state of survival mode that Survivors get their name.

In Fred's case, his strive to survive was activated each summer when he would re-enter a period of survival mode. During these times, Fred would have to work as much as he possibly could so that he would have enough money saved to be able to balance his studies and Deliveroo once the academic term restarted. In practice, this meant that Fred would achieve incredible feats such as cycling 130/40 kilometres (80 miles) a day, however, if Fred did not achieve these feats, his livelihood and by extension his dream to become a sports psychologist would be compromised. A Survivor may not have disposable income, but they

do have another resource to be spent: their energy and their bodies. In the same way as Fred's handlebars would buckle as a reactive response to the force exerted by Fred, he too was moulded and physically conditioned by his gig courier work, and over time, he too would change form, buckle and bend to cope with the demands of being a Survivor courier. For example, during survival mode, Fred's body would continuously be pushed to its limits and through this process Fred would become exceptionally fit but he would also become extremely fatigued. The morning after each shift, Fred would wake up 'knackered', eat his porridge and did so each day with the knowledge that he did not have the luxury of being able to take the time to fully recover. Fred's dedication of so much energy and time looking after and cultivating his physical capacity meant he inevitably sacrificed his capacity to concentrate in his lectures 'for more than 10 minutes' even after his shifts had long finished. It should be remembered that Fred is a human being and this means that there are real consequences to be recognised here. The difference between Fred and his buckled handlebars is that his bicycle can be repaired, replaced or even upgraded, but his body and his mind are irreplaceable resources that have been left marked by his time as a Survivor courier.

Energy maintenance is crucial for all gig couriers, especially survivors, as the longer you work the less on average you will earn *and* the more you will need to spend on food in order to sustain yourself, or in the case of scooter or car, this means fuel for your car *and* fuel for yourself. An additional issue that a bicycle courier like Fred faces is that it is not possible to carry an entire day's food because there is no place to put it, and even if there was a magic storage device for food, it would only be additional weight that would need to be managed. One way to maximise your energy and refuel ratio is by *multi-apping* (covered in depth in Chapter 5), which is the practice of being signed into multiple platforms simultaneously with the goal to maximise deliveries per hour. Fred explains:

> ‘[After taking into account the cost of food] You’re going to get something like £4 an hour, which is barely enough to buy food. Being a cyclist, you need to spend loads of money on food. I know how to cook cheap food, but it’s the amount. I eat loads of carbohydrates because of the fuel: pasta, bread, oats and stuff. But £4 an hour, that’s… so what a lot of guys do, especially cyclists because we get the scraps, we work a couple of apps at the same time’.

For survivors, the bicycle is the cheapest means of transport for engaging in the gig economy, but critically, bicycles require maintenance and these costs need to be factored in. This means there is the possibility of making a *loss* working as a gig courier. Unfortunately, one means of securing more money per hour is by eliminating the maintenance costs such as replacement brake pads or rubber tubing which saves a few pounds; however, this increases risk because both safety and all earning potential is compromised should an accident happen.

It is possible to say plenty more about the lives of Survivors, but these are the essential issues they face. We can now turn to the type that the gig economy was designed for, and thankfully, the type Fred now is: The Side Hustler.

The Side-Hustler

Side-Hustlers make up the majority of my gig courier sample with twelve of my participants having their relationship and experience of gig courier work well-described by the Side-Hustler label. This proportion is to be expected as most people who work as gig couriers seek and champion the ‘casual’ or as Michael (British, 39, Bicycle, Surrey) describes, the ‘idiot-proof’ version of gig courier work. Michael described gig courier work as:

> ‘It’s a get-up-and-do-it. You haven’t got to be overly skilled – you’ve got to be a little bit tech savvy but not so much. You haven’t got to go on a bunch of courses, you know, you manage your own health safety which is wearing a crash helmet and wearing a load of lights on your bike. Like I say, its plug-in-and-play. It’s a job anyone can do, it really is’.

Michael's plug-in-and-play description stems from the perceived accessibility of the work (challenged and explored in Chapter 4) and his statement of 'I have a push-bike so I thought I can go out and be sort of my own boss, work my own hours and just get some constant money flowing in the house'. Michael is correct in his evaluation that you do not *need* to be 'overly skilled' in order to do the job, but this is only because he is a Side-Hustler. For Survivors and Free Agents, factors such as the cultivation of skill (explored in Chapter 5) and the fitness ceiling are determinants of success. For Fred, his physical conditioning coupled with strategic decision-making optimised the bicycle to 'make it work' but the human body is limited. As Thomas (Side-Hustler, British, 25, Bicycle, Kent) stated:

> 'I've always hit 60 miles, I've done 70 or 80 miles in a day and I just cannot bypass that. I can't get any fitter. I can do more miles but I can't do it continuously every single day. And there's things where I'd come home from work and I'd have an ice bath, just because I needed my body to recover'.

In other words, Side-Hustlers are free to coast, cycle 80 miles or take breaks if they wish because they are free from economic dependence.

The relationship between Side-Hustlers and gig couriership can be described as facultatively symbiotic. This relationship is similar to Survivors in that the relationship is mutually beneficial, but it is a facultative symbiotic relationship in that the survival of Side-Hustlers and the gig delivery service are independent of one another *and* that access is dependent on the discretion of the gig company. This is an important difference because these are the requisite conditions to enable Fred's idyllic scenario of 'getting paid to cycle with a backpack'. Side-Hustlers gain access to straightforward work that can top-up income, or it can be a hobby that has an additional benefit of providing exercise or developing a deeper understanding of their city. Irrespective of the reason for being a Side-Hustler, these couriers are the type that can be seen enjoying Kindle and ice-cream breaks in the sunshine in the

summer. The Side-Hustler, on the whole, has a pleasant experience as a gig courier, and for this reason they are a valuable resource for gig companies. They are a valuable resource because the Side-Hustler is marketing and recruitment tool, and by extension, this provides gig companies with a saturated labour market. Not all Side-Hustlers are the same in their economic relationship to gig courier work, and it should be noted that there is a perceptible difference between couriers such as Sam (British, 18, Bicycle, Kent) and Robert (British, 19, Bicycle, Kent) who work for pocket money or for the exercise inherent to the work, compared with a courier like Michael who work to 'top-up' household income following COVID-19 redundancy. Michael does not *need* the money, but it still has a purpose for the 'bits and bobs' of household expenditure. As a result, for many of my Side-Hustler couriers, the determining factor that placed them underneath the umbrella of 'Side-Hustler' rather than 'Survivor' was because they still had choice in whether they *had* to work. By retaining independence, Side-Hustlers avoid the majority of the negative conditions that Fred endured in his instances of survival mode. The reason Side-Hustlers are able to avoid income dependence is because either they are like Sam and Robert who still live at home with their parents, or more commonly, the courier has a 'main' job or a partner that handles the majority of living expenses. For example, Maverick (British, 38, E-Bike, Hampshire) and Jim (British, 33, Car, Devon) both have well-paid employment in IT and use their work as gig couriers to top-up their income, meanwhile, Matt (British, 32, Bicycle/Motorbike, Nottinghamshire) had a senior executive position in the supermarket industry, but he was made redundant, causing him to become dependent on his partner whilst he retrained to become a vet instead. Consequently, Side-Hustlers are the most diverse group, and include a variety of ages and backgrounds which was only complicated further by COVID-19 redundancies and the lockdowns that restricted the scope of available work.

In terms of the trajectory of Side-Hustlers, the majority, if not all, see gig courier work as a temporary endeavour, and this is the reason that the labour pool of couriers is so fluid. Side Hustlers will dip in and out of the work at their leisure, but it is not a central concern of their lives. For this reason, the 'gig values', which are the ideas of freedom and flexibility, are relatively unimportant to Side-Hustlers. Instead, these values are 'bonuses' or 'perks' of the work that make it much more appealing. As a result, Side-Hustlers occupy the 'sweet spot' of gig couriership because they have no allegiance to the gig economy, and their long-term prospects are not dependent on it. For example, the students such as Sam and Robert sought to carry on their gig courier work in their new university cities, but they had no intention of *being* gig couriers. Similarly, those who took on gig courier work as a result of COVID-19 redundancy rarely had long term plans for the work, with future engagement being determined on a speculative basis. This is important because the role of gig courier work in the Side-Hustler's life tells us something about identity formation of couriers, where gig courier work is something you do, not something you are (which I explore in Chapter 4 in more depth).

Side-Hustlers can also be a transitional phase, and a few gig couriers in my sample were on the way to becoming entrepreneurs or were looking to go full-time with gig courier work. These entrepreneurial individuals are the final type and are a very interesting part of the gig courier workforce.

Free Agents

Akin to Survivors, Free Agents are a small proportion of gig courier labour, and they make up six of my couriers. The defining trait of the Free Agent gig courier is that they are in gig courier work for the gig values of freedom and flexibility. These gig couriers often have the most sophisticated and strategic approach to their gig courier work. For example, two of my

couriers, James (26, British, E-Bike, Nottinghamshire) and Dominic (26, British, E-Bike, London) combine their work with popular YouTube channels where they document their couriership and provide advice and guidance to prospective couriers. Similarly, Piotr (21, Polish, E-Bike, Nottinghamshire) explained:

> 'I am in the industry of movies and music, and that is what is important for me the most… I'm an artist, so basically, I cannot be employed because I am losing my creativity. I am more focussed on the [employed] work than on the side projects, and side-projects are very important for me'.

For Piotr, a tempered engagement gig courier work allows him to explore his passions and set up his own business. The Free Agent has an interesting economic relationship with gig couriership because like Survivors, the gig courier work is often a primary source of income, however, Free Agents are not dominated by gig couriership in the same way. In each of my interviews I asked participants how long they intended to work as a gig courier for, and my interview with Chris (39, British, E-Bike, Berkshire) captured the Free Agent's vulnerability well:

> 'I don't. Every year I say I don't wanna do that again. But because I've got even bigger gaps in my employment history it becomes more difficult, so whilst I do other things like the teaching, and I make a little bit of money from YouTube, and I've also got something else that I do online as well. What normally happens is because its easier to make money through Deliveroo, like the other jobs really take a lot of concentration or a lot of effort. I fall into the… oh I'll just do Deliveroo then whilst I'm in the country. And, ohhh I'll pick up the other things when I leave the country when I'm more relaxed and I'm happier, but whilst I'm the UK, let's just take advantage of Deliveroo. When really, they're taking advantage of me'.

Chris used to work in IT and he knows that each time he takes the option of working for

Deliveroo or teaching English he is contributing to his position of being stuck in gig couriership. Chris was one of the most interesting couriers to interview as he is a veteran gig courier who has been through many different iterations of gig courier work and this meant that he had a wealth of experience to draw on. Indeed, Chris explained throughout his interview about the different challenges of the work, but this eventually culminated into his statement that he was pushed away from 'being a normal person with a house and a family', and how he needed to find satisfaction in life elsewhere. This was an incredibly important development in the interview as Chris presented himself as a charismatic and confident man but he expressed vulnerability throughout, and this became particularly clear when expressed how he had "given up" on his dream of being a solicitor. Chris's experience is useful in that it demonstrates the symbiotic relationship that exists between Free Agents and gig couriership. Being a Free Agent can be attractive for the freedom it offers, but for gig couriers like Chris who are perpetually treading water, it seems as if being a Free Agent has trapped him in a lifestyle he would rather not lead.

For Survivors, the values of flexibility and freedom of gig couriership are illusionary because choice is removed from their world, and it is debatable whether the values are deceptive for Free Agents too. For this reason, the symbiotic relationship between Free Agents and gig couriership has the capacity to be obligate and facultative simultaneously. The nature of this relationship is particularly important because the Free Agent appears to gain independence and emancipation from the traditional labour market, however, their independence is dependent on their access to gig courier work, and so, behind the decorative banners of flexibility and freedom is the similar precarity experienced by Survivors. This is very important because it means that there is a relationship between dependence and investment for Free Agents. Chris has spent years as a gig courier and he is only able to spend time in Thailand because he does not have the commitments that a 'normal' person

would have. The point here is to question to what extent choice is present for Chris, because if he could he would give up gig courier work, but doing so would mean giving up what he values, which is at the very least, the feeling of being independent and free. Free Agents that prioritise independence manage to subsist through their gig courier work normally have other income streams (such as YouTube) which means they do not become Survivors as they are still able to have choice in when and how to work. This is an important distinction to draw between Survivors and Free Agents as whilst both can have an obligate symbiotic relationship with gig couriership, the emphasis is different: Survivors depend on the income, Free Agents depend on the freedom.

Free Agents normally have entrepreneurship as a key trait, and this is the reason why Maverick is recorded as a Side-Hustler with Free Agent traits. Maverick explained at length how he saw the gig economy as a 'project' of his, and he would conduct little experiments to see whether he could find new ways to become more efficient. Indeed, it should be noted that Free Agents have all invested significantly into gig courier work, and this normally means that they have purchased an E-Bike (or they built their own) which, depending on the model, can cost from a few hundred pounds to thousands. Once again, this is a key distinction between Free Agents and the Survivor. A survivor will not be able to invest in an e-bike, either because it is too expensive or because the real risk of theft or damage would be an even greater disaster. Similarly, a Side-Hustler would benefit little from an E-Bike as they would need to work quite a lot of hours to break even and so it would take a long time to have a return on investment. For Free Agents, the investment is critical because E-Bikes can be significantly faster than a bicycle but maintain the manoeuvrability of a bicycle. This is important as it reduces the ceiling as the majority of the Free Agents will not have the athletic capacity of Fred because they are older or they have health conditions which limit how fast they would be able to cycle. Further, E-Bikes are particularly useful in hilly terrain,

or in pedestrianised areas that can be accessed (illegally or otherwise) with a bicycle. For example, a town centre at the bottom of a hill is relatively effortless for returning from a job to pick up another order, but it would be more difficult on the way to a delivery because of the incline, additional weight and need to be cautious in *how* you cycle to preserve the integrity of the goods. An E-Bike solves many of these problems because even though they are legally restricted to 15.5 MPH, many gig couriers will tune or derestrict their E-Bikes to reach speeds of up of approximately 60 MPH. This means Free Agents are able to cover more distance in less time and require less physical energy to pedal, which means Fred's feat of cycling 80 miles daily becomes achievable and sustainable. One thing to mention about the E-Bike is that their increased speed means that their risk in an accident increases which is something many gig couriers do not consider enough. The safety of gig couriers largely falls outside the scope of this project, but danger management, whether that be on the road or on the council estate is an important part of ensuring the sustainability of your gig couriership. Indeed, a helmet (if they wear one) is insufficient compared to the kind of protective gear a motorcyclist is expected to wear. In terms of an investment, the only flaw of an E-Bike is that it has to be charged, which means having additional batteries available or it means needing to return home to charge the bicycle which would interrupt a shift. This means an E-Bike offers clear benefits, but it also means there is another aspect to be managed as running out of charge miles from home for someone not as physically fit as Fred is much more of a challenge.

For the younger Free Agents such as James or Piotr, this relationship is useful because it is a platform for them to achieve other things that are more important to them – normally achievable because they do not have any dependents. For instance, James is an excellent example for the global gig courier because at heart he "a travelling man" who enjoys doing gig courier work in different countries and the experience of different cultures and systems.

However, it should be noted that for the majority of young people this kind of opportunity is limited, and largely James has this kind of opportunity because his father is an engineer who designs E-Bikes. Meanwhile, older Free Agents such as Oliver (44, British, E-Bike, Nottinghamshire) appreciate the gig economy as a market force that can be exploited. Oliver already has a business but he enjoys the gig economy, colloquially refers to the Deliveroo algorithm as Frank, and describes his para-social relationship with it as relatively friendly. Overall, Free Agents have a positive relationship with gig courier work where they get their feeling of independence and gig companies get experienced labour in the pool that organically rationalises itself. This is important because the entrepreneurial drive of Free Agents is inherently beneficial to gig companies because it creates new benchmarks for everyone else. Each 'project' Maverick takes to improve his efficiency also improves the service for customers which is a benefit for the model as a whole as in an on-demand service, speed is key. This benchmarking and gamification as a form of internal rationalisation is important, and will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the challenge of characterising couriers and has presented a typology to scaffold gig courier experience. The benefit of explicitly discussing nomenclature is that I am able to express why the field was like 'nailing jelly', and how we can make things clearer by limiting scope to mitigate against Jingle and Jangle fallacies. This chapter also identified some existing 'gig worker' typologies and used these as a platform to build my own typology. The three types of gig courier, Survivor, Side-Hustler and Free Agent are helpful devices to understand gig courier experience as they capture the different relationships individuals have with the gig economy, and indeed, the role the gig economy

has in their lives. Survivors have an obligate symbiotic relationship with gig courier work because they are economically dependent on gig courier work. Side-Hustlers have a facultative symbiotic relationship with gig courier work because their lives are parallel to gig courier work and do not depend on it but rely on access to get the benefits of gig courier work. Free Agents can have a obligate and facultative symbiotic relationship because their *way of life* is dependent on the access to gig courier work. In the next chapter, I explore the process of getting into gig courier work, and what this means for organisational socialisation.

Chapter Four: Getting into Gig Courier Work: Organisational Socialisation in a Gig Economy

Introduction

Chapter One has explored the organisational structure of the gig economy and its relationship to the platform economy, and importantly, the concept of the 'independent contractor'. Chapter Two explored the research design of the thesis and the methodological challenges of studying gig couriership. Chapter Three investigated nomenclature in scholarship on the gig economy, the characterisation of couriers and introduced a typology of gig couriers working in the delivery sector of the gig economy. Together, these chapters have provided the foundation to grasp organisational socialisation in a gig economy. The central purpose of this chapter is to introduce the idea of 'gig organisational socialisation', demonstrate how it differs from traditional organisational socialisation and its impact on work identity.

The first responsibility of this chapter is to mitigate against contributing to the aforementioned 'Jingle' and 'Jangle' fallacies. When discussing organisational socialisation in the gig economy, I am exclusively referring to organisational socialisation in the delivery sector of the gig economy. This is an important statement because gig companies are often classified together due to their similar characteristics, for example, the ride-sharing and the delivery sectors share the use of an on-demand labour pool. Despite sharing an on-demand labour pool, organisational socialisation in these two sectors should be understood and discussed separately. This is a fundamental point because the nature and construction of organisational socialisation in the gig economy is primarily determined by the employment relationship between gig company and individual.

In the UK context, organisational socialisation is linked to the common employment statuses of independent contractor, worker and employee. These employment statuses matter for distinguishing between the ride-sharing and the delivery sector because employment status dictates the legal obligation the platform has to the individual, which in turn, changes the dynamics of an on-demand labour pool. Once UK Uber drivers were granted *worker* status in 2016, the dynamics of the Uber on-demand labour pool would have irrevocably changed (Davidov 2016). For example, as Uber guarantee the national minimum wage to the Uber driver this means that Uber no longer has an economic incentive to over-saturate the number of drivers in an area. Changing the number of drivers in an area has an impact on the relationship between drivers as the environment has become less competitive, and at the same time, it also becomes less of an economic risk for the drivers as minimum income is guaranteed. As a result, it is clear how changing the employment status of an individual can change the nature of an on-demand labour pool. It should also be mentioned that another crucial aspect of this change is that Uber drivers are considered workers for the entirety of the time they are logged into the Uber app, and this includes the time drivers spend waiting for fares. This is a significant change in the nature of the work as waiting, and in particular, uncompensated waiting, is one of the central features of gig couriership (which is explored in Chapter Five). For these reasons, organisational socialisation in the gig economy is a complex topic, and discussion should be as specific as possible because the process of organisational socialisation, the dynamics of the labour pool and the experience of these dynamics are dependent on the employment relationship between gig company and individual.

The structure of this chapter has four sections. The first section, *Organisational Socialisation,* explores the theory, purpose and importance of organisational socialisation in the social reproduction of organisations across time. This section is useful because it provides an

overview of the meaning of organisational socialisation and because it acts as a point of comparison for gig organisational socialisation. The second section, *Gig Organisational Socialisation,* explains the recruitment process for gig couriers and how gig companies have reconfigured organisational socialisation to create, maintain and temper their on-demand labour pool of independent contractors. The third section, *The First Shift*, is the point of convergence for gig couriers in their journey to become gig couriers. This section explores gig courier experience of gig organisational socialisation and explores how the formal and informal processes of gig organisational socialisation temper gig couriers to become denizens rather than members of an organisation. The final section, *Gig Couriers and Work Identity*, explores relationship between gig couriers and bike messengers and the idea of 'precarious and personalised work identities' (Petriglieri, Ashford and Wrzeniewski, 2019) and how work identity is managed in gig courier work.

This chapter contributes to our understanding of the gig economy for three reasons. The first reason is because organisational socialisation is key to understanding how organisations continue to exist across time. The second reason is because the rationale and the method of gig organisational socialisation is distinct from traditional organisational socialisation, and it is through these distinctions that gig companies are able to achieve and deliver Mass Just-In-Time production through the production and maintenance of an on-demand labour pool of independent contractors. The third reason is because the idea of 'gig organisational socialisation' is a gap in the literature. Social research into the gig economy predominately focusses on the experience or practice of "gig work" through the quality of conditions or the role of the algorithmic management, for example, 'Good gig, bad gig: autonomy and algorithmic control in the global gig economy' (Wood *et al.* 2019), however, these contributions focus on the practice and experience of work without taking into account how

gig couriers are tempered by the onboarding process or how the dynamics of gig couriership are legitimised during the onboarding process. As a result, this chapter aims to help fill the gap in the literature by exploring the formal and informal organisational socialisation of "getting into" gig courier work to explain how this process shapes gig couriership.

Organisational Socialisation

Organisational socialisation is widely acknowledged as a critical part of the recruitment process due to its impact on effectiveness and efficiency outcomes for both organisations and employees (Field and Coetzer, 2008; Yang, 2008). Organisational socialisation can be defined as the process of assimilating newcomers into a workplace with the primary emphasis on 'obtaining employee commitment and retaining staff' (Field and Coetzer, 2008:524). Consequently, organisational socialisation describes the strategic process that enables the social reproduction of work and organisations across time. Organisational socialisation includes both formal and informal structures and is summarised by Van Maanen and Schein (1977) in their seminal *Toward a theory of organizational socialization* as individuals 'learning the ropes' of an organisation. For Van Maanen and Schein, learning the ropes has a greater scope and meaning than navigating how to perform the duties of a job, instead, learning the ropes means learning how to become part of an organisation. Van Maanen and Schein discuss this sentiment, and write:

> 'Work organisations offer a person far more than merely a job. Indeed, from the time individuals enter a workplace to the time they leave their membership behind, they experience and often commit themselves to a distinct way of life complete with its own rhythms, rewards, relationships, demands and potentials' (Van Mannen and Schein, 1977:1).

Presented in this way, organisational socialisation is a mutually beneficial exchange between individual and organisation. Individuals are offered membership of an organisation, and in exchange, individuals pledge allegiance to the organisation. The results of this exchange are that an individual gains responsibility and access to opportunity, and in turn, the organisation as an entity continues to survive. As a result, as discussed previously, this relationship begins as *obligatory symbiotic* as both organisation and individual would depend on one another to survive as separate organisms, however, the difference in this case is that organisational socialisation eventually seeks to absorb and integrate the individual into the organisation to such an extent that they become a proxy for the organisation. This means the difference in purpose between obligate symbiosis and organisational socialisation is that an obligate symbiotic relationship keeps parties cooperative but exclusive from one another, meanwhile, organisational socialisation seeks to assimilate.

If organisational socialisation is the process that prepares individuals to become part of an organisation, then it is possible to apply this understanding of organisational socialisation to both small or large organisations. For example, it is possible to view an education system as formal organisational socialisation to become part of 'society' which is codified through the concept of 'citizenship'. The values of membership and citizenship are markers of belonging and these markers demonstrate integration into an organisation. Integrating individuals into an organisation, whether the organisation is a country or a business, is the method of social reproduction. As a result, it is useful to focus on these ideas now so that it is clear how philosophically and methodologically different gig organisational socialisation is.

The philosophy and methodology underpinning organisational socialisation is interesting because the purpose of organisational socialisation is more than the pragmatic pursuit of

efficiency and effectiveness. Whilst transferring generational knowledge and rationalised processes to newcomers maintains operational effectiveness, it is more important for an organisation to preserve the identity, or the spirit of the organisation. Preserving the spirit of the organisation is the most important goal because, as Van Maanen and Schein state, organisations rely on offering more than a 'job' to individuals. If all an organisation can offer is a job, commitment to the organisation will be limited and this will be an existential threat to an organisation.

Preserving the spirit of an organisation and transferring knowledge from veteran to newcomer is vital for the social reproduction of an organisation, and before the 21st century, this would have taken place in a physical, brick-and-mortar workplace. The brick-and-mortar workplace, for example, a factory, is a staging area for organisational socialisation because it is a space where veterans and newcomers will be able to engage in both formal and informal organisational socialisation. For example, formal socialisation in the factory would include instruction on how to use machinery or equipment, meanwhile, informal socialisation would include rituals such as 'banana time' (Roy, 1959). At the same time, the physical space is useful because it telegraphs the trajectory of other individuals in the organisation. In other words, it signals what investment in the organisation looks like to newcomers and shows how allegiance to the organisation is rewarded. Van Mannen and Schein (1977:7) use the example of a conversation between a senior police officer and a rookie police officer using slang as a way to demonstrate the acquisition and transfer of knowledge in a police station. This is useful because it is both a cultural and practical example of social reproduction in a workplace. The point to emphasise is that organisational socialisation is about investment in individuals to preserve the organisation. In other words, investment in the newcomer equates to investment in the organisation. For the police example, as the rookie is expected to build their career in the police force, and as such, all resources spent on the rookie are an

investment in the police force as a whole. In this way, organisational socialisation is a long-term project that results in preserving something greater than the sum of its parts.

It could be argued that this explanation of organisational socialisation is an idyllic account of how organisations continue to function across time; however, the purpose of this section is to demonstrate the difference between organisational socialisation and gig organisational socialisation rationale and method. The point of this section is to indicate that there is something special in organisational socialisation because it wants to provide a transcendental and transformative experience to ensure the stability of the organisation. Fostering belonging through membership of an organisation is a milestone in the life course, and sometimes, the membership of an organisation has a life course trajectory in and of itself. By emphasising belonging, membership, social consciousness and the idea of investment for the future, it becomes easier to understand why the differences in gig organisational socialisation are worth discussing.

Before finishing this section, it is necessary to consider how current technological developments (such as ChatGPT) could impact or change organisational socialisation and the structure of organisations. Currently, artificial intelligence and algorithmic management are still nascent, however, as artificial intelligence develops and continues to 'collaborate' with humans, it is expected that it itself will have a unique role in the social reproduction of organisations (Chowdhury *et al.,* 2022). The point to make here is that even though the current capacity of algorithms and artificial intelligence means it is unable to be an actor in the social reproduction of an organisation in the same way as a human, this does not mean that we do not have the foundation through digital platforms and algorithms as managers. As we approach the technological singularity (the point in which technological growth becomes uncontrollable and irreversible), the relationship between humans and artificial

intelligence will become more essential in the social reproduction of organisations. In the next section, gig organisational socialisation is explored, and it will be clear how these developments will prove instrumental for gig organisational socialisation. For example, the erasure of middle management would mean that onboarding could be conducted by an artificial intelligence, and this is particularly the case for the kind onboarding that does not lead to assimilation in the organisation.

Gig Organisational Socialisation

Now that the theory, importance and purpose of organisational socialisation have been explained it is possible to explore the idea of 'gig organisational socialisation'. The first point to emphasise is that gig organisational socialisation and organisational socialisation are mutually exclusive processes/strategies that can occur within the same company. This is important to make clear because even though the gig courier does not receive organisational socialisation in the traditional sense, this does not mean that traditional organisational socialisation does not exist in the delivery sector of the gig economy. On the contrary, it is possible to build a career working in the gig economy because the gig company's workforce is tiered. The tiering of a gig company can be understood through Atkinson's (1984) 'flexible firm' model whereby a workforce is divided into the 'core' and a 'periphery' of an organisation's operations. For example, the 'core' of a gig company are functions such as software development, marketing or strategic management, meanwhile, in the periphery are the gig couriers. The structure of a gig company is shown in the figure below.

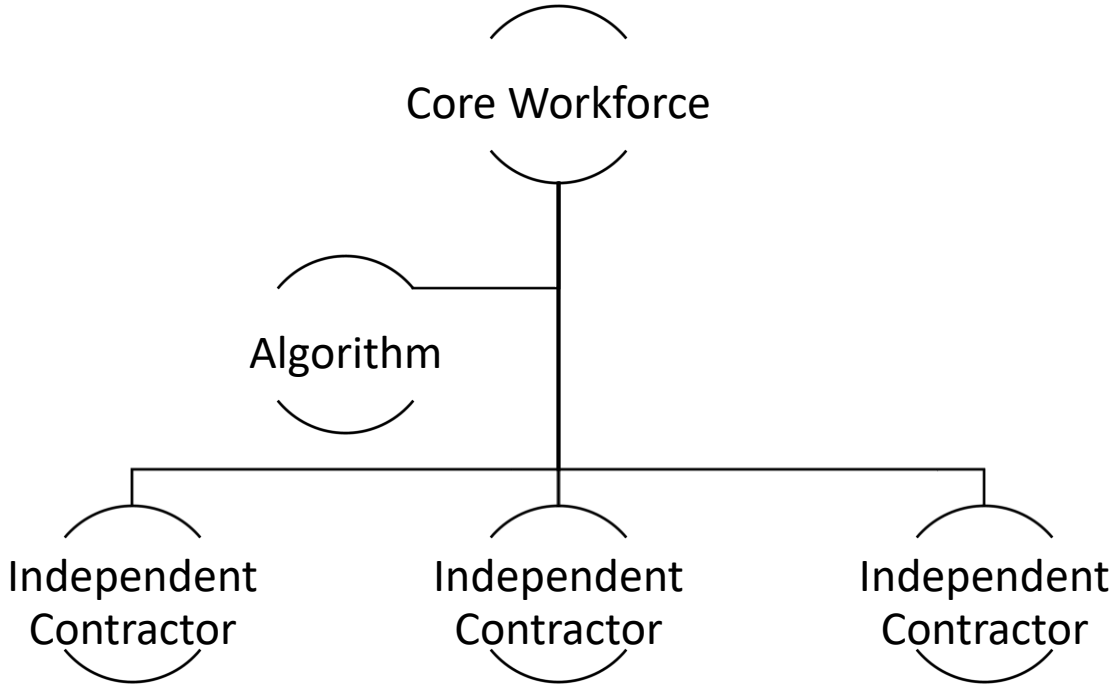

Figure 4.1: Organisational Structure of a Gig Company

It is interesting to note that the idea of a tiered workforce was developed long before the gig economy. Atkinson's model was developed in 1984 in response to the idea that uncertain, unpredictable and competitive markets required organisations to operate with a high level of flexibility. In other words, organisations were encouraged to move towards management styles which were constructed to adapt to contingent demands of the market and the environment without jeopardising their organisational efficiency or effectiveness. What this meant in practice was a streamlined, employed core of essential value-producing functions supported by a semi-employed or a peripheral workforce of independent contractors. In the 21st century, gig companies have retained the core and periphery dichotomy but it has been supercharged by the possibilities of digital platforms and algorithmic management. For example, Deliveroo has approximately 3,000 employees but they have 180,000 gig couriers (Sweney 2023; Iqbal 2023). For this reason, the differences between the flexible firm in the 20th century and a 21st century gig company is found in the scale and geography of operations.

Atkinson's model remains useful to understand the tiered system of a gig company, however, the traditional roles of the core and periphery do not directly translate to the gig economy, and this is why I have presented it as a hierarchy instead with 'core' at the top, algorithm in the middle and independent contractor at the bottom. A digital flexible firm is interesting because whilst the algorithm coordinates labour, the main value-producing activities of the company are all conducted by the peripheral workforce. In this way, the centrality of the core and periphery to the business model has been flipped, and this means that the core workforce are now the supporting apparatus for the periphery workforce. Therefore, the hierarchy should be understood as indicating whether or not organisational socialisation is a concern for the organisation rather than which part of the workforce are value-producing. The relationship between the core and peripheral workforce is particularly interesting because there will be little to no contact between them. The digital platform has the level of flexibility it has because of the algorithm, however, without the core workforce to tinker and coordinate the algorithm and without the peripheral workforce to be the labour on the ground, the value chain does not function. For this reason, it is perhaps useful to consider the digital flexible firm as something distinct from an analogue flexible firm rather than a digitalisation of it.

A tiered system is important to the gig economy because it indicates which kind of organisational socialisation an individual will receive. The language used by gig companies in recruitment is an interesting way to demarcate the tier. For example, a prospective gig courier for Deliveroo will apply through a button entitled 'Ride with us' whereas a prospective software developer would apply through a 'Careers' page. In this way, it is demonstrated from the point of application that there is a difference in the level of belonging and trajectory for gig couriers and a software developer. As such, the software developer can expect to be part of the core workforce, and will be assimilated into the

organisation accordingly through traditional organisational socialisation. For instance, when applying to work at Deliveroo, the prospective employees will find that the careers landing page details 'A taste of life at Deliveroo', an explanation on how employees are enabled to 'Be part of something bigger' and how the organisation fosters identity through 'Proud to be You, Proud to be Roo' (Deliveroo, 2019). As a result, it is clear that a 'career' at Deliveroo closely mirrors the philosophy of organisational socialisation to offer 'more than a job', meanwhile, a gig courier is not offered a job at all. This is the crux of the difference in belonging and it is useful to understand this through the ideas of membership or citizenship. Employees are members of an organisation; independent contractors are denizens of an organisation. I have deliberately used the idea of a denizen as it denotes that the gig courier is found in a particular place, rather than belonging to the place. This has a dual meaning for citizenship and also it has a biological implication which shows the obligate (or facultative) symbiotic relationship between them and the gig company. Indeed, a gig courier will ride *with*, not *for* the company meaning the trajectory of a gig courier and the organisation run parallel to each other, and are not united.

In this way, the social reproduction of a gig company does not need to rely on assimilating gig couriers, and this means that loyalty and allegiance are not features of gig organisational socialisation. Gig organisational socialisation is built on a separate premise to traditional organisational socialisation. If organisational socialisation is the philosophy and practice of investing in individuals to invest in itself; gig organisational socialisation is the philosophy and practice of supplying and replacing disposable individuals. The disposability of a gig courier is by design, and this is made clear from the very beginning of the onboarding process.

The Onboarding Process

Onboarding is often used as a synonym for organisational socialisation and is used by gig companies in their recruitment of gig couriers. However, to be clear, when I use the term 'organisational socialisation' or 'gig organisational socialisation', I am referring to the umbrella concept which captures both the philosophy as well as the methods of assimilating a newcomer into an organisation, whereas, 'onboarding' refers to the process alone. This is important to emphasise because there can be a difference between the theory of organisational socialisation and the practice. For example, onboarding newcomers into a workplace should be a standardised and relatively clear process because this creates social cohesion and a sense of belonging between members of an organisation. In traditional organisational socialisation, onboarding might include having an ID card printed, an IT account assigned and an introduction to colleagues and a workspace as part of fostering a sense of belonging because these are symbols of membership of an organisation (Keyton 2010). However, for gig couriers, onboarding is a very different experience.

In the delivery sector of the gig economy the onboarding process is neither a standardised or a clear experience. This is because the experience couriers have in their formal gig organisational socialisation can differ significantly depending on when they applied to start working as a gig courier. This difference is explained well by Chris (Free Agent, 39, E-Bike, Berkshire) who stated that '[gig companies] change their policies and practices, the way they do things, very regularly'. As gig companies have experimented and rationalised their processes, onboarding has changed across time, and as these changes have happened, formal gig organisational socialisation has become increasingly streamlined and individualised.

In 2015/16 when couriers such as Chris were onboarded, part of their initiation included a 'trial shift'. In a trial shift, the prospective courier would work alongside another courier and they would be evaluated by the courier on whether or not they were competent enough to be a courier. As a result, in some respects, this was a skill-based interview on cycling proficiency and safety that could be seen as comparable to that of a driving test, however, as Chris explained, the trials system was not very effective:

> 'Trials were a bit of a joke really, depending on who you got. If the person wanted to learn, then fair enough, they would show you round, they'd answer your questions but because you got paid for the trial shift, you wanted to get rid of them as quick as possible so you could continue making money. The chances are people would turn up and they'd go "okay, you've got a bike, yeah you look relatively fit, do one order and then you can be on your way'.

This sentiment was echoed by Fred (Survivor, 24, Bicycle, East Midlands) who described the trial evaluation as 'you just follow someone on your bike for an hour' and 'if you have a bike, you can work. If you can cycle you can work'. This is interesting as when I began the interviews with gig couriers, I anticipated that trials would be a rite of passage in the journey to become a gig courier. Nevertheless, it became clear that trials were a check-box exercise that mattered little to gig couriers in their journey, and eventually, trials were abandoned by gig companies. Today, the process of onboarding is a simple process which consists of providing an ID and the right to work, followed by online video tutorials. Matt (Side-Hustler, 32, Bicycle/Motorbike, Midlands) applied to work as a gig courier in response to the pandemic, and explained the 'right to work' section of the process:

> 'You select what area you want to be in, you figure out identification, you are sent a barcode from an external verification company called Sterling, and you take that barcode and your

> identification documents to the Post Office – you pay £6 and then the Post Office will validate your identification and then the Post Office will send that back to the company'.

Matt continued to explain that the external verification company is used by other gig companies too, yet the checks must be done each time as the record is non-transferrable. It is also important to mention that the "right to work" section of the process appears to be simple, but this is only the case for those with British citizenship. The right to work check is less straightforward for those who are working in the UK on a visa. For example, as mentioned in Chapter Three, Nasir (Survivor, 29, Scooter, Greater London) is on a spouse visa and this means that his right to work is dependent on his visa status. Unfortunately, Nasir explained that there is a loophole in the system where it is possible to have the legal right to work but not to have the physical paperwork to provide proof. For instance, Nasir discussed the idea of a British citizen without a passport or a drivers license, and questioned how they would be able to prove their right to work. In this respect, Nasir stated that Deliveroo has their own 'law' regarding a right to work check whereby they would refuse to onboard an individual without physical proof. As Chris explained earlier, this is likely as a strategy to ensure that Deliveroo is not enabling illegal work, although, it is an approach that causes cases like Nasir to fall through the gaps in the system. Furthermore, Nasir explained that Deliveroo continue to check his right to work and threaten to withhold his account and prevent access unless proof of work can be given. Nasir explained how this is a worrying aspect of the process because 'Deliveroo's law' does not align with government regulation, yet he has little room to negotiate as Deliveroo hold the power to withhold or terminate his account at their discretion. Consequently, one of the differences in experience in the onboarding process can be found between migrants and citizens working in the gig economy,

however, the right to work is an issue that would also impact the journey into work outside of the gig economy.

Once a gig courier has been accepted by the gig company, they are granted access to the app but the length of time it will take to be accepted is an unknown variable. This is important because even though the application process is simple, this does not mean it cannot be a lengthy, undetermined process. The lack of determinability and information asymmetry is a key part of moulding the expectations for gig couriers in the relationship with the platform and emphasises their position as a denizen of the organisation. It is necessary to state that the length of time spent waiting for a response from a gig company has additional or a disproportionate impact depending on the type of gig courier. For a Survivor such as Nasir, each day spent waiting to be onboarded or to be re-onboarded is a day without additional (or any) cash flow. Nasir was worried that Deliveroo accounted for approximately 30% of his earnings, and if he is waiting for the company to manually review his case and his account is withheld in the meantime, this means that is a large portion of his earnings will be inaccessible. For a Free Agent, a long waiting period has the potential to disrupt, delay or derail the lifestyle they desire. Free Agents actively optimise the balance between flexibility and income generating potential, and this means that a Free Agent would have a diversified portfolio of income streams to enable their lifestyle and safeguard against disruption. For instance, James (Free Agent, 26, E-Bike, Midlands) and Chris both have YouTube channels and Piotr (Free Agent, 21, Bicycle/E-Bike, Midlands) has side-projects in the music industry where he is working on establishing a following. The type of courier that is least impacted by the waiting period are Side-Hustlers, as for them, a long period of waiting is inconvenient. For example, Matt's application waiting times varied significantly depending on the company, but as he was not financially dependent on the income and he was not using gig courier work to support other projects, the length of time spent waiting was more palatable:

> ‘I’d not heard of Stuart, it was another rider who told me about Stuart, and the sign-up process, the onboarding process from start-to-finish with Stuart was about a week and a half, compared to the 7 months with Deliveroo. UberEats, again, it’s been a while – that’s gone a bit haywire, so I’ve done the Sterling checks, I’ve done the verification at the Post Office, and I got an email a couple of days ago from UberEats asking me to create an account to start my verification process. So, I had to email them to explain that I’ve already done this, and I’m just waiting on them to get back to me’.

Matt’s experience with onboarding into different gig companies demonstrates how the process to apply to these companies is similar but the processing times can be very different, which makes them feel indeterminable. These timescales of acceptance are significantly different but Matt also shows that the process is fallible and this is useful because it means that a prospective gig courier cannot know whether or not something has gone wrong in the application process as all they can do is send an email into the aether or continue their wait. For example, I too applied to join gig platforms and did not receive a response at all. As a result, my application likely joined the many applications which were over the threshold of saturation, but potentially my application was just lost in transit. Discussing my application to join with Fred, he stated:

> ‘I think the case with you is that, you said you couldn’t join, it’s just because it’s so easy to join and everyone joins, they’re quite saturated. You have to be lucky with the timing. Around September/October when the students come and there’s more demand’.

Fred’s assertion that access to the app is dependent on luck is an interesting justification for onboarding into gig couriership, especially as he couples it with the knowledge he has on the peaks and troughs of gig courier recruitment. It is also interesting that gig couriers recruited during these peak times are often told that they only have temporary access to the app and that their access will be terminated once their services are no longer needed. This is similar

to temping, and so, gig couriers will also hope that if they work hard and they are lucky enough, they will be kept on as a gig courier. Naturally, as they are independent contractors, the language of being lucky to be 'kept on' does not make much sense, however, this is the nature of a facultative symbiotic relationship as the gig companies control the access to their platforms as their sole discretion. One of the reasons this is interesting is because gig couriers are well aware the labour pool is deliberately saturated, but they accept that it is part of the business model of the gig economy. For example, in Maverick's (Side-Hustler, 38, E-Bike, Hampshire) interview, we discussed how different gig couriers responded to the seasonal recruitment of gig couriers:

> 'You know what? I've only seen him a few times, and do you find that a lot. We had like an influx of new people, and quite a few of them I've not seen. Either they're working different times, or they just don't do it. They just quit. And the grandad, we call him the grandad, I forget his name. He's done it for 2 years, and he's like the oldest guy whose been doing Deliveroo. He's alright. But he's like, "there's these new riders everywhere!" Just moans about the new riders. He moans about Deliveroo creating new riders, but it's a business. The business isn't there to make him happy, the business isn't there to make me happy. The business is there to make sure they've got enough riders to get the food to the customers as quick as possible. There's no negatives for them [platforms] to have too many riders. None. It's just negatives for us. It's all negatives for us, and that's the nature of the beast. It's never gonna change, it can't. It just can't do it.'

For this reason, the role of luck and acceptance is a lesson to be learned during onboarding, and it is a part of wider themes that I explore more closely in *Chapter Five: Service on Standby*.

For this section, it is more accurate to describe the luck as a trickle-down of a meticulous decision made by gig companies to not onboard new gig couriers. There is a delicate balance gig companies find between maintaining saturation and oversaturation of onboarded, and indeed, the ratio between active or inactive gig couriers. If the majority of gig couriers onboarded fit the mould of the Side-Hustler, it is important that the Side-Hustler is able to

access work otherwise the number of active couriers will decrease. A decrease in the number of couriers results in scarcity which means each courier becomes more valuable and this is antithetical to the labour model. For example, Nasir mentioned that during religious periods such as Eid or secular holidays such as New Year's Day, many gig couriers will not work and this means that the supply side of the courier equation is underrepresented whereas the demand side will increase. In response, gig companies will offer additional incentives to tempt gig couriers to work during these times. The incentives are often a multiplier rate, or a 'boost' that is added to the calculation of an order, however, the best multiplier rates are only present when supply is shortest. After all, as gig couriers are independent contractors, gig companies must ensure that gig couriers are willing to wait for an order to arrive. Enabling service on standby is one of the key practices of gig companies, and I discuss this in depth in Chapter Five. Fortunately for gig companies, algorithmic management is capable of coordinating the supply of gig couriers, however, little is known about *how* this is done. What is known is that it is important for gig companies to maintain a healthy pool of labour that meets the needs of the platform whilst simultaneously restricting the bargaining power of gig couriers.

For gig organisational socialisation, the current iteration of onboarding works well for gig companies because gig couriers do not need to physically speak or see a representative of the gig company or another courier at any part of the formal process to begin working as a gig courier. It is likely this change was enacted as part of rationalising the onboarding process to avoid paying a courier to onboard a newcomer, however, Chris highlighted that this change also meant that newcomers had no "test" to become gig couriers. Indeed, Chris stated 'I don't think [the new couriers] are tested in anyway. I think [the gig companies] are more concerned with background checks for legal reasons as opposed to training'. Removing trials was an important decision as it removed one of the only remaining parts of the

socialisation process that mirrored traditional organisational socialisation. Whether trials were a meaningful part of the journey or not, they were a necessary part of the journey to become a gig courier that depended on the new gig courier interacting with an experienced gig courier tasked with evaluating them, but also, to show them the ropes of gig couriership. For example, Piotr reminisced about his onboarding experience:

> 'Wow. It was so long ago. [Laughs] I had a rusty bike back then, and the guy who took me in was my friend, we became friends later on. I wasn't fit for this job, I didn't have the stamina , I had a rusty bike, but I developed. I bought myself a better bike later on, I bought an e-bike and I was growing with the equipment. I was investing a lot of money in this job, and it was a very important project in my life working for food delivery companies. Onboarding was hard, but the guy believed in me. He gave me some tips on what to do when I started and it was very pleasant back then, it was very good. There were not that many companies on the market, there was only Deliveroo I think. There was only Deliveroo in Nottingham. That's something, its very different now'.

Piotr's experience of onboarding shows how it had some features of traditional organisational socialisation. The idea of the 'guy believed in me' is particularly important here because it shows how there was an investment into Piotr that helped him to develop the skills necessary to be able to become a gig courier. The critical distinction between the investment found in traditional organisational socialisation and the investment found in this example is the origin and purpose of the investment. The gig courier that showed Piotr the ropes of gig couriership went above and beyond their responsibility to facilitate Piotr's entry into the world of being a gig courier, and this is an exception to the other stances on the utility of trials. If a gig courier could show the ropes and empower another through their actions, this was an important part of the onboarding process that no longer exists. By removing this aspect, it further individualises the process and this solidifies that gig couriers do not need to have a relationship with other gig couriers in order to get into gig courier work.

As aforementioned, traditional organisational socialisation goes beyond pragmatic concerns, meanwhile, formal gig organisational socialisation emphasises pragmatism alone. The onboarding process used to have interaction between veteran and newcomer courier as part of the training, however, by removing the trials, gig organisational socialisation is now purely functional and there is no intention to assimilate the gig courier into the company. For this reason, this change is indicative of a move away from the training and investment for the future method of organisational socialisation, and to move towards the resupply and replace model of gig organisational socialisation.

As mentioned above, indeterminacy and information asymmetry are a key feature of gig organisational socialisation. The onboarding process has little information on the position of a gig courier and this means that their knowledge and their capacity to prepare is restricted. Some of the most interesting insights into onboarding can be found in the accounts of veteran couriers who have been through multiple iterations of onboarding in the gig economy, but also in other workplaces. As discussed in Chapter Three, Fred (Side-Hustler, 24, Bicycle, Midlands) has worked in many different sectors and this means that he has experienced many kinds of organisational socialisation. The following is an extract from Fred's interview which shows his experience of getting into gig couriership:

> 'I saw an advert at my university's careers place, and they was like, "oh you know, it's a flexible job you can get £16 an hour, you just need your bike, your smartphone, internet, helmet and you're good to go". So I applied, and it looked really good. I thought this was going to be a more competitive process, I'm quite used to going to interviews to get a job. It wasn't. It was very easy to get it. It's essentially, they've made it even easier now 4 years later. But back then it was just doing online training, and then someone would get back to you about getting you your equipment and stuff like that, the backpack. There was a thing where there were people employed who would do an in-person training, so there was a system where you had to go to someone. I thought it would be an interview, but you just follow them on your bike for an hour'.

Fred's interview is a good example of the informality of the recruitment process and how this compares to a traditional trajectory of application, interview and then onboarding. Interestingly, many gig couriers expected the process to be more difficult than it is, however, it is important to remember that it is in a gig company's interest to have as many gig couriers at their disposal both in and outside their labour pool so that they are able to control the flow and amount of gig couriers. The crucial aspect of this is that there is an erasure of security in 'getting into' gig couriership. Gig couriers do not 'get the job', on the contrary, gig couriers are reminded throughout the process of how their contract can and will be terminated if they breach their service agreement or if their services are no longer required. As a result, perhaps it is fair to say that 'getting into' gig couriership does require some luck as individuals are unimportant to gig companies – numbers are.

The final part to emphasise about gig organisational socialisation is the emotional impact of informational asymmetry and the indeterminateness of the onboarding process. Whilst Fred's original onboarding with Deliveroo was smooth and he was onboarded within the same week of applying, when Fred tried to onboard with other gig companies, such as JustEat and UberEats, he experienced a six month wait before he heard back about his employment. Referring to my own failure to be onboarded, he explained 'I know the pain'. The pain Fred describes stems from the experience of indefiniteness embedded in the onboarding process. Becoming acclimated to the experience of indefiniteness is the main lesson to be learned during onboarding, and it is this indefiniteness that fosters a culture of reactivity rather than proactivity.

The First Shift

The first shift is the point of convergence for gig couriers and was one of the most enjoyable sections of the interviews I had with gig couriers. Despite their heterogenous journeys into gig courier work, all gig couriers reach the moment when they need to make their first pickup and their first delivery. As a result, it seems that the first shift is a more important milestone for getting into gig courier work than the formal onboarding of receiving the kit or filing the paperwork. The first shift was memorable experience for all of the gig couriers I spoke with, and this makes sense considering how it is the beginning of their work, but also, because it is the moment when they become exposed to the informal features of gig organisational socialisation.

To begin, it is helpful to show the emotion and passion that can be expressed through speaking about their first shift. Maverick (Side-Hustler, 38, E-Bike, Hampshire) spoke at length about his first shift and demonstrates how the first shift is an important moment in the journey to becoming a gig courier. The following extract provides a useful insight into gig organisational socialisation and is in response to the question, 'do you remember your first shift?':

> 'Yeah, do you know what? I remember my first shift as crystal clear as I remember losing my virginity. [*I laugh*]. It sounds really crazy. I don't remember any first day of any job, I've ever done, ever. Any other jobs, and I've done a few jobs, I don't remember the first day. I remember the first order I took, I remember how nervous I was, and I took a photo of me waiting for my first order. I remember it **crystal clear.** I had my bloody Deliveroo outfit on, like I was a schoolboy. Had the Deliveroo hat, I was like Yeeeeeah! I'm going to go and do my Deliveroo and my cycling! [Big grin] Went to KFC, got my order, I went in there and I'm looking around going, what the fuck? Does my order come on this screen? They don't in KFC. You've gotta go and ask them for it. So, I'm waiting there for like 10 minutes, and I'm like, where's my order? My order number is not on there, and there's a rider next to me – blanked me. And I'm like, is my order coming? Completely blanked me, he was a scooter. Another guy, I'm like, does this number go on there, and he's like, no, you need to go and show them

> your number. Got my order, I remember **exactly** where my first order went. In Popley, it was like 2.1 miles from here. I was like, this is fucking awesome. I just remember thinking, it was a really nice day as well. It was hot, but not too hot. You could have your jacket on, zip it down slightly and it cools you down. I remember it really clearly. I had no onboarding, I just went click, click, click, you're in Deliveroo. It was that simple. They make you watch a few videos, which obviously I didn't watch, I didn't give a shit, I was just gonna wing it, how hard could it be? That's what I was like. [*I laugh]* You see the thing is, I guess I'm blessed in a way in a way that I could delete the app and that's it, I don't even need to think about Deliveroo ever again, I have that out. So, I think that's how I can take more pleasure out of it. Any job that you do becomes monotonous, even if you're like a pop star. You've got millions of fans, but you get bored of making music, you know it happens, bands break up for that exact reason. People get bored of doing the same thing when they feel like they have to do the same thing. I don't feel like I have to do it'.

Maverick's extract is useful for many reasons. The first to highlight is the part when he explains how he remembers his first shift for Deliveroo, but not for his other jobs. This is helpful because it shows that for Maverick there is something unique, special and exciting about being able to cycle for a job. It should be mentioned that Maverick's experience of gig couriership is a positive one, and he mentions that this is perhaps due to the fact that he is able to quit and forget about the app at any time. In this way, Maverick fits the mould of a Side-Hustler well. Indeed, this suggests that for the emotional side of getting into gig courier work, the Side-Hustler is in the 'sweet spot' of gig couriership when discussing the balance between risk and reward when learning the ropes of gig couriership. Comparing this experience to a Survivor or a Free Agent, it is understandable how the freedom to quit would enable the kind of positive experience Maverick (or other Side-Hustlers) have with gig couriership.

The first shift can feel like a bit of an adventure, and this was indicated well in several interviews where they mentioned how simply felt fashionable to be a courier on a bicycle,

and this was made particularly clear by Maverick when he spoke about the 1986 film 'Quicksilver':

> 'Kevin Spacey, no not Kevin Spacey, Kevin Bacon. [Laughs] It's an 80s film, I think it came out in 1986, and I watched it on VHS loads as a kid. It's about a guy who was in a really well-paid job, and he becomes a bike messenger. It was something I always wanted to do, always as a kid. I always wanted to do that job because I thought it looked amazing. It was like The Goonies to me, I've always loved push-bikes. So, the idea of being paid to cycle was like a dream come true. So, it's like that in the film, money isn't everything, it's about doing what you enjoy'.

At the time of this interview, Maverick was almost 40, had a wife and a young son, and was enjoying a successful career as an IT professional, so it was remarkable to see Maverick's awe and schoolboy exuberance about his first shift and how Basingstoke was his New York. The energy and magic associated with Maverick's shift is palpable, and is a useful demonstration of how gig couriership can have a glamorous appeal to it. Indeed, when Maverick said that he wanted to 'wing it', it shows how the first shift is one of discovery and experimentation too.

As Maverick is standing in KFC, he had entered the world of gig couriership and was confused because he had an idea of how an order pick-up would work, but it did not work the way he thought it would. Maverick learned through doing that he was expected to work it out by himself; however, he was fortunate that another gig courier was willing to point him in the right direction. Aside from the intervention, it is the independence that Maverick was thrilled by because it was his task to use his senses and intuition to work out how to do his job. It is interesting how many of the gig couriers irrespective of type would emphasise the freedom of gig couriership that they were unable to experience in other kinds of work. However, it should be mentioned that this freedom is experienced in different ways, and it is the diffusion of freedom that matters in the analysis. Informal socialisation teaches a gig

courier that freedom is tempered by the relationship the courier has to gig courier work, and as discussed in Chapter Three, the more dependent on the work you are, the less freedom you are able to have in the work.

Maverick's extract is also helpful because it demonstrates how the formal onboarding (the video tutorials) were deemed unnecessary and he decided to take his chances of being able to work it out as he went along. Indeed, even if Maverick watched the instruction videos, he still would have needed to work out how individual restaurants process their orders as the designated area for couriers to wait and collect the order is not a standardised practice. It is also important to note that Maverick learned that he could not expect other gig couriers to instruct him on how the processes worked and that he might need to work things out for himself. This is a vital feature of informal gig organisational socialisation because the nature of being an independent contractor means that inter-courier relationships are tricky. Gig couriers (particularly new gig couriers) must question to what extent they can trust and rely on other gig couriers because they are technically in direct competition with one another for orders. Not all gig couriers will trust the advice of other gig couriers and this point was made clear by Robert (Side-Hustler, 19, Bicycle, Kent):

> 'I remember on my first shift I was waiting outside this restaurant and I was waiting there for about 30 minutes, which is really like unheard of almost. One of the, I guess I can call them the OG delivery people in my area was coming to pick up at the same restaurant. I was talking to him and he was saying how this restaurant, and the restaurant adjacent were notoriously slow. It's almost not worth accepting. It's worth cycling past, and if your food is not there, it's almost worth not accepting it because you'll be waiting for so long just to do that one order where in that time you could do 2 or 3 more. I did kind of think at the time, oh maybe he's just saying that so that he can pick up the orders that I reject but I learnt after a couple of times, and a couple of hours [Laughs] of waiting that yeah, some restaurants are notoriously slow. You get to know which ones to avoid, which ones to take over time, which is useful, I guess'.

For Robert, the idea of the 'OG delivery people' sabotaging his work was feasible, however, after experiencing long waits, Robert learned that this courier's advice could be trusted after all. This is an interesting dynamic because of how is it distinct to the experience of Piotr who experienced trials and had a guide who 'believed in him'. Perhaps it is the case that if Robert had been onboarded by the 'OG' gig courier, then he would have been more willing to trust him as a guide rather than a direct competitor.

The inter-courier dynamics are one of the most interesting parts about the first shift because new gig couriers will be exposed to other gig couriers as gig couriers for the first time. This is important because new gig couriers are placed into the debate on what determining the status of the relationship between gig couriers. Colleagues, competition and camaraderie are three characteristics of this relationship, and it is accurate to describe this relationship as contingent on context. For example, Maverick makes reference to the fact that the courier who ignored him was a 'scooter', which at face value simply describes the type of vehicle the gig courier uses to complete the work, however, beneath this simple description is a derogatory tone which demonstrates one of the divides between gig couriers. Essentially, 'he was a scooter' was a signal that it is not surprising that the courier was unhelpful because of the type of vehicle he uses. Learning this divide and their place in it is a lesson of gig couriership because subcultures and cultural boundaries are important to fit into the dynamics of the work.

Despite the presence of subcultures, not all couriers are interested in engaging with other couriers, and some such as Maverick are highly individualistic and argue that the relationship gig couriers have with other gig couriers is civil but superficial. For instance, Maverick will recognise faces but he will not know any names. A superficial relationship between gig couriers irrespective of vehicle was expressed frequently in interviews, and shows how even

zones which have a quasi-community are limited to nods, a wave, or at most, a WhatsApp group. Nevertheless, the inter-courier dynamics in the zone are different to inter-courier dynamics online, however, the wider discussion on inter-courier dynamics falls outside the scope of this section.

Returning to the first shift and gig organisational socialisation, one of the most important lessons for gig couriers to learn is to become independent and to not expect help from others. An individualistic and isolationist mindset in gig couriers is an asset to gig companies because it restricts how gig couriers will interact with each other. If gig couriers have an adversarial relationship this means that gig companies will not need to have to worry as much about industrial action. Indeed, it was made clear by a few of the veteran gig couriers about how industrial action simply meant more work for them as there would be less gig couriers online. This is another aspect of tempering gig couriers to be denizens as it means that the relationships between individuals in the on-demand labour pool are constructed to be unimportant or even disadvantageous to the work.

The final part of the first shift is to emphasise and incentivise individual rationalisation. It is useful to compare this to the idea of *kaizen,* or continuous improvement, but in the case of the gig courier, action only benefits the individual and the company. For gig couriers, this will normally take place through multi-apping, optimising their strategy, or guesstimating how the algorithm processes action. These actions are explored in Chapter 5, but they are important here because if the point of gig organisational socialisation is to use an independent workforce and discard them, if necessary, it is important to ensure that gig couriers have the potential to gain from working with the gig companies. This is the foundation of the entrepreneurialism embedded into gig courier work as it incentivises self-rationalisation, which in turn, raises the performance benchmark for all. In this way, gig

companies are able to disarm gig couriers to an extent in that creating an atomised and fragmented workforce means that they are less likely to cooperate, and also, because it means that actions taken by gig couriers to disrupt work is likely to only harm the gig courier. In other words, a gig courier cannot break the tools of the company as their bicycle and their phone is their own property. This is not to say that gig couriers are powerless, but it is important to acknowledge that the environment gig couriers operate in is qualitatively different to the one experienced by a member of the core workforce.

Gig Couriers and Work Identity

Since the 1990s the argument has been made that the relationship between people and their work has been corroded (Sennett, 1998) and that this has resulted in disruption to a 'sustainable moral order of the past' (Strangleman, 2012: 411). As an alternative structure and experience of work, gig organisational socialisation represents how a system based on resupply and replace marginalise the value of a 'sustainable or endurable life' (Strangleman, 2012: 411). For Strangleman, a sustainable or endurable life is one in which people 'carve out meaning and identity from their work, are socialised into and through employment and how they in turn pass on these values' (ibid). Consequently, if gig organisational socialisation discards this as a functional strategic process, what is the role work identity in gig couriership?

To demonstrate the role of work identity in gig couriership, it is useful to think about gig couriership in relation to a comparable worker that pre-existed the gig economy and the digital platform: bike messengers. Spinney and Popan (2020: 138) state 'as a central mode of urban logistics, bike messengers have been around for over a century and over the past three decades their numbers have been increasing… [however], the last decade has also seen a notable shift in the character and role of messengers'. Consequently, Spinney and Popan (2020: 138) divide the 'eras' of bike messengering into before and after the 'twin shift' of the 'dematerialisation of

many goods traditionally delivered by bike messengers and the introduction of mobile digital devices to govern delivery services'. This is important for the discussion on the role of work identity in gig couriership because Spinney and Popan do not understand gig couriers as a separate form of work from bike messengers, but instead, describe them as 'gig economy bike messengers' or 'messenger 2.0'. This is useful because this allows the suggestion that these authors who have themselves witnessed the transformation of their bike messengering worlds are expressing a similar sentiment to Strangleman's (2012) older railway workers who 'lament the erosion of their workplace culture and the sustainable moral order of the past'. Indeed, Spinney and Popan emphasise academic research based on early 2000s ethnographies of bike messengering as demonstrating the importance of 'messenger practice and ritual to the production of a distinct identity' (2020: 139), and in particular, how the practice of bike messengering work is (or was) embedded within 'street subculture' or the 'outlaw' style explored by Ben Fincham (2006; 2007a; 2007b; 2008).

Fincham's ethnographic work is influential for capturing the practice of work of early 2000s bike messengers and for demonstrating how the anarchistic subculture of bike messengering permeated work and life to such an extent that bike messengering reflected not so much a form of work, but a lifestyle that continued to echo in the identity of an individual after they stopped being a bike messenger (2008: 619). Consequently, Fincham argued that for bike messengers the 'binary distinction between work and life, work and leisure or work and not work are relatively meaningless' (2008: 619). It is for this reason, that I choose to draw a distinction between gig couriers and bike messengers because for each of the three types of gig courier, gig courier work is something you do, not something you are.

In Fincham's ethnographic work, the work of a bike messenger is not considered as a 'job for life', but the average working life was 'about three years' (2008: 619). Two decades later, gig

organisational socialisation and the system of resupply and replace means that involvement in the gig economy can often be measured in weeks and gig couriers who have worked for three years would be considered the old guard, however, veteran status does not mean they are deemed worthy of respect by newer couriers. For example, when asked about if experience demanded respect Maverick explained:

> 'No. The guys… one yes, definitely, but I was warned about him by 2 people. They're like, oh he's a bit of a prick. When I first met him, I thought he was a bit of a prick. If you talk to me I'm gonna slap ya. I don't care who you think you are, if you talk down to me I'll slap you'.

In this way, some aspects remain present in gig couriership insofar as a formal hierarchy between gig couriers is formally absent and because a traditional social hierarchy of experience is rejected. Interestingly, Maverick explained that, eventually, he began to respect the veteran gig courier not because of his knowledge but because of how he rationalised his work:

> I respect him because he went stealth, and I was like, why is he all dressed in black. Why has he got a black bag, why is he sitting over there? Now I completely get it. I completely get what he's done, and after speaking to him I can see he's invested. He's like, yeah I got a new chain set because the other one was having more drag. So I'm like, oh he's making his job easier by investing. He spent like £300 on a bag he imported from America, and that's true, he showed me the website. I'm like, you've actually thought about this, you've actually thought right I need this to make myself blend in a bit better.

For Fincham's bike messengers, a strong attachment to work identity was a form of 'symbolic compensation' that produced a 'celebrated outsider' status which made the poor conditions and pay of bike messenger work tolerable (2008:621, 622). The subcultural fashion markers of bike messengers such as piercings, tattoos or chains were used to overtly establish and display 'insider' status of the bike messenger community (Fincham, 2008: 622). On the contrary, in gig couriership these markers are overwritten by fluorescent corporate logos for casual gig couriers, and for the veterans, the benefits of 'going stealth' or 'naked boxes' (David, Side-Hustler)

supersedes all as an overt display of affiliation to the identity of a gig courier precludes multi-apping (explored in Chapter 5) and the ability to blend into the urban environment to avoid unwanted attention from the public. Consequently, some gig couriers hold nostalgia and marvel at the glamour of the Hollywood depiction of bike messengering, and they may feel the residue of that world in their first shift and beyond, but the difference between bike messengering as a central performance of identity and the relative meaninglessness of gig couriership is a testament to the influence and importance of gig organisational socialisation.

Indeed, as discussedabove, gig couriership is a tiered workforce, and it is through the structure of the digital platform and algorithmic management that the gig courier experience is one of independent compartmentalisation, which is intended to detach them from the collective structure and experience of a traditional holding environment experienced by their bike messenger counterparts. This detachment is important as Petriglieri and colleagues (2018:124) explain that 'in the absence of organizational or professional membership, workers experience stark emotional tensions encompassing both the anxiety and fulfilment of working in precarious and personal conditions'. Further, Petriglieri and colleagues explore the dualism between the 'agony' and 'ecstasy' of independent work, and controversially, stated that organisational holding environments could be understood as 'surrogates' for the personally cultivated holding environment (2018: 156). Arguing for the personally cultivated holding environment as not only an alternative to the organisational variant but as the organic option has critical implications for the idea of work and employment as the foundation for moral order and the endurable or sustainable life. For this reason, their call for researchers to explore how 'digital platforms facilitate or hinder the personalization and precariousness' of independent work (2018: 160) is necessary to understand what the impact of gig organisational socialisation could be in the *longue durée* of work. However, the issue with directly applying Petriglieri and colleagues' theory of personally cultivated work identities constructed through routines, physical places,

significant people and the purpose of work to gig couriership is that the independent workers in their study firmly have 'outsider' status, whereby they exist and operate outside the frameworks of the organisations they contract for. Meanwhile, gig couriers are denizens of the gig economy whereby they exist and operate within the structure of the organisations they contract for, but in return, they are strictly restricted to work for rather than be allowed to belong to an organisation.

Conclusion

This chapter has focussed on exploring organisational socialisation and the contrast it has to the idea of gig organisational socialisation. The first section of this chapter emphasised how organisational socialisation is about providing 'more than a job' through membership in order to obtain loyalty and allegiance from the prospective employee to safeguard the social reproduction of the organisation. On the contrary, gig organisational socialisation emphasises that a job is not provided in the first place. In the place of membership, gig couriers are denizens of the on-demand labour pool, and this means that they experience an ethos of resupply and replace rather than investment for the future. The first shift explores the rite of passage for becoming a gig courier as it is marks the moment when gig couriers finally enter the world of gig couriership, and importantly, they are fully exposed to the informal structures of gig organisational socialisation such as inter-courier dynamics. The final section, gig couriers and work identity, explores the relationship between gig couriers and bike messengers and argued that gig organisational socialisation and the strategy of resupply and replace has impacted the work to such an extent that work that what was once a lifestyle for some is now a disposable part of a gig courier's identity, if it was ever considered to be an element of it at all. From this chapter, it has been established that the

‘getting into’ stage of gig couriership is worthy of analysis because of the distinction between the methods of traditional organisational socialisation and the way that gig companies onboard gig couriers into the on-demand labour pool. In the next chapter, the practice of gig courier work, and indeed, how the gig economy is able to function through Service on Standby will be explored.

Chapter Five: Service on Standby: The Practice and Lived Experience of Gig Courier Work

Introduction

As Chapter Four has explored the idea of gig organisational socialisation and the experience of 'getting into' gig work this chapter can now engage with the experience of gig courier work itself. The focus of this chapter is on the practice and lived experience of gig courier work, however, it is inaccurate to discuss gig courier work as if it happens in isolation, and so, this chapter also lays the theoretical foundation to present gig couriers as part of an assemblage of interdependent human and non-human actors. In particular, the goal of this chapter is to unpack the relationships gig couriers have with their work whilst also exploring the negotiations they make as part of an assemblage to explain how an on-demand food delivery service is feasible. As a result, this chapter is an exploration gig courier work and how it is embedded within a wider structure.

This chapter has three core sections: *On-Demand Service as an Interdependent Assemblage*, *Service on Standby*, *Colleagues, Camaraderie and Competition*.

The first section, *On-Demand Service as an Interdependent Assemblage,* is brief and is designed to theoretically orientate the chapter by explaining the rationale behind using the idea of an assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988) to understand the relationship between the work of gig couriers and the food-delivery service. This section highlights how optimal conditions for gig companies are enabled, and how this is often at the gig courier's expense. This section focusses on what an optimal on-demand service looks like, and the economic

processes of the food delivery sector I explain how a degradable product and the necessity of physical presence makes it unconventional for an on-demand service.

Service on Standby is the section that intends to capture the centrality of waiting in gig courier work. This section classifies waiting and its impact on affect, followed by a deep exploration into the different techniques and tactics gig couriers deploy to navigate and attempt to mitigate the threat of waiting. From gamification to rituals that appease algorithmic deities, this section explores the gig courier's role as the temporally subservient subject in the interdependent assemblage through the three ideal types of courier.

Colleagues, Camaraderie and Competition, covers the multi-faceted nature of inter-courier relationships and explores how they are advantageous to gig companies. This section presents the multi-faceted inter-courier relationships in both a situated and 'diasporic' context, and explains how these relationships are key to grasping a couriers' underdeveloped position to negotiate, disrupt and change the conditions of their work. Whilst this chapter is based upon the experiences of couriers working across England, it is also important to include a wider discussion that acknowledges the international aspects of gig couriership that could be described as a loose 'diaspora' of gig couriers. I acknowledge the term diaspora is already laden with meaning from its application in studies of migration (Ben-Rafael, 2013), and it might be considered strange to attach the term to gig couriers, however, my reasoning behind attaching it to gig couriers will be made clear. Despite the fragmentation and isolation produced by gig organisational socialisation, many gig couriers remain fully aware of their domestic and international counterparts, and as I discuss, the relationships couriers have with one another are informed by their local context and the developments that take place internationally. In this way, even though each gig courier may structurally operate as an independent contractor, they always remain aware and connected

to other gig couriers. It is through this awareness and connection that I argue that inter-courier relationships are interesting because they resemble the compound of hydrophobic 'magic' sand; whereby depending on the conditions, inter-courier relationships are steadfast or dissolve entirely.

An Interdependent Assemblage and Contradictions in Gig Couriership

Using an assemblage to contain gig courier work is a useful exercise because assemblages offer a straightforward presentation of complex and contingent social forms. A challenge of this chapter is to populate the orderly idea of the gig interdependent assemblage with the messy reality of gig courier work to show how remarkable Mass Just-In-Time production is. Viewing the gig food delivery service as an interdependent assemblage between human and non-human actors is complex idea but it can be made clearer through visual representation. For example, Harvey's model of Instituted Economic Processes presents the relationship between production, exchange, distribution, consumption and external factors (Figure 5.1). Below, I have populated Harvey's (2007) model to create a similar diagram (Figure 5.2) which indicates the flow of relationships in the gig on-demand food delivery service. Figure 5.2 helps to visualise the different actors and details how they are connected with one another and the wider environment to constitute a gig on-demand food delivery service.

Presenting the food delivery service in this way is useful because it contains the flux of contingent forms without stifling them, however, it is important to state that depicting the food delivery service in this way also implies a smoothness or a state of synchronisation and harmony between the different parts.

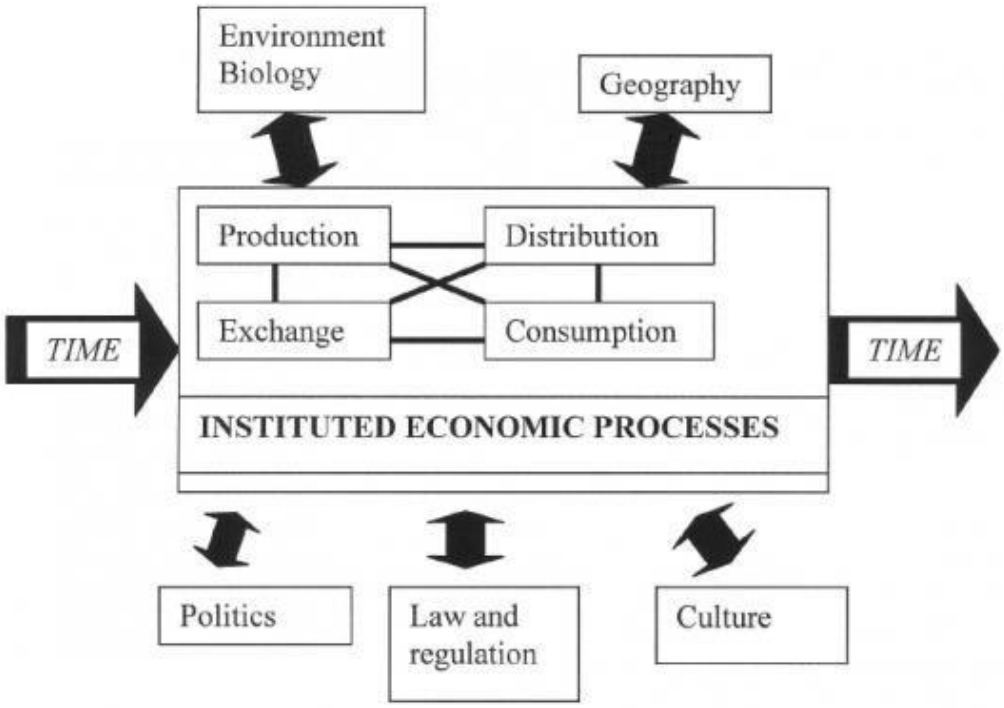

Figure 5.1: Instituted Economic Processes (Harvey 2007)

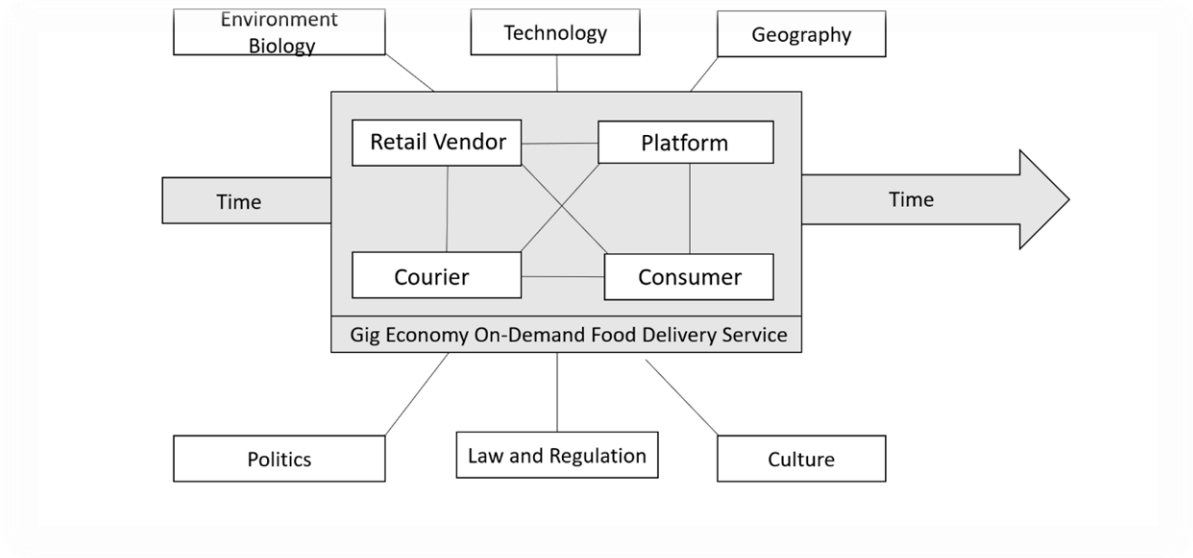

Figure 5.2: Instituted Economic Processes of the Food Delivery Service

Now that the food-delivery service has been visualised, it is easier to explain why the idea of assemblage is useful. The main benefit of working with the idea of an assemblage, or *rhizome* in (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 7), is that it allows for social relationships between

and within interdependent actors to be characterised under the rule of '…connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988:7). This idea provides way to express that in the on-demand food delivery service, the human and non-human, material and non-material, the temporal and the spatial are all part of a web of relations that are dynamic and co-exist without clearly delimited hierarchies or linearity. The non-delimited hierarchies and non-linearity is important to emphasise because unlike the method of subject tracing, such as following the tomato from farm to plate (Harvey, Quilley and Beyon, 2002), an assemblage does not have a primary actor, product or object of study to be followed. This is particularly necessary for studying the gig economy because of how variable the actors can be. For example, there is no single trajectory, pattern or time-span a gig courier follows, and for the same reason as developing ideal types, it is helpful to instead focus on developing ways to capture the individual trajectories, patterns and durations that rhyme rather than a fully-representative model. However, even though assemblages have their uses, there are problems inherent to working with an assemblage.

One problem with assemblages is that they can be extended indefinitely, with the inevitable conclusion that an assemblage will eventually be so inclusive that everything is connected to everything else. This is an obstacle because if everything is connected to everything, the presence of a relationship existing between actors becomes relatively meaningless. Another problem is that assemblages are a nexus of social relationships and so this means they should be considered as a whole, however, it is difficult to understand the role of an actor, or the experience of that actor, without peeling them away from the noisiness of the whole. What this means in practice for examining the assemblage is that whilst factors such as geography, law or the politics of a land are integral in influencing an on-demand delivery service, the core of the on-demand food delivery service are the actors or factors that

facilitate production, distribution, exchange and consumption of the service. Consequently, the other actors in the core such as gig companies or consumers and their relationship with external factors such as government regulation are able to be discussed in more depth in subsequent chapters. Now that the theoretical groundwork and rationale behind an interdependent assemblage has been laid, we can now focus on the contradictions in gig couriership to humanise an important piece of the interdependent assemblage and empirically ground a discussion of the gig economy's development and its impact on work, economy and society.

An Unconventional Service

At its heart, the platform economy is built upon the premise of delivering an on-demand service. In everyday life we are surrounded by a variety of on-demand services, however, it is important to step back and consider the factors that enable these services to exist. This line of thinking leads to the important question: What actually *is* an on-demand service, and why then is an on-demand food delivery unconventional?

Sociologists often leave research into the design of on-demand service system to the field of operations research and management science (Winston, 2022), however, even though the behind-the-scenes coding and mechanisms of these systems often fall outside our scope and expertise, the rationale behind the design of these systems are the guiding factor that determine the boundaries of where to enable and where to confine. For this reason, understanding the rationale behind these systems is helpful because it explains the digital environment gig couriers operate in, and underpins their role as a temporally subservient subject.

The data scientists and engineers who design and maintain on-demand systems are tasked with two responsibilities. Their first duty is to anticipate the supply and demand of a service. Their second duty is to adaptively refine the system throughout the platform's life cycle to balance delay sensitivity (a variable of uncertainty), ensure prices stay high and wages stay low, and meet the speed expectations of ever-impatient consumers (Taylor, 2018; Bai *et al.,* 2019). An on-demand service 'connects time-sensitive customers with independent service providers' who are often referred to as "agents" (Taylor, 2018:1). The term 'agent' offers a useful insight into the optimal conditions for a platform because it emphasises sculpting the *agency* of the independent service providers and leans on the point that uncertainty is a variable to be balanced, not eliminated. In the optimal conditions, the relationship between consumers, company and agent is one where the 'opportunity cost' is enough for independent service providers to *choose* to deliver the service without needing to increases their wages or increase delays and uncertainty for consumers.

For this reason, an on-demand service is designed to mitigate (or eliminate entirely) the waiting time of consumers. The most common way to achieve this is through having service on standby, which means to have the service available for immediate deployment at the consumer's discretion. The on-demand services most representative of this model are the digital platform streaming services, such as Netflix or Amazon Prime Video, which enable consumers near-instant access to entertainment impeded only by the quality of a consumers internet speed. These streaming services are a de facto quality benchmark for an on-demand service; however, when viewed through Harvey's (2007) framework (Figure 5.1) it is clear to see how the near-instantaneous delivery of these streaming services is dependent on meeting two conditions. The first condition is that the point of consumption is temporally distinct from the other economic processes. The second condition is that service at the point of consumption is spatially suspended in order to be accessed and operated at will. The

nondigital equivalent of renting a film is a useful way to show how meeting these two conditions is vital in the delivery of an on-demand service. Before these platforms, the point of consumption would involve something similar to the following: physically walk into a shop, walk around the shop until you find a film you would like to watch, pick up the film, walk to the checkout, wait in line at the counter, pay for the film, leave the shop, go home, and finally, put the film in the DVD player. It is clear to see renting a film from a shop takes far longer than streaming a film because the first condition is met, but the second condition is unmet.

The non-digital version is able to meet the first condition because the making of entertainment (production), the negotiations of rights and responsibilities to the entertainment (exchange), and the delivery of the films to the shop (distribution) occurs and continues to exist past the point of consumption. However, there is a caveat to the point of consumption in that product's continued accessibility is reliant on a customer physically returning their rental (which can be lost, damaged or destroyed), which must then be restocked on the shelf by an employee to be ready for the new customer. In contrast, digital streaming platforms follow a similar path to the non-digital version but with a key difference that products are uploaded to a digital library. Streaming platforms are then able to meet the second condition because consumers autonomously navigate a digital interface and select their entertainment without needing to communicate with another party. In essence, the reason digital platforms are able to deliver an on-demand streaming service at near instantaneous speed is because the laborious and human-centric parts of the economic process are independent of the point of consumption *and* the product continues to exist in the same form beyond consumption.

Now that the two conditions for an on-demand service have been explained, it is possible to see why an on-demand food delivery service is unconventional. The on-demand food delivery sector meets neither condition because food must be prepared, collected and physically delivered. This means the human-centric parts of the economic process remain time-sensitive, are physically present and must be consistently repeated as the products decay and cease to exist after the point of consumption. Nevertheless, the on-demand food delivery service manages to exist. In the case of the digital streaming platform, the library can be summoned and dispelled at will by a consumer with no consequences to the library. In the same way, from the perspective of the consumer, the function and purpose of a digital library and gig courier as a distribution mechanism are the same: a courier is summoned and dispelled when no longer in use too. However, the central challenge for designers of an on-demand food delivery service to overcome is the stark difference between autonomous systems and human beings. The challenge lies in that gig couriers are human beings who have other roles and responsibilities besides delivering food and they are unable to be suspended in space and time without consequence. System programmers have attempted to solve this problem through the aforementioned idea of the 'opportunity cost', whereby the opportunity cost is low enough to encourage couriers to be willing to be on-standby to deliver an on-demand service *should* they be summoned. A courier willingly choosing to be on-standby is most important piece of the system because gig couriers are hired as independent contractors who are only paid for a completed delivery.

It is here that the conflict in this arrangement becomes clear. The on-demand food delivery service is dependent on couriers who miscalculate opportunity costs, or more typically, the couriers who cannot afford to negotiate with unfavourable opportunity costs. In other words, the waiting time of customers is offset by the unpaid waiting time of gig couriers (Bai

et al. 2019; Taylor 2018). For this reason, gig couriers are structurally temporally subservient. The practice of being a temporally subservient subject can be emotionally taxing, and depending on the circumstances of the courier, it can be an existential threat. As I explore later, the negative feelings and active threat unrewarded waiting can offer helps to explain the lengths couriers will take to mitigate their waiting time.

Contextualising Courier Relationships and their Experiences

Gig couriers have a well-recognisable position as a feature of the gig economy. Over the past five years, researchers have contributed to an ever-growing collection of international accounts on the character and lived experience of gig courier work (Healy, Nicholson and Pekarek, 2017; Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas, 2018); Christie and Ward, 2019; Lei, 2021; Heiland, 2021). These accounts of gig courier work are useful for understanding the gig economy, its workers and its development across time because the characteristics and experience of gig courier work is situated in the political, economic, social and temporal context it takes place in. What this means is that changes to a single aspect of the interdependent assemblage can change how gig courier work can look as a whole. For example, as explored in the previous chapter, the process and the experience of gig organisational socialisation in the UK has changed significantly over the past five years, meanwhile, factors such as Brexit or the COVID-19 pandemic have implications for how the on-demand food delivery service looks and functions for years to come.

Aside from the differences between international contexts, it is also important to remember that how gig courier work looks and feels can vary dramatically within a nation. From the amount of work or 'shift' patterns available to the differences in terrain from zone to zone, working in an urban environment has a qualitatively different landscape to working in a smaller, more rural area. For example, riding for Deliveroo in London, UK will be more

comparable to riding for Deliveroo in Amsterdam, Netherlands than riding for Deliveroo in a smaller, quieter and hillier place such as Canterbury. However, in the same way, riding for UberEats in San Francisco, USA would mean couriers have access to a different, more updated app with more information available to them, which influences the opportunity cost because it means couriers have less uncertainty than their European counterparts. What this all means is that each empirical account of gig courier work is insightful on its own, but when considered alongside other cases of gig courier work it is possible to explore gig courier work, its development and its implications on a multi-scalar level. For instance, accounts of gig courier work in Italy and the UK have been used to orientate a discussion of regulation through an exploration of gig courier protests, courier receptiveness to unionisation, and the logistics of forming a trade union for the challenges presented by the gig economy (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2017; 2020).

In this chapter, the data discussed relates to the practice and lived experience of gig couriers in the UK context, however, gig courier work does not exist in a vacuum, and even some of my participants have themselves explored how it is to be a gig courier in different countries. As a result, my participants were often acutely aware of the distinctions between the practice of other gig couriers in the UK and their international counterparts.

Service on Standby

The sociological study of waiting is important because it acknowledges that 'waiting is a universal experience that shapes place and socialises us to cultural norms and processes that are centred on waiting' (López, 2022:1). Indeed, waiting was described by Lefebvre as a 'prominent feature of modern everyday life (in Jeffrey, 2008:954), however, for gig couriers, waiting is central to their world. As explained by a veteran gig courier, 'You just wait, that's

what we do. If you're not waiting for a restaurant, you're waiting for an order, or you're waiting for a customer' (Chris, 39, E-Bike, Free Agent). Ever since their application, couriers are conditioned to become accustomed to waiting, irrespective of whether they are a Survivor, Side-Hustler or Free Agent. The key difference between these types of courier and their experience of waiting is the impact that waiting has on them and the ways in which the courier will attempt to navigate the situations they find themselves in. However, before exploring these varying impacts in detail, it is important to explore waiting, and crucially, the decision-making and judgement involved in waiting as the on-demand food delivery service is dependent on gig couriers who never fully 'switch off'.

In order to explain the idea of never switching off, it is necessary to differentiate between how 'on standby' feels compared to other types of waiting. The concept, or practice of waiting is well-researched, especially in relation to the lived experience. For example, the idea of 'living in liminality' (O'Reilly, 2018) is often associated with asylum seekers, or other people in-between states, places or situations. Indeed, the act of waiting itself is often explored as an interstitial time, which describes an intermediate place, or a gap, between two places of being or moments. This is an important element to consider because this interstitial space is often seen as a place of nothingness, of stillness and inaction which often mean these in-between spaces are normally perceived as intermissions between events and are rarely of interest themselves. Viewed as a corridor that connects different spaces, waiting takes on different forms and can be considered a feature of modern everyday (social) architecture (Jeffrey, 2008).

For Gasparini (Gasparini 1995), these forms of everyday waiting include: waiting as a blockage of action, an experience with substitute meanings or as a meaningful experience in and of itself. The different forms of waiting, and the varying levels of 'stillness' (Bissell and

Fuller 2011) they involve are important to grasp the difference between the kinds of waiting couriers are involved in. Using Gasparini's first form as a blockage of action as a starting point, I have created a classification of waiting in order to demarcate four types of 'blockage of action' waiting: 'Compensated', 'Suspended', 'Routine' and 'Disruptive'. Each type of waiting has a different social and affective consequence for the individual depending on the type of courier they are and the social context of the wait (Figure 5.3).

Figure: 5.3 Classification of Waiting

As the figure shows, waits can be classified by following the flow chart. It is useful to classify types of waiting because there is a qualitative difference in experience between them, and being able to distinguish between the different forms of waiting makes it easier to identify which type of waiting I am referring to when I examine them. Following the flow chart, once social importance of the wait has been established, the expectedness of the wait can be considered. The final step is to consider how determinable the wait is. In other words, is there a signal or way of knowing the duration of the wait? The determinability of a wait is a critical stage in the flow chart as it is the factor that can lead to suspended waiting. The idea of 'suspension' has useful describe an emotionally taxing wait because of the immobility and lack of direction, and this is why Tong and colleagues use suspension in their study on kidney transplants (Tong *et al.* 2015). When classifying waiting, it is necessary to remember that the social importance of a wait, expectedness and determinability of a wait will always be mediated by its specific temporal context. For example, in Table 5.4, I have outlined the type of wait, an example from gig courier work and the predicted level of emotional impact the wait will have on the individual.

Type of Wait	Wait Example	Emotional Impact of Wait	Descriptive Emotion
Compensated	McDonalds Waiting Area	Medium	Impatience
Suspended	Onboarding	High	Anxiety
Routine	Customer on their way to collect food	Low	Indifference
Disruptive	Finance section of App has frozen and is 'under maintenance'	Medium	Annoyance

Table: 5.4 Waiting in Gig Courier Work

The table above shows a variety of waits that are familiar to us in everyday life, however, it is clear that some waits are attached to more serious circumstances than others. Nevertheless, even though importance, expectedness and determinability can be considered as existing on a spectrum, the seriousness of what is being waited for is unnecessary to classify the type of wait it is. The reason for this is because there are a set of norms and emotions associated with that type of wait.

Compensated waits normally have a space associated with them that is designated as the place to wait. These waits are expected and are determinable as there is normally an 'appointment' or in the case of waiting to pick up the order in the restaurant, a verbal or visual cue to identify when an order will be ready, however, these cues are not always

accurate and this can exacerbate feelings such as impatience. Suspended waits do not have designated spaces, and instead, these waits are often isolated experiences that lean on hope, which can result in anxiety and other negative feelings. Routine waits are also often without a designated space, however, these waits are accompanied with a clear signal that determines how long the wait will be, for example, a stop at a traffic light. These waits are unimportant and often short, so their emotional impact is minimal unless other factors (such as running late to an appointment) are involved. Disruptive waits are often related to access which can be space-related, however they are mainly interesting because even though some waits will be more disruptive than others in terms of the amount of time they cause an individual to 'lose'; above all their defining impact is that they cause annoyance. For the examples in the table, the issue of an elevator breaking down could be addressed by taking the stairs and the frozen app could be overlooked because that section does not impact the money-making section in the apps, however, the two-sided nature of disruptive waits is found when the elevator breaks and a person is unable to take the stairs, or in the courier example, when the app breaks and the courier needs to be able to access those funds so they can eat that day. What this means is that disruptive waits have the capacity to be a threat, but it primarily depends on individual circumstances. Therefore, when seeking to explore the experience of waiting in gig couriership, the first part is to understand that even though couriers will experience all four of these types of waits during and beyond their shifts, these four waits will not feel the same nor are experienced in the same way by each type of courier. For this reason, waits should be situated in their social context alongside the individual circumstances of couriers because these are able to exacerbate or soften the impact of a wait. Now that we have describes the different types of waiting, in the next section, we can now look at the practice of waiting, and we can see how different types of courier engage with, and deploy strategies to mitigate the impact of waiting.

The Practice of Waiting: Second Class Citizens

The most familiar type of waiting couriers engage in are their compensated waits which take place when they are waiting to pick-up an order from a restaurant. These waits are common and are an excellent demonstration of temporal subservience, which is structured into the food delivery service through space and the dynamic that exists between restaurant staff, couriers and the general public. When thinking about these waits, it is important to keep in mind that waiting time for couriers is unpaid, and that this wait will be in addition to the wait the courier had to receive the order in the first place. For this reason, a couriers compensation refers to the order they pick up, not that they receive money for waiting. Even though some food delivery apps have experimented with paid waiting time, this is often rejected by couriers because the rate normally only begins after 15 minutes have been spent waiting, and even then, the rate is fluctuating around 15p per minute. For this reason, among others, asking couriers about their experience of waiting in restaurants is a question that often led to laughter or a large sigh, especially when the question was coupled with a chain restaurant where the waiting times are notorious amongst couriers. For instance, David (31, Irish, Side-Hustler, Bicycle, Hampshire) remarked,

> '…Oh God… Some restaurants are awful, and some are completely unapologetic about it. You might hear different things from different people in Southampton. Taco Bell is absolutely the worst. I waited there for half an hour, and eventually… I just said, I'm not leaving until I get the food and it took me 45 minutes'.

Spending 45 minutes waiting for an order from a fast-food restaurant is an interesting situation in and of itself, but it becomes even more interesting when David made it clear that this was the time when he was doing Deliveroo for exercise instead of the money, and now, like most couriers he has a self-imposed 'cut-off' for the amount of time he is willing to wait in a restaurant.

An unpaid 45 minutes is not the longest wait one of my participants has endured out of principle, with some couriers claiming to have waited up to 90 minutes for an order. The amount of time spent waiting is less important than the sentiment underpinning David's statement of 'I'm not leaving' and the dynamic that this creates between couriers and a restaurant's staff. A stubbornness, or phrased more positively, a commitment to delivering a good service for the customer is only something a courier would engage in if they meet the traits of a Side-Hustler or Free-Agent type courier. Indeed, David's example of principled waiting can be referred to as an example of elective waiting, whereby he actively chooses to sacrifice his time and earning potential out of service to a customer. In these instances, it becomes clear how the opportunity cost can fall in favour of digital platforms. Considering couriers are independent contractors who do not have a 'customer base' in the same way as a self-employed individual, it is interesting how some couriers will wait out of principle in the way that they do, yet, it is a common belief amongst couriers that they are in the service industry and that it is their duty to deliver a good customer experience. What this means in practice is that a courier knows that if they were to walk away from an order with the potential for a long wait, it is likely that the following couriers would have the same approach, and this means the food would ultimately not arrive to the customer who has paid for it. This customer focus is an example of the kind of behaviour that emphasises the fact that couriers are in the service industry, however, it also demonstrates that the system depends on couriers who are actively willing to sacrifice their time and earning potential to ensure that the customer is happy and receives what they paid for.

A courier's willingness to wait is the key part to understanding the dynamic of an opportunity cost because even once an order has been prepared, this does not necessarily mean that it will be directly handed to the courier. It is often the case that couriers will physically see their order being prepared only for it be placed under a heat lamp where it

will sit and stew before they will eventually be summoned by number to come and collect it. Throughout the time, a courier will be faced with the decision of whether they should continue to wait or reject the order with the chance that a better, timelier opportunity could arrive. Should a courier point out that the order is clearly visible and in front of them, this is unlikely to be met with anything other than an extended wait for disrupting the peace.

There is certainly an interesting power dynamic that exists between restaurant staff and couriers. Whilst in the restaurant space, couriers are expected to be seen and not heard so as to not disrupt paying customers. Throughout the pandemic and the lockdowns, restaurants grappled with the problem of having couriers and customers in the same space, and this has often been addressed by creating separate spaces for couriers to wait for and collect their orders in the same fashion and purpose as a 'tradesman's entrance' (Pearson and Richards, 2003).

When my interview with Chris took place in August 2020, the food delivery sector was still in the process of adapting to the challenges of the pandemic and up until recently, couriers would use the same spaces as customers to wait. For couriers, this is a recipe for conflict and a source of discomfort as couriers are unpaid for their waiting time and couriers often spoke at how they felt restaurant staff did not respect their time. Chris (39, British, Berkshire, E-Bike, Free Agent) was quite passionate about the topic and said the following:

> 'Restaurants prioritise customers so if a customer comes in after they've accepted an order then 9 times out 10 they'll do the customers order first because they're not paying 30% to Deliveroo for the orders they do for the customer. So they're always going to prioritise the customer. If it wasn't for that, it would be for the fact that the customer is standing in front of them saying, I want my food. With us, we don't matter. We are definitely second-class citizens, whatever you want to say in that respect. We could be waiting at a restaurant for 30 minutes, even longer, depending on how long you're prepared to wait for'.

This feeling of derision from restaurant staff towards couriers was discussed in the majority of my interviews, and many couriers would detail the stories they had with a rowdy manager or their peacekeeping operations as they try to deescalate. Still, some couriers are able to develop a relationship with independent restaurants to the point where they can get 'freebies', however, these relationships were few and far between in my interviews. The following exchange I had with Maverick (38, British, E-Bike, Berkshire, Side-Hustler) describes the hot-or-cold dynamic couriers have with restaurants:

> 'Maverick: We just got talking, and I told him I love pizza, and he was like, at the end of the shift come back and I'll give you a pizza. I said, will do, I'll come back for the pizza, thank you. I came back and he gave me a side, two bottles of coke, and the pizza for free. Just gave me it, there ya go.
>
> Jack: I guess that's the difference between… because you say its difficult to build rapport. I guess that's the difference between independents and the chains. That guy is willing to talk to you.
>
> Maverick: That's exactly it. It is the independents that are willing to do that. I'm genuinely hoping that businesses are doing well in this climate. I want you, you Jack, I want you to do well. And I want businesses to do well. I don't want you to go through hardship. I genuinely don't want that. So I'll ask, is business doing well? Sometimes I don't even get an answer, I get blanked. I'm genuinely asking because I care, I don't want to see hardship in my community'.

I built a significant rapport with Maverick throughout my fieldwork, and he made it clear that he struggled to accept or understand why he was treated differently when he wore his Deliveroo jacket (which he was very proud of). However, Maverick is a project manager and an IT professional and he explained that he constantly uses these skills to evaluate the world around him. The following is a wonderful extract from Maverick's interview which offers an explanation of how it looks and feels to be a 'second class citizen'. This idea can be viewed as similar to the idea of being denizen rather than a citizen I explored previously (Chapter 4). It

should be noted that Maverick's statements on personhood are powerful, and I have decided to include them in full to show just how perceptive and emotive gig couriers can be about their subjugated role in the world:

> 'One of the most shocking things about doing Deliveroo is that you become invisible. I tried to explain this to my wife, and she couldn't understand what I was saying. You become part of the working environment. You become almost like you're homeless, that's the best way to explain it. People don't see you on a personal level, they **don't** see you. They see a person on a bike, but as soon as they see the Deliveroo you become a faceless entity to them, almost like a void. Does that make sense? [Carry on, elaborate] So you become… and that was what shocked me the most out of the whole thing. Wow, people don't just ignore you, they can't see you. Oh its just another driver. Its like seeing a delivery driver, or a postman. If you see a postman down the road who you're not going to recognise that postman ever again. You become part of that. That was the most shocking thing. I said to the wife, the strangest thing is people just don't see you, not that they don't get out of your way – that happens all the time just being a cyclist, they just don't see you as a person anymore. You become that homeless person, you become part of the… what's the word? You become part of the scenery. You're part of the scenery now. You're not part of the public. You'll notice another public member; I like that jacket or something will stand out about them. They see absolutely nothing of you'.

The idea of a 'faceless entity', a 'void' and 'part of the scenery' are echoed in other interviews but without the same linguistic weight behind them. Even though he was covered in fluorescent colours and logos, Maverick, the real person who has thoughts, feelings and beliefs beneath the iconography of the on-demand service is invisible and unremarkable. This is the real consequence of structuring temporal and spatial subservience in the gig food delivery service – it has deep ripples for identity as it inevitably depersonalises couriers, creating distribution nodes with suppressed humanity. This interpretation of structured temporal subservience and its consequences are why I think couriers develop tactics, or perhaps coping mechanisms, to mitigate or channel their suffering. Mitigating or avoiding

waiting of course has practical explanations such as maximising income or minimising boredom, but if we look deeper, we can see how waiting accompanied with becoming invisible, the practice of being the human in the opportunity cost equation is an uncomfortable experience.

Mitigating Waiting and The Three Types of Gig Courier

There are two approaches to how gig couriers mitigate their waiting: Rationalisation and Religious. Rationalisation relates to a secular, scientific-esque approach that uses trial and error and deploys strategies to decipher patterns and trends alongside the cultivation of skill in an attempt to *anticipate* the flow or rhythm of gig courier work. The second approach is 'esoteric' in that it is based upon superstition, the deification or personalisation of the algorithm and the engagement in rituals to foster favour with the algorithm. Interestingly, these approaches are both effective, are not mutually exclusive and can and are often harmonious with one another. The reason for this is due to the fact that the full set of variables that determine order distribution and the other machinations of the opportunity cost equation that enable and confine couriers are well-beyond the reach of gig couriers. Indeed, even though quite a few of my participants have worked in, currently work in or were very familiar with IT, they would offer potential explanations for how things *could* work, but would all acknowledge that this can only ever amount to speculation. For example, in discussion with Jim, an inquisitive telecoms engineer (33, British, Car, Devon, Side-Hustler):

> 'I wonder how powerful it really can be, in what I guess God Mode can see. How do they do it? The job allocation, and stuff like that. That fascinates me to see the inner workings of it. I'd love to see that, but that will [laughs]… that will never see the light of day. That's beyond a vault somewhere, I'm sure'.

As a result, the unequal distribution of information means that even the most perceptive, entrepreneurial-spirited couriers such as Jim know that the true inner workings of the algorithm will always remain a guarded mystery to them. To discuss these mitigation strategies, we will first look at the rationalisation approach through multi-apping. Next, we will look at the blended ritual and strategy of 'being in the right place' and finally, we will look at the personification or deification of the algorithm.

'Multi-apping' is a term that describes the practice of simultaneously using multiple digital platforms in order to maximise income and minimise waiting. For example, a courier could be signed into Deliveroo and UberEats at the same time in an attempt to 'double' the chances of receiving an order. During my interviews, multi-apping was a relatively new phenomena and whilst not a direct infringement of their service agreement, digital platforms were unhappy with couriers doing this because it disrupted the opportunity cost equation. In other words, if couriers were signed in on multiple apps, it meant that they were potentially completing two jobs *simultaneously* as well, and this meant that waiting time for customers could be *increased*. Naturally, over the years digital platforms found a way to be able to detect whether or not a courier was multi-apping and their service agreement would likely be terminated as a result. However, couriers being a resilient bunch meant that they would circumvent this by having separate phones for different platforms, VPN's or other ways to scramble the system in order to disrupt a platform's capacity to detect that the courier was multi-apping. This situation then led to platforms adapting by making couriers authenticate in different ways, for example with a photo mid-shift. The struggle between couriers and apps inevitably has led to some ridiculous displays where the most audacious couriers will pull out a mini-wooden plank with three phones cello taped to it, which they then proceed to tap away on the three different interfaces. At the time of writing, couriers are still able to engage in multi-apping but are increasingly having to

become smarter at outmanoeuvring the detection of the platforms, and they also need to manage customers and other couriers should they be caught taking multi-apping too far. In theory, multi-apping should be a straight upgrade to a courier's chances at mitigating waiting, however, the problem lies in the information inequality. Not all platform interfaces and processes are identical, and so, if a courier was to accept two orders simultaneously, they run the risk of the order destinations being in separate directions. Should this happen, it would become obvious that they were multi-apping and this would make them vulnerable for termination, either for multi-apping or for receiving multiple negative reviews for cycling all over the city before taking the food to the customer straightaway. Many of my participants would multi-app, but would emphasise that they would do it 'within reason', otherwise they would also be jeopardising the customer. Indeed, it seems that the longer a courier works in the gig food delivery sector, the more likely they are to become a multi-apper – although, this could be due to variable length of time it takes to be onboarded onto other apps rather than a "progression" of skill or veterancy. It should be mentioned that multi-apping is a much more stressful endeavour than single-apping, and it is a practice that requires constant concentration with a taste for risk. For example, a few of my couriers including David (31, Irish, Hampshire, Bicycle, Side-Hustler) explained why they do not multi-app:

> 'I'm not a multi-apper [Laughs]. I don't know if my brain could cope with that many apps. But I know a lot of people do UberEats and I think Stuart. I think there's also 8DOL? I think there's one in our area so, it's for grocery delivery. Most people who multi-app work two, but I know some people who do three and four. Yeah, I don't think I'd be up for that'.

Interestingly, David is training to be a doctor, but he does not think that he could cope with the demands of multi-apping. David's reluctance to multi-app despite his established tolerance of high-stress jobs such as teaching or care-work is a useful way to demonstrate

the skill-requirement to successfully multi-app. David also acknowledged that his ability to supplement his income through teaching and care-work is likely the reason he does not multi-app, and if had Survivor traits, the situation would change:

> 'I would say that if I was doing this full-time, I would 100% be a multi-apper. The crux of it is that I don't think by itself Deliveroo is sustainable anymore. There was a time it was, but not anymore, especially not for a cyclist'.

As David says, the crux of the issue is that single-apping is often not a sustainable income *anymore*. David is likely referring to the 'Golden Time' when couriers would be paid per drop in addition to an hourly rate. Unfortunately, this model has primarily been abandoned and now the income couriers can make is far more variable. It is through the point of sustainability where the three types of couriers come into the equation.

As we discussed previously, Survivors are wholly dependent on the income they receive from gig courier work, and so, they need to maximise their income, which is often achieved through multi-apping *or* working longer hours. The problem Survivors face with multi-apping is that they cannot afford to risk having their accounts deactivated, and so, their negotiations with the opportunity cost are different to Side-Hustler or Free Agent couriers.

Survivors are the couriers who will not choose to wait out of principle in the way that David might, but instead, wait because that income will be guaranteed – even if the length of the wait might be far beyond what other couriers would be willing to endure. In other words, it is safer to make £3 for an hour of work rather than jeopardise your entire earnings by taking a risk of multi-apping. This sentiment and fear were present in my interview with Nasir (29, Indian, Scooter, Greater London, Survivor) as he is the sole earner in his household and he is also on a spousal visa. What this means for Nasir is that he also has to contend with UK immigration constraints placed on him, for example, the Right to Work checks which can mean his account can be placed on hold by digital platforms whilst they 'verify' whether he

is eligible to work in the UK. For couriers like Nasir, they can choose to multi-app, but they are likely not going to engage with multi-apping to take multiple orders because he cannot afford to lose his income. Nasir will instead use other apps as a way to gauge other opportunities, and if he determines another opportunity is better, he will then cancel the current one and take the new one. This is important because when I questioned whether this was an example of the work being flexible, Nasir said the following:

> 'The flexibility is, yeah, you have control, you can go offline/online anytime you want, its flexible, but if you don't make minimum wage then there is no use for the flexibility. Its something like me, you do multi-platform, so you use your rights, you use your rights to cancel your order , not to accept order, not to go online… to benefit you. It is flexible but it doesn't benefit just being flexible, its not that beneficial.
>
> Jack: So as you said earlier on, its only flexible because you can multi-app?
>
> Nasir: Yeah, multi-app or do other things, its not flexible, like if your just supposed to do Deliveroo and you trade all your working rights for just being flexible it's a kind of no-no. You'll not make a living. It could be flexible but it won't benefit in anyway, its kind of… yeah'.

Nasir has a powerful statement here in that flexibility is meaningless without the chance to make a living. This is the main difference in multi-apping between the different types of couriers, and shows how the multi-apping technique is stratified. Survivors can multi-app to gauge opportunity, Side-Hustlers can multi-app to maximise income and minimise waiting, and Free Agents will multi-app as part of their strategy to achieve maximum freedom. Unfortunately, it is common to see on gig courier forums that a Survivor will be caught out trying to multi-app and will be pleading with other couriers on how they can get their accounts reinstated – but they will often receive little sympathy from other couriers and instead will be labelled as 'greedy' or 'spoiling it for others'. In essence, in the world of gig couriership, there is a fine line between using multiple apps to mitigate waiting time, maximise income and taking advantage of the system, other couriers and the customer.

The second technique can be described as ‘being in the right place’ and this is technique has both the flavours of rationalisation and religion. Being in the right place relates to the fact that many couriers will have a favourite ‘waiting spot’ where they choose to wait whilst they receive a notification for an order, and this means that there is an underlying idea and feeling that these choices influence luck. These waiting spots are not random, and often, they become hubs for interaction between couriers on bicycles and e-bikes. These hubs are often at the centre of an urban area that are local to high-traffic restaurants. Some couriers have strategised by using applications such as Google Maps to detail *exactly* where the centre between restaurants is, and they will wait there accordingly in the belief that this will support their chances of getting an order. Other couriers such as Maverick have measured step by step away from a restaurant in order to see at what point they will no longer receive a ping from it, which can then be recorded as ‘that side of the street is the end of the zone’. Interestingly, we do not have much evidence to suggest that proximity to restaurant is a main factor in order distribution, indeed, it could be that vehicle choice such as E-bike, car or scooter are more decisive factors in determining who receives an order. Once again, the information inequality informs conspiracy theories about how best to be in the correct place, at the correct time. For the religious side of the ‘in the right place’, some couriers have decided that the best way to be in the right place is to occasionally cycle around an area to show that they are still active, and that just maybe, this will show the algorithm that they are ready for an order. Alternatively, some couriers have decided that the best way to navigate *where* to wait is through the ‘busyness’ of the app, as this can determine whether or not it is worth going to work in the first place. However, Maverick in his investigations keenly pointed out that the busyness of the app is purely due to whether or not enough local restaurants have selected the ‘Busy’ option on their side of the platform. For this reason, the ways couriers navigate the best place to wait are a consequence of restricted knowledge, and the

differences in processes of reconciling this. In other words, both the rationalisation and religious approach can see that there seems to be an effect from doing what they do, but both are unable to determine whether their successes or failures are due to miscalculation, luck, or a 'gift from above' from the Uber Gods.

Deification is an example of how algorithmic management can be a strange dynamic. Oliver (44, British, Nottinghamshire, E-Bike, Side-Hustler/Free-Agent) is an IT professional with an entrepreneurial spirit and was the only courier I interviewed who would refer to Deliveroo's algorithm by its name: Frank. Oliver is fully aware that Frank is an algorithm but he personified the algorithm and portrayed his actions as being a case of relationship management in order to get into Frank's good books. In Oliver's theory, the aim of mastering the Deliveroo game is to get Frank to like you, and the best way to do this is to offer tribute in the form of additional speed via an E-Bike, or to perhaps increase effort and cycle a little bit faster in order to be rewarded with another order. After all, if we go by the opportunity cost equation, the most important factor is whether or not you are an efficient rider, so there is some logic behind gaining favour with Frank. In Oliver's own words:

> 'If I can get around faster, and Frank can see that, and Frank likes me because of that – I'm thinking I'm going to get more work, and that kind of is what happens. So, I'm preferring it the way it is now. On an E-bike, I can go a lot faster than someone that's on a normal bike. So, I found myself getting more jobs, and I found that other normal cyclists who I knew were sat there waiting for something – and I was maybe further away from the restaurant for example, I knew that they were in that situation but I'd been sent the job anyway, probably because I was faster. I don't know how Frank works, but I'm just gonna guess it's something like that. With me just running my business, I either get customers or I don't. You could have customers that are with you for years and that's great, or you could have customers that you do something for and you never see them again – and there's nothing that you can do to influence that to get more business from them. So, when it comes to making Frank like you – there are things you can do to influence that to get more work coming to you, or to hopefully have it never sack you'.

As a result, personification and performances to increase favour with the Uber or Deliveroo deities are a popular way to navigate the uncertainty inherent in the food delivery sector.

Conclusion

This chapter has tackled the central question of 'what is an on-demand delivery service, and how exactly does it manage to function?' by focussing on the practice and lived experience of gig courier work. In particular, this chapter has explored the idea of a structured temporal subservience that exists for couriers within the interdependent assemblage of the on-demand food delivery service. The key implications are the contradictions that cause conflict couriers jostle at the heart of the service and how these have clear consequences for identity construction of gig couriers. Learning to wait and how to cope with waiting is a skill couriers cultivate throughout their journey into and during their gig courier work, and the mitigation strategies they deploy are stratified by their own personal circumstances. The key contribution of this chapter is to show the centrality of waiting to the courier experience, the affectual consequences of waiting, and in particular, to highlight how Survivors are the least able to navigate unfavourable opportunity costs due to their dependence on the work for income, and for this reason they are the ones that suffer the most from indeterminate waits. Meanwhile, Side-Hustlers and Free Agents are able to deploy a range of strategies to mitigate their waiting time and the experience of being a second-class citizen. In the next chapter, I explore the present and future(s) of the gig economy, and how gig couriership can be understood in relation to wider themes within 21st century capitalism.

Chapter Six: At the Crossroads: Risk and Precarious Futures in the Gig Economy

Introduction

The previous chapters have been focussed on making sense of the gig courier and their relationships with the gig economy. In this chapter, I explore how gig couriers and the gig economy can be considered as a reflection of broader social, economic and political trends such as individualism, and in particular, how this is useful for discussions on the future of work and economic life.

The central aim of this chapter is to discuss how the conditions of gig courier work can be framed by the themes of precarity and risk. The chapter seeks to demonstrate how Bauman's discussion of 'liquid modernity' and the 'unholy trinity' of 'unsafety', 'insecurity' and 'uncertainty' can be combined with Ulrich Beck's idea of 'risk society' to frame how risks are individually and structurally perceived, experienced, managed and mitigated in a gig economy. As the impact and influence of the gig economy on the world of work remains tentative, this chapter seeks to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the implications of the gig economy by exploring how risk and precarity are embedded in gig courier work. Whilst the scope of this contribution is limited by a partial sample of gig couriers and the short history of the gig economy, this chapter demonstrates how risk and precarity are useful to understand gig courier work, and this serves as a starting point for discussing a potential future of work where gig economy conditions are more prevalent.

The chapter is split into two sections. The first section explains Bauman's and Beck's theoretical frameworks and how their application can be useful to understand the gig

economy. Next, the section introduces a novel concept called 'social obsolescence', which is important because it aims to show how the ideological underpinnings of 'new capitalism' assist in vindicating the precarious conditions of the gig economy. Together, these ideas help to explain how individuals living and working in a gig economy positively reframe precarious material conditions. The second section applies Bauman and Beck's frameworks to gig couriership through the types of gig courier to explore the functional and symbolic role of precarity and risk in a gig economy.

Risk Society, the Unholy Trinity and the Gig Economy

The theory of 'risk society' (Beck, 1992) is a popular and useful way for social scientists to incorporate risk and its impact on individuals and society into their analysis. The central idea of risk society is that modern society is orientated by and toward risk and that the social navigation of risk has become more complex over time. This is particularly important considering that some of the greatest physical risks to humans have been manufactured. For example, the harnessing of nuclear energy is a common example because whilst the Manhattan Project managed to successfully develop a weapon of unprecedented power before Nazi Germany; the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Chernobyl disaster are sombre events that mark the catastrophic potential of that power. Indeed, the risks associated with nuclear energy are transnational and are embedded into the fabric of society to such an extent that even though nuclear energy is positioned as one of the most effective sources of contemporary sustainable energy, public opinion remains an obstacle for development and implementation in the 21st century (Horvath and Rachlew, 2016). The reason I have focussed on nuclear energy as the example of a manufactured risk is that the same logic can be applied to the invention of digital platforms. The digital platform does not

have the striking presence of a nuclear cloud; however, the digital platform is also a triumph of innovation that has changed the parameters for what is possible in the world of work. The inventions themselves may be considered as neutral, but it is their applications that help determine how they are the risks they pose are perceived. For this reason, the actual risk (s) of these inventions can be perceived differently depending on the society and the individual. Consequently, applying risk society to the gig economy is helpful because it highlights that the conditions experienced by gig couriers are transnational and are systematically embedded within the practice and narrative of the gig economy; however, the risk (s) and conditions are still filtered through the individual gig couriers themselves. This is important because, for Beck (1992: 21), a 'risk society' is a 'systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself [because] rationalisation and rapid technological change have outpaced societies ability to control and check the unintended consequences of risk'. For this reason, it is useful to overlay the idea of a risk society onto Bauman's 'unholy trinity' to capture the personal experience of risk.

In a similar vein to Beck, Bauman (2013) argued that modernity reflects a transition from order and stability to a state of constant change, and he describes the conditions of this 'liquid modernity' through the idea of the 'unholy trinity'. The unholy trinity are defined as 'insecurity (of position, entitlements and livelihood), of uncertainty (as to their continuation and future stability) and of unsafety (of one's body, one's self and their extensions: possessions, neighbourhood, community)' (Bauman, 2013:161). As a result, the unholy trinity and its consequences for gig couriership are processed through the lens of individual and are considered to be a matter of personal triumph or failure. As a result, the wider structural risk of the gig economy is overshadowed by the individualisation of risk, and this is why the unholy trinity is a useful companion to risk society as it captures how gig couriers personally navigate living and working in gig economy conditions. The precarious legislative environment

surrounding the employment status of gig couriers is a useful way to indicate how 'risk society' and the 'unholy' trinity can complement each other. 'Risk society' is a useful lens to capture the role of systemic risks in the gig economy as it highlights how independent contractor status is an economic (financial insecurity), health (gig couriers are liable for their own accidents and therefore unsafe), regulatory (uncertain status and responsibilities) risk for all gig couriers. Meanwhile, Bauman's 'unholy trinity' can be used to explore how the insecurity, unsafety and uncertainty impacts the perception, experience, management and mitigation of risk by gig couriers. By combining Beck and Bauman's frameworks, it is possible to explore how the gig economy can be considered as evidence of the consequences (unintended or otherwise) of systems that replace social institutions with individuals in the control and checking of risk.

New Capitalism and Social Obsolescence

Throughout my research into gig courier work and the gig economy, I have often been asked why anyone (particularly Survivors) would be willing to put up with working as a gig courier in the gig economy. This is an important question because it highlights how the conditions of risk and precarity have become naturalised and accepted features and that the naturalisation of these features is key to how the gig economy is able to function. This is especially important as there is a tangible cultural divide between generations in the world of work which has only continued to accelerate as the 'individualist', 'digital native' and 'entrepreneurial' Generation Z (mid/late 1990s – 2010) have joined the workforce (Berkup, 2014: 218). In other words, if the gig economy is a reflection of everything you have ever known, why would expectations for the world of work be different?

The acceptance (or perhaps reconciliation) of risk and precarity are key to understanding 21st century work because it impacts how researchers themselves understand and interpret work. For example, social behaviour or forms of organisation considered abnormal or unacceptable by a Generation X researcher could be considered conventional and reasonable by a Generation Z researcher, and this is likely to be reflected in research on the rise of social media influencers and its discontents (Freberg *et al.,* 2011; Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman, 2021). The acceptance/reconciliation of precarity and risk, or the common resignation of 'that's just how the world works' is a crucial part of an explanation into why gig couriers are willing to work in a gig economy despite the suboptimal conditions.

This shift in perception was also discussed in the literature review; however, it is worth revisiting here to re-contextualise the conditions. The shift can be described as the emergence of 'new capitalism', and 'new capitalism' can be understood as a social order that synthesises neoliberalism as the political ideology with capitalism as the economic system. Whilst neoliberalism has been acknowledged as a dominant ideology for decades, neoliberalism has been described by Gerstle (2022) as the 'creed that calls explicitly for the unleashing of capitalism's power', which means neoliberalism can be a nebulous ideology with varied interpretations on how exactly capitalism should be used. For example, in the UK political context, from the adoption of Labour's 'Third Way' politics in the 1990's to the Conservative's 2019 campaign to 'Unleash Britain's Potential, using capitalism's potential for 'good' and to 'address social inequality' has been a common political theme across the political spectrum (Stanley 2022; Powell, 2000).

The political shift is an important one because it is possible to argue that new capitalism has become embedded in the social fabric of everyday life to such an extent that it has become the default modus operandi. Neoliberal dominance in social institutions and everyday life has

meant that the Overton Window has shifted to a point where neoliberalism is now a politically centrist position, and this means that there is an incentive for political parties to cater to political moderates who align themselves with neoliberalism; which is interesting as even critics of neoliberalism are likely to still carry out and endorse neoliberal policy (Plehwe, 2005). More recently, Williams and Williams (2020) explained how neoliberalism's capacity to survive and even consolidate its position despite financial (and political) crisis provides an insight into the nature of contemporary power, arguing that 'contingent neoliberalism' describes the increasing trend of 'authoritarian features' of government. This is an important point because it frames social change as tethered to neoliberalism in that if social change exists it must be within the parameters of neoliberal thought. What is also particularly interesting is that despite recurrent crisis and the unpopularity of policies such as austerity, alternative approaches to government, such as Labour under Jeremy Corbyn, resulted in electoral catastrophe (Goes, 2020). For this reason, the grasp that neoliberalism has on the status quo is important to understand how the conditions of new capitalism are normalised over time.

Since New Labour, centre left social democratic political parties have declined in prominence internationally (Cox, 2019). At the same time, whilst populist events such as the United Kingdom leaving the European Union or the election of Donald Trump in the United States might be considered as rebellions against the neoliberal international order, it is argued in the field of international relations that these events have often strengthened neoliberalism, and that the 'dynamics between neoliberalism and populism are more intertwined and complex than a simple opposition would presuppose' (Rossi, 2023:2). In other words, it is possible to conceive neoliberalism as the *host* of populism, which controversially means that a 'neoliberal populism' could be considered as manufactured opposition against the neoliberal international order.

The changing perception of new capitalism and its application to gig economy conditions is demonstrated well by how social theorists were convinced (and worried) that new capitalism would have a negative and irrevocable impact on the contemporary social order. For example, Anthony Giddens was a key instrument of New Labour's Third Way politics. Giddens's *Runaway World* (1999) posited that globalisation would have destructive and transformative economic, social and political consequences, and so far, the 21st century has been crisis punctuated by crisis, and this is important because each event has continued to shape the perception of risk and precarity in the world. For example, the 9/11 attacks and the global War on Terror redefined the parameters of international security, the Great Recession demonstrated the fragility of the global economic system, and the SARS and COVID-19 pandemics showed the continued vulnerability of humanity and the precarity of our social institutions. In this way, 'all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned…' (Marx and Engels, 2019) can be said to summarise the transformative power on the social consciousness of risk and precarity in 21st century.

One of the most important questions about new capitalism is the role of government in the management of risk and precarity. As Buchanan (2018) summarises, Bauman places blame on the 'failure of government to act as the principal guarantor of existence'. This is an important point in determining the future of the gig economy from a policy standpoint because it provides one of the perspectives on the political question of the teleology of government, and in particular, the role of the nation state in the economy; which is the crux of the answer to 'what do we do about the gig economy?'. Neoliberalism does not advertise itself as the ideology of equal outcome, on the contrary, competition and the chance of failure are integral features. For this reason, it could be argued that the reason the gig economy is so readily able to be characterised by the unholy trinity (and continue to grow and thrive) is because it is explicitly *not* a collective endeavour. As discussed in previous

chapters, from gig organisational socialisation and independent contractor status, the gig economy is constructed in a way so that the individual is simultaneously the most important and the most disposable asset in the gig economy. Through individualisation and policies and procedures that encourage fragmentation, the unholy trinity of unsafety, insecurity and instability are legitimised and the 'winners' and 'losers' are accredited as the outcome of merit rather than a case of systemic disadvantage.

If inequality is inevitable, it is important to determine what level of inequality in the gig economy is acceptable because the problem with winning and losing in the gig economy is the distance between what winning and losing looks like. For Side-Hustlers, the gig economy is their playground that provides an opportunity for exercise, a project with entrepreneurial flair and an avenue for extra income. Meanwhile, for the Free Agents and the Survivors their economic dependence means that the stakes are much higher. Winning in the gig economy as a Survivor on the short-term means earning enough to get to tomorrow, and over the long term, a transition into Side-Hustler or Free Agent status. For Free Agents, winning equates to emancipation from the confines of the traditional labour market and access to enjoy their ambrosia of freedom and flexibility. On the other hand, losing in the gig economy means a life characterised by a life on standby where each day of work delivers nothing except a variable paycheque, or as I discuss later, at the extreme, a loss of life altogether.

As argued in previous chapters, the technological and social forces of a society need to converge in order for change to take place and the Great Recession is often acknowledged as the social catalyst for the gig economy because of mass unemployment coupled with the desire for flexible work (Bulian, 2021). The socio-political context of the gig economy is very important because it is helpful to understand what people are willing to tolerate and why this could be the case. For example, during the time of the interviews, COVID-19 pandemic

lockdowns were taking place across the country and this meant that gig courier work became a lifeline for many who otherwise would have had zero income. Indeed, a few of my participants had been made redundant due to COVID-19 and this meant that gig courier work was their option to keep their households afloat. During the same time, it is important to remember that the financial assistance available was dependent on employment status, and that even then, the support was delayed which meant many sought a solution other than credit card debt. For this reason, the lockdowns represent a particular period of time which caused gig courier work to become extremely desirable for the income it could provide, but also, because it was an opportunity to be part of a small minority who were permitted to be outside and take advantage of recently deserted city streets (which is well-documented by gig couriers on social media sites such as YouTube); although it is necessary to acknowledge that gig couriers would have had exchanged this opportunity for new risks such as an increased exposure to COVID-19. In summary, the particular social, political and economic context of working as a gig courier during the lockdowns means that the interview data reflects a specific period in the gig economy because it captures both a demographic shift in those involved in gig courier work, but also, the additional uncertainty, risk and incentives involved in the equation of managing expectations for a world on lockdown. If change is constant, uncertainty is certain and the future is inhospitable, then individual's need to be able to reconcile and justify the suffering associated with risk and precarity, and this is a part of what I argue is due to social obsolescence.

In the study of work and society, fundamental questions asked centuries ago are often just as relevant to be asked today. What is the division of labour? How is the work developing across time? What are the conflicts of interest? The continued relevancy of these questions is important because it shows how there has been a historical relationship of continuity between social science and the development of capitalism across time. To be specific, the

relationship has been one where even if the internet or another disruptive technology has been set to revolutionise the world of work; a vocabulary and canon co-exists to contextualise and make sense of these developments. The problem with contemporary sociological analysis in the 21st century world of work is that capitalism is characterised by a kind of rapid and turbulent change that has made it difficult to grasp, and even more difficult to predict the social consequences of what these developments might be.

Obsolescence is an idea that is not often discussed by sociologists, and even then, the idea of obsolescence is usually attached to technologies that have been replaced or eliminated as a result of a new development. The idea of obsolescence is represented well by Solis's (2011) bestselling *The End of Business as Usual* which is written as a how-to guide for businesses on how to take advantage of the digital revolution. The reason I refer to this book in particular is because it brazenly imports Social Darwinism to the 21st century as a way to explain social change. For example, the elimination of the Yellow Pages (which existed since 1880) is attributed to the rise of Facebook and other digital marketspaces, and this means that digitalisation is adopted as a marker of social evolution, and organisations can either choose to adapt or perish. The Yellow Pages may seem to be a small casualty of social change, but it is symbolic of how quickly the pace and the strength of change in infrastructure and social behaviour has been over the last 30 years. To put this into context, the eldest of generation Z (born from 1996 – 2010) will have seen a Yellow Pages in their grandparents or parents' house and they would have a landline in their house, however, Generation Alpha (2010 – 2024) will have likely never seen a Yellow Pages and will have little reason to have a landline in their house at all.

For this reason, the social conditions of contemporary capitalism are built on the *obsolescence* of the world before the internet and modern globalisation. In this way, I argue

that obsolescence is a useful way to understand the nature and conditions of contemporary capitalism, and it could be considered as one of the driving forces of why sociological research into these developments is so challenging. Social obsolescence means we are operating in relatively unchartered territory. Indeed, in *Runaway World* (Giddens 2003), Giddens explained, 'we are the first generation to live in this society, whose contours we can yet only dimly see' (2003:19). What is certain is that life in the 21st century is uncertain, and considering the social and technological progress that has taken place over the last 20 years, similar progress can be expected that could revolutionise the world of work once more, especially with our continued tinkering with automation and artificial intelligence.

Social thinkers often write about new capitalism in language that describes destruction or implies that something has gone wrong. The reason for this is because when we study the conditions and realities of contemporary capitalism, we find the unholy trinity and a willingness of people to sacrifice both their present and future. Bauman refers to this trend as part of a turn towards immediate gratification (2013:163), however, the question is whether or not people are 'pushed' or 'pulled' into this way of living and working. In a world where the choice is between precarity in the traditional labour market or precarity in the gig economy, what choice is there? Consequently, the nature of social obsolescence is a world where Chris feels that having a job, family and a house are now aspirations rather than something he could expect. Social obsolescence takes away established traditions and ways of being quicker than we can adapt, and we are still developing mechanisms to cope with this transition. Whilst mechanisms are still being developed, in the meantime, the reconciliation through the idea of 'isn't that just life?' is pervasive.

I spoke about the future of work at length with Cameron (Side-Hustler, 33, Car, Leicestershire) which was useful because he worked in Human Resources before the

pandemic, and he explained that the pandemic had shown us that the 'human element' was important to the work we are doing. Intrigued, I followed up and asked what that meant, and he provided the following insight:

> 'I think what you gain from people is knowledge and information based on experiences that you haven't had yourself, and they have that information sharing and experience which adds a lot of value to a lot of people, I think… And just, I think there's a need for people to have human interaction on an emotional level. *We yearn for it, whether its friendships or validation or feedback, in whatever context it is – we yearn for that human interaction. We're not meant to be alone in solitude, without a connection.'*

The 'human element' is a part that makes work special, and when gig organisational socialisation creates a pool of fragmented, disconnected and individualised workers in competition with one another, the unholy trinity of unsafety, insecurity and uncertainty are able to persist relatively unchallenged. As the gig economy continues to grow, more and more people will begin to live and work in a way that is a departure from the 'job for life'. Perhaps in the future of work, solitude will mean we are connected to our app but we are disconnected from the world, and it is not difficult to foresee how a world of work characterised by this kind of disconnectedness would be dystopic. Social change is inevitable but social obsolescence leads to a fragile world where people are unable to feel safe, secure or certain about what their future will hold.

Gig Couriers and the experience of risk and precarity in a gig economy

Now that the theoretical frameworks, the strength of new capitalism and its justification by social obsolescence has been established; I can turn directly to show how this impacts gig courier work through the gig courier typology. As discussed in previous chapters, the organisation and practice of gig courier work produces and maintains a precarious environment, but the intensity of how these conditions are experienced will be impacted by gig courier type and individual circumstance as some types of gig courier are more protected

than others from the negative effects. To visually demonstrate this, I have plotted the three types of gig courier against Bauman's unholy trinity in the following table to reflect the personal relationship that a gig courier will have with risk and the precarious conditions of the gig economy.

	Survivor	Side-Hustler	Free Agent
Unsafety	Intense	Moderate	Intense
Insecurity	Intense	Low	Moderate
Uncertainty	Intense	Low	Moderate

Table 6.1: Gig Couriers and The Unholy Trinity

Gig Couriers and Unsafety

The condition of unsafety is important for all couriers but the experience is more intense for Survivors and Free agents as they are economically dependent on the work, and also, because they will often use a bicycle/e-bike to complete the work. As gig couriers are independent contractors, their safety (however this might be conceived) is their sole responsibility and they can expect little support or empathy from the gig company. For example, on the different support available for disruption during a shift from the gig companies, Chris (Free Agent, 39, E-Bike, Berkshire) explained:

> 'With Deliveroo, sometimes its busy, sometimes you have to be put on hold, and their rider support is useless as well. Like, completely useless. You could say, Oh I've just been hit by a car, and they'll go, "Are you able to deliver the order?". It's a, Hmm what do you think? "I don't know, are you able to deliver the order?" No! I'm not! But Uber is non-existent. They're not even useless, they're non-existent'.

As a result, gig couriers often feel that the gig companies care more about the cargo gig couriers carry than their wellbeing. Indeed, if I asked a gig courier if the gig companies cared about their wellbeing, gig couriers would often go into detail that the gig companies would "pretend to care" but that their concern was limited to only when it would benefit them. Consequently, unsafety is a systemic risk which is has been individualised by ensuring gig

couriers are responsible for their own safety as independent contractors. For this reason, gig couriers do not expect support from the gig companies, and instead, they rely on themselves, and rarely, each other to protect themselves.

A primary threat of unsafety to be discussed is due to road accidents, however, the risk of being a victim of crime can be a significant safety issue for gig couriers too. Bike theft is commonplace and was a key theme in many interviews either in points made on mitigating theft or in dealing with the consequences. One example from the interviews involved a gig courier's bike being stolen whilst they were waiting inside a restaurant, which was followed by a co-ordinated effort by gig couriers to swarm the area, find the bike and return it. The gig couriers were successful and the bike was returned the same day. This is an interesting example of gig courier's breaching their fragmented social bonds to come together to protect themselves against threats as a mutual defence pact. A useful more in-depth example was also provided by Chris when he spoke at length about a particular "career bike thief" that was notorious in his city. Chris and some other gig couriers he knew worked together to find him, capture him, and notify the police, however, despite their efforts Chris explained that the criminal justice system was uninterested and detailed how the bike thief and their gang continued to operate but with the change that Chris and the others were now specific targets for the gang. Consequently, the self-regulating vigilantism practiced by gig couriers might be partially explained by the attitude that the gig companies are uninterested and traditional law enforcement will be ineffective. Whilst outside the scope of this thesis, discussions of crime were prevalent in the interviews with veteran couriers insofar that some zones and cities are heavily impacted by, and are also involved in crime such as drug distribution. For this reason, it would be very interesting to have future research in this area.

Returning to the intersection between the unholy trinity and gig couriers, unsafety will be more intensely felt by those who are economically dependent on the work because in the above example of bike theft, it means that both the mechanism to earn money has been stolen, but also, it will need to be replaced. Considering how expensive e-bikes can be, both Free Agents and Survivors will have an even greater interest in protecting and defending their property. For survivors such as Fred, protecting his bike was akin to protecting his livelihood and so it was critical that he was able to see his bicycle (and protect it if necessary) at all times. Survivors have little disposable income and so this is one of the reasons that they have an intense relationship with unsafety as each time they have to take an undesirable order, such as a 10pm to a high crime area, they know that the risk is high and the reward is relatively low. This also does not include the direct threats to gig courier wellbeing such as muggings, which unfortunately, is also something gig couriers must be aware of, and is a reason why gig couriers often do not carry valuables (such as a wallet) with them whilst at work.

Aside from the threat of violence or theft, I primarily decided to classify the Survivor and Free Agent relationship with unsafety due to how often they are exposed to the elements and traffic. Chris also spoke at length about the dangers of being a cyclist on the road:

> 'Where should I start?! We've got bad drivers. I think it was only a couple of weeks ago that I came within inches of being run over by a heavy goods vehicle from a Czech number plate. I was going straight over a roundabout, my friend was in front of me, he [lorry] was to the left of me and I had right of way but he wasn't even looking. I got in front of him and he went to pull out and then when he did eventually see me, he slammed on his horn like it was my fault, overtook half way and then swerved in front of both of us. So we only had a very small gap, and then he did the same again at the next roundabout to another car. I then got alongside him and he either didn't want to speak English or he couldn't, and that was probably the closest I've come to dying because you don't mess around with HGV's. If you're hit, you're dead. 2 or 3 years ago I was hit by a car, same thing. I was going straight over a roundabout, he was going too fast, straight out and hit me. Fortunately, if I was there like a

> millisecond slower then I would have gone up on the bonnet. It was only a couple of months ago that a Polish guy was killed in a 20 zone by a driver that had just finished work. I got there for the aftermath and you could see his bone, he had a hole in his head. He died on scene, it was ugly, it really was. He'd only had just started the job maybe one week before that. He'd got a job for the NHS that he was really excited about starting, he was only doing Deliveroo just to tide him over, and within a week he was dead'.

Many of the gig couriers I interviewed spoke of 'close-calls' with traffic, but Chris's words demonstrate how capricious life as a gig courier can be. I found it was particularly important to include Chris's example of the Polish gig courier who was due to begin working in the NHS because, whilst it is a particularly sombre case, it is not an uncommon incident. Gig couriers are often injured at work, and the variables that can cause the most damage are largely out of the control of the gig courier. For instance, in Chris's example, according to the rules and structure of the road, the Polish gig courier should have survived an accident in a 20 miles per hour zone if they were hit, however, if the driver was speeding the chances of survival diminish dramatically and this does not take into account the other hazards in the environment that could exacerbate the accident. The point to make clear is that human beings on the road are extremely vulnerable and that the margins for error in gig couriership are small, and even then, are often determined by those other than the gig courier.

Gig couriers are able to mitigate against unsafety at work through protective equipment, a well-maintained bicycle and through a cultivation of skill in risk management, however, as aforementioned, even the most adept cyclist will be no contest for a rogue lorry. To make matters worse, risk-taking behaviour is incentivised in the gig economy and this means that gig couriers (especially the economically dependent) are likely to find themselves in dangerous situations. The road can be a dangerous place for any cyclist, however, the kind of risk-taking incentivised by the practice of the work means that safety will inevitably be in contest with an optimal delivery. Side-Hustlers have the luxury of not *needing* to reach a

financial target and this is the primary reason I describe their relationship with unsafety as moderate. For example, in a hilly city recovering from snowfall with black ice on the roads, the Side-Hustler has little incentive to tackle the additional risks of working that day. Meanwhile, Survivors and Free Agents will calculate whether or not missing the day would mean they would be able to reach their financial targets. In the UK, we are lucky to have a relatively temperate climate, however, in other countries, gig couriers can be found navigating blizzards, heavy rain and other weather that makes an already dangerous job that much more dangerous.

Through the labour pattern of gig couriers, it is clear how gig couriers are incentivised to take risks as the faster a gig courier is able to complete an order, the faster they will be able to receive another one. In addition, platforms such as UberEats will also use gamification techniques to create 'quests' for gig couriers which encourage gig couriers to meet a number of orders in a single shift to receive a bonus. These intrinsic and extrinsic reward systems within gig courier work are innocuous in and of themselves, but taken to extremes, they exacerbate the risks of unsafety in gig courier work. For instance, if a gig courier stays on the road for longer than they probably should because they want to meet a quest objective, this will have an impact on tiredness, concentration and reaction times which increases the risk of accidents.

The incentivisation of risk-taking behaviour is important to consider because if Survivors such as Fred are perennially exhausted, gamification and the positive feedback loop on their activity accompanied by a point of comparison from shift to shift can be a powerful force to undermine safety. Indeed, gig couriers will often strive to 'beat their score' and this can be operationalised in a few different ways. Fred's primary motivation was to earn money but he also wanted to maximise his physical condition and could measure this against the amount

of distance travelled in a day. Meanwhile Maverick wanted to optimise his strategy and wanted to be able to predict his cycle-earnings ratio:

> 'I wanna work out exactly how much it costs me, per mile, to deliver food. That's my time, not including the time I'm putting into it, but just the per mile. So I'm looking forward to that, and I reckon its about another couple of months and I'll have another idea of say, how many brake pads I'm going through – tyres I'm going through per month, how much money I'm making per month. Over 6 months ideally, so I can say, ok, that's gonna cost me 7p per mile, 10p, 15p to deliver this stuff because of the stuff I've invested, so even like clothing. Again, its all part of the project, and I didn't even realise that would be part of it – so there's a business aspect of it that I'm looking at as well. So me investing in myself and my equipment – is it going to make me more of an effective rider? Am I a more effective rider because I've got this equipment?'.

At the same time, it should be mentioned that for Maverick, the most important part of the delivery was to strike a balance between efficiency and the integrity of the cargo and himself:

> 'You're not in charge of how efficient the food gets to you, how fast, you know that's the kitchen's efficiency. Your efficiency is to get to point B as fast and as safe as possible. I keep saying the word safe because I ride sensibly. I still feel like bad riders represent us, even though we're not connected, we still are, we're still tarred with the same brush. Again, human nature, people like tarring with the same brush. So, you see someone fly through town in a no-cycle zone, super quick, and you're like – prick. You're doing the same job as me, but you're riding like a knobhead. I don't. I do stupid stuff, I run red lights, I've done stupid shit. But I don't put others in danger'.

This is an interesting extract from Maverick for a few reasons. The first is because it demarcates the 'bad riders' from 'us' despite how he constantly distances himself from other gig couriers, which is a useful example of how whilst individualised, gig couriers are still aware of the connection they have with one another and how the behaviour of other couriers will impact how they are personally perceived. The second reason is because of how his assessment of gig courier behaviour as sensible or not controls for whether or not *others* are put in danger by an action. In this way, there is an active distinction to be made between

reckless and calculated risk in gig couriership. After all, if transgression is a theme in gig couriership, it makes sense for Maverick to create a hierarchy of sensible behaviour to justify and legitimise his approach to how he navigates the balance between safety and efficiency. It is important to state that the risks gig couriers take cannot be reduced to the role of risk-incentivisation alone as some of their behaviour is voluntarily risky. For example, there is a qualitative difference between an overtaking lorry and the decision to cycle through a pedestrianised area. For this reason, it is important to highlight that there is something notable about the juxtaposition between the vulnerability of the gig courier and the cavalier disposition they often have to their own safety. For example, through Maverick's Hollywood-inspired depiction of bicycle couriers (discussed previously), it is possible to see how gig couriers can confuse their unparalleled urban manoeuvrability with invincibility. This is particularly clear when Maverick explained he ran a red light in front of a police car 'as an experiment', and how he mentioned it was an out of the ordinary choice for him:

> 'You would never, I would never do that in my car. Never! [Laughs] Never do that on a motorbike! But I did it because I was on a cycle, and I was on my way back into town. I was like, what's the Old Bill gonna do here? He knows I've run a red because this is turning green and I'm flying past him. I saw it. It was a conscious decision [Laughing as he speaks] that I can't believe I made. I'm like 38 years old and I'm making these stupid decisions where I could have got told off or fined. But I wanted to see, and they didn't do anything, not a single thing, didn't even blink!'

Running red lights, irrespective of whether the junction appears to be clear, is as Maverick admits, the kind of risk that would be unthinkable for him outside of the context of being a gig courier on a bicycle. Add in the fact that the police car (a representation of law and order) is introduced into the equation, and I would argue the primary reward of this experiment is the adrenaline rather than the few seconds saved. For this reason, it is useful to look at these decisions through the relationship between edgework and *voluntary* risk

regimes and their potential to be gendered (Laurendeau, 2008). This is important to understand how the presence of risk in and of itself can be a socially systemic motivating force in explaining male behaviour (Lyng and Matthews, 2007). Despite engagement in voluntary risk regimes, I want to draw this section to a close by returning to Chris's earlier explanation of how the margin between a thrilling (albeit terrifying) encounter and a fatal disaster can be genuinely miniscule. Indeed, it does seem that having a close-call or witnessing disaster helps to ground gig couriers and encourage them to appreciate their vulnerability. For this reason, it is likely that the amount of engagement in voluntary risk regimes reduces as gig couriers increase their experience and the magic of being a gig courier diminishes, however, considering the majority of gig couriers have a short-term involvement with the gig economy and how risk factors are often outside the control of gig couriers, it is difficult to foresee gig couriership as ever being a safe type of work.

Gig Couriers and Insecurity

As defined by Bauman previously, insecurity relates to position, entitlements and livelihood, and this is a multi-faceted part of gig couriership for all gig couriers. The primary difference between gig couriers in terms of insecurity is how impactful the factor of insecurity is to their livelihoods and their reason for involvement in the gig economy. Compared to unsafety, the relationships between the ideal types of gig courier and insecurity are more pronounced due to their different economic relationships with the gig economy. In this section, I will focus on the gig economy as a means to provide a livelihood, and will show how the insecurity of the gig economy is acknowledged and also how it is likely to translate

into an insecure future. The factors of insecurity and uncertainty are interwoven, and for this reason, it is useful to see insecurity as a proxy for the present, and uncertainty as a proxy for the future.

Insecurity is an aspect that is shared by all gig couriers which means it is important to break down insecurity into how intense and negative the experience of insecurity is. What is interesting is that by using the three types of gig courier, it is possible to predict the level of intensity and how negative the experience is by considering how economically dependent the gig courier is on gig courier work. Consequently, Survivors have the most intense and negative experience with insecurity, followed by Free Agents and then Side-Hustlers. As discussed in previous chapters, factors such as independent contractor status and the existence of at-will dismissal means that insecurity is a constant threat to *all* gig couriers, however, the type of gig courier dictates how significant of a factor insecurity is in their experience in the gig economy, and also, whether or not it needs to be addressed in the first place. For example, in a seasonal 'recruitment' drive where gig couriers have been clearly told in their partner agreement that their position is temporary and their termination is inevitable; gig couriers will all be in a position of extreme insecurity, but this is a much greater threat to the livelihood of a Survivor and Free Agent than a Side-Hustler. The significance of the factor of insecurity is well-summarised by Maverick:

> 'You're gonna have people that rely on it and people that don't rely on it. I'm in the category that doesn't rely on it. So, if things go tits up, [Looking around room with hands up] I've got my job, my house is still standing, still got money coming in – I'm fine. I can wash my hands of it. But at the same time, I'd worry for the other people'.

This is another useful extract from my interview with Maverick because it shows the different stakes for the types of gig courier in the gig economy. Maverick is able to weather the systemic risk of insecurity of the gig economy because he is a Side-Hustler who is

insulated from its effects by his primary income and his ability to walk away unscathed. For Maverick, the gig economy can be exciting because he is able to play and then return to his normal life, meanwhile, for Survivors and Free Agents, their economic dependence on the gig economy means that walking away has much greater consequences. I continued to speak with Maverick about the topic and what was interesting was that he was frustrated with couriers who complain about the conditions of gig courier work.

> 'I've pulled away. I did spend, I wouldn't say a lot of time, but I'd say a considerable amount of time talking to the people that I was riding with. But I just found myself getting frustrated. People like moaning, it's a British thing, I don't know, but I'm like, if you don't like doing it that much… Fuck off? Just don't do it. No one is putting a gun to your head and went, you've gotta go and do gig work. No one. We're lucky, we're a town that's in an affluent area, there's jobs. There's a lot of jobs. You go onto Indeed, there's jobs there. So, if you don't like doing what you're doing, then don't do it'.

Maverick's bluntness here is important because it shows a familiar sentiment about working in the gig economy. Side-Hustlers are unlikely to fully appreciate what the gig economy can offer because insecurity for them is not an issue as they themselves are economically secure. For Survivors and the Free Agents, the insecurity of the gig economy is a key aspect of their worlds, and it is clear from speaking to Survivors and Free Agents discontented with the gig economy that the choice to stay in or leave the gig economy is a complex one. For example, I asked Nasir which of his jobs had the most different atmosphere to his job as a gig courier, and he responded:

> 'This is the different one! Other one, its secure job. This one is insecure; you don't know until when. You don't know how much hour you're gonna make, I still make my target but it can fluctuate anytime. You can start making double the living wage or nothing at the same time. Some hours it happens to me, but you do double, it balances out. You think, now it's not happening right now, but it might happen in the month, or the [next] week or the future. We don't have that control, it's up to Deliveroo'.

In this way, the social, economic and political context intersected with the skills and attributes of the individual is how tolerance for working in the gig economy is processed. For a professional such as Maverick, involvement in the gig economy is relatively stringless because the money is not as impressive as it is to Nasir who would prefer to risk earning nothing if he can earn double the living wage because he knows will make more than he would make as a pizza delivery driver or a security guard. Nasir stated 'right now I am doing good so I am sticking with this. I think I am still earning more money than if I am doing bus driving or security guard. If this stops happening then I will start looking for a different job'. Nasir's decision-making acknowledges the systemic insecurity of the gig economy; however, the opportunity cost and the financial insecurity is calculated in relation to the certainty and limited earning potential in other types of work.

For Free Agents such as Chris, the insecurity of the gig economy can be considered as the price paid for being able to engage and disengage from the work at-will, however, Chris is deeply dissatisfied with the gig economy. When I asked Chris how he felt about the gig economy becoming commonplace, he paused, sighed, and explained how 'you have to ask yourself the value of things like sick pay, holiday pay, loyalty' and that he would not want his friends, family or children (if he had any) to work in the gig economy. It is in these candid moments that the impact of social obsolescence and the reconciliation of precarity and risk is clear. It might be assumed that Free Agents are the kind of gig courier that are empowered by the gig economy, however, their relationships with the gig economy are complex. Chris presents himself as a very charismatic and confident man, however, it was clear that he feels trapped by gig courier work. Chris shared the dreams he had to be a solicitor and explained that when he was told he would likely fail, he gave it up.

> '…that was one of the things that pushed me away from being a normal person, having a job, having a family, house blah, blah, blah. I'm just saying this isn't going to work for me. [I] Just

> have to try and find satisfaction from a different area of life. Which is a bit sad, but I guess that's just me'.

This extract from Chris is an opportunity to see what social consequences of living and working in the gig economy can look like. On the surface, insecurity of the gig economy can be seen as opportunity and the price of an alternative way to earn an income and live life, however, it also seems that there is something important about being a "normal person" that Chris wishes he had. Having a job, a family and a house are traditional goals that felt out of reach for Chris, and this is the reason I described the Free Agent's relationship with insecurity to be moderate because *ideally* the Free Agent should use the gig economy to achieve their dreams, however, it is clear from Chris's experience that living and working in a gig economy can be a bittersweet world. To finish this section, I borrow a quote from Bauman which summarises the sentiment well: 'the mobility and the flexibility of identification which characterize the 'shopping around' type of life are not so much vehicles of emancipation as the instruments of the redistribution of freedoms' (2013:161). In this way, a future of work orientated towards a gig economy structure should be approached cautiously as only Side-Hustlers are equipped to be able to fully 'negotiate' with the gig economy by having the option to walk away; and this will be important to observe as the gig economy matures because the unintended consequences of insecurity embedded in the gig economy will become clearer.

Gig Couriers and Uncertainty

Uncertainty is one of the most important parts of gig couriership, and in this section I am going to focus on the significance of uncertain futures for gig couriers. As I mentioned previously, if insecurity describes the present, uncertainty can be used to describe the

future. In a similar way to insecurity, the significance of uncertainty is related to the level of economic dependence, and in this way, Survivors are the most impacted by uncertainty, followed by Free Agents and once again, Side-Hustlers are the least impacted.

In a gig economy, uncertainty is certain, and this is makes it difficult to plan for a gig courier to plan for the future. Indeed, in the previous section, Chris spoke about the idea of a 'normal' person how living and working in the gig economy can result in something different. However, uncertainty is a systemic risk in modern life that extends beyond the experience of work in the gig economy. As Bauman wrote, 'secure jobs in secure companies seem to be the yarn of grandfathers' nostalgia; nor are there many skills and experiences which, once acquired, would guarantee that the job will be offered, and once offered, will prove lasting (2013:161).

A 'job for life' or a traditional career helps to mitigate against uncertainty because it provides structure, direction and progress, however, the supply of these options in the modern labour market are limited and it is questionable whether or not the job for life is even desirable anymore. For example, when I asked Sam (Side-Hustler, 18, Bicycle, Kent) about his career prospects, his explained that he wanted to be an engineer, however, he had no intention of staying at a single company his whole life like his father had. When I asked Sam how he felt about the prospect of the end of the job for life, Sam stated that he thought 'staying at a company is different than staying in a field of work'. This is important because Sam's goal to be an engineer gives him a sense of security and certainty that 'even if there was a drastic change in the field of work, I think it's a good thing [because] I think it means you're less likely to feel trapped in a job, wherever you're not happy'. In this way, Sam is confident that his acquired skillset will enable him to prioritise 'passion' and 'interest' over the security and certainty that a traditional career would provide. Consequently, there is an interesting

generational divide between Bauman's point about skill-sets being unable to provide lasting employment and how this compares to Sam's excitement about the prospect of being able to jump from job to job.

Sam was an important participant in my sample because he was the youngest of my participants, and it was particularly insightful when he mentioned, 'I think a lot of adults are scared because it's the norm to stick with the job and then retire with that job'. This is interesting because Sam is making the argument that the reason traditional careers are favoured is because they are normalised rather than for the conditions and benefits that a traditional career would provide. For Sam, the world is supposed to be characterised by change, so why not embrace it? After all, being a gig courier at the bottom of the hierarchy is only a short-term activity for Side-Hustlers like Sam.

Meanwhile for Survivors such as Nasir, he explained that he did not think gig courier work could be a career as it was insecure and explained that 'if you're a bus driver then you know you have a job for life driving the bus around. You never see an example of someone doing 90 years of couriering. That's never happening'. Nasir makes an important point here in that the sustainability of gig courier work is limited. Firstly, in the actual capacity to perform the work on the day, but also, across the long term. Whilst it is possible to extend the feasibility of working as a gig courier when you are older through investing in an e-bike or by switching to a car or scooter, it is unlikely that the 60-year-old gig courier will be able to match the efficiency of their younger counterparts. Consequently, it is likely that the ceiling for optimisation in gig couriership is one of physicality rather than skill, and this means that age will have diminishing returns in gig couriership. The diminishing returns is the crux of why gig courier work is uncertain because it highlights the sustainability issue of gig couriership. Whilst Survivors and Free Agents may be able to meet their financial targets and balance

their lives today, they might not be able to achieve this the following year. This is a problem because this less of a systemic risk than a systemic inevitability that a gig courier will reach the end of their capacity to work in the gig economy sooner than retirement age and they will be left with limited options. For example, when I asked Chris how long he wanted to do Deliveroo for, he responded:

> 'I don't. Every year I say I don't wanna do that again. But because I've got even bigger gaps in my employment history it becomes more difficult, so whilst I do other things like the teaching, and I make a little bit of money from YouTube, and I've also got something else that I do online as well. What normally happens is because it's easier to make money through Deliveroo, like the other jobs really take a lot of concentration or a lot of effort. I fall into the… oh I'll just do Deliveroo then whilst I'm in the country. And, oh I'll pick up the other things when I leave the country when I'm more relaxed and I'm happier, but whilst I'm the UK, let's just take advantage of Deliveroo. When really, they're taking advantage of me'.

Chris's experience of being a Free Agent is useful to provide an insight into how the gig economy can encourage living in uncertainty due to its accessibility, however, it can also be argued that Chris's attitude towards the gig economy reflects how 'precarious economic and social conditions train men and women (or make them learn the hard way) to perceive the world as a container full of disposable objects, objects for one-off use; the whole world - including other human beings' (Bauman, 2013:162). Chris acknowledges he is disposable to the gig companies, but he justifies this as the price of having freedom and flexibility in his work:

> 'You aren't free to work whenever you want, but isn't that just synonymous with capitalism? You can't just do a job and say I want to be paid as much as him, you have to either be good at your job, or be prepared to do something that other people aren't prepared to do'.

Despite the freedom and flexibility that is assumed to be obtained by working in the gig economy, experienced gig couriers like Chris can begin to feel trapped by the gig economy,

however, this is in direct contrast to younger gig couriers such as Sam who think that the normalisation of the gig economy could lead to people no longer feeling trapped by their jobs. The uncertainty of the gig economy means that both Chris and Sam can be correct, however, if the 'job for life' is to be replaced by a lifetime of jobbing, it is important that people are protected from becoming destitute once their ability to engage in jobbing ends; after all, there are no pensions in a gig economy.

Conclusion

Whilst new capitalism is pervasive and social obsolescence means that 20th century expectations for the world of work continue to be eroded (or have been), this does not mean that the gig economy is unassailable. The gig economy is a developing phenomenon, and because the futures of the gig economy remain uncertain it means that change can still be enacted to safeguard the 'human element' in the world of work. As I have mentioned throughout this chapter, the problem with the gig economy is found when it is taken to the extremes. In the sweet spot, Side-Hustlers are relatively unaffected by the precarity and risk embedded within the gig economy because they are not economically dependent on the gig economy, which means their participation is largely leisurely. In the idealised version of the Free Agent, their participation in the gig economy is their mechanism to live life as they desire, using passion to guide decision-making, however, it is clear that sustained involvement in the gig economy can mean a Free Agent can become trapped by the accessibility of gig courier work at the expense of other projects, which means their long-term futures are jeopardised. Finally, Survivors are at the bottom of the hierarchy and they

suffer disproportionately to make the entire system function. The struggle with uncertainty, insecurity and unsafety is a problem for sustainability in the gig economy and life afterwards, and it is for this reason that the final chapter continues the discussion on the social consequences of the gig economy for work and society.

Conclusion

Chris: *So how do you see the gig economy in the future?*

Jack: I see it as inevitable. I just want to make it decent.

Chris: *I'm just glad there's some optimists around.*

(Chris, Free Agent, E-Bike)

Introduction

If the gig economy is inevitable, how should we respond? This short interaction between myself and a veteran gig courier reflects how the conversation on the gig economy and its implications for the future of work and society is one that is often split between anticipation and resignation. The gig economy and its the relationship to the future of work is in a state of flux because the central question for policymakers and academics quickly changed from 'what is the gig economy?' to 'what should *our* gig economy look like?'. Government resolutions on the role of the gig economy in our lives are imminent, however, in an increasingly globalised and digitalised world, any resolution passed faces the issue that declaring the gig economy to be an evil does not place it back into Pandora's box.

In this thesis, I have explored England's gig economy through its food-delivery sector. The conclusion for this thesis is split into two sections. The first section evaluates the contributions of the thesis and how these contributions relate to the objectives, aims and the research questions. The second section addresses the inevitability of the gig economy and argues that gig economies are the foundation for the futures of work and that their success or failure to influence the future of work is dependent on the relationship between gig companies and (in)hospitable nation states.

Evaluating Contributions

This thesis has made both conceptual and methodological contributions to our understanding of the gig economy and the nature of work in the 21st century. Each chapter of the thesis offers a specific contribution to knowledge; however, the meta-contribution of the thesis is in its presentation of the gig economy as evidence of paradigmatic shift in the

world of work. Therefore, whilst this thesis does function as an empirical study on the food-delivery sector in England's gig economy, it is also a discussion on how the gig economy is indicative of a change in the relationship between people and their work as well as the nature of work itself.

Disentangling Scholarship on Digital Platforms

The primary contribution of *Chapter One: Digital Platforms and a New Economy* is that the new knowledge it has produced can be used by sociologists and non-sociologists (such as scholars in organisational psychology or business and management) to untangle the inconsistencies within scholarship on the gig economy. For sociologists in particular, the chapter's discussion on the relationship between the sociology of work and the gig economy is useful for showing the value of sociology as a discipline in that it is equipped with a broad range of concepts and approaches to study and make sense of work. Moreover, the chapter grounds the development of the gig economy by presenting the gig economy as being connected to wider historical processes of disruptive technology and industrial revolution. As such, this chapter is important for supporting the idea that a paradigm shift has occurred in the world of work in general.

Whilst I have been unable to resolve the external inconsistencies that exist in scholarship on the gig economy, it is intended that by addressing them directly here, other research on digital platforms should become less confusing to read. For example, if after reading this thesis another author refers to Deliveroo or Uber as part of the 'sharing economy', this should no longer be a cause for concern. Moreover, whilst the main purpose of the matryoshka doll figure (introduced in Chapter One) was to visualise the scope of this PhD project, it can also be used to understand the scope of other research on platform-enabled

work. For instance, a study on the 'ride-hailing' or taxi sector is similar to this project and this means it would sit alongside the food delivery sector, meanwhile, a study on 'geographically tethered work' or 'cloud work' would be effectively served by the 'AssetBased Services' layer because it includes more than one sector. Ultimately, the diagram *is* a simplistic representation but it is helpful as a quick reference to see the interrelationship and interdependencies between and within the layers of the platform economy.

Methodological Challenges of Studying Work

Chapter Two: Studying Gig Courier Work mainly focusses on research design, but it is useful beyond this thesis for how it discusses the methodological challenges associated with researching 21st century work, and also, how a PhD project can adapt and still generate meaningful data despite restrictions on data collection, in this case arising from the COVID19 pandemic. The chapter is also useful as a reflection on the practice of obtaining access in the gig economy and how its resistance to traditional research methods of studying work is important for subsequent research on the gig economy. For example, accessing gig couriers in general is challenging because they are a 'hard to reach' group (Badger and Woodcock 2019), however, accessing female or migrant gig couriers is another layer of difficulty.
Chapter Three: Navigating Nomenclature and the Challenge of Characterising Couriers has two contributions. The first contribution is analytical in that it explains the value of abandoning the concept of 'gig work' in favour of specific descriptions such as 'gig courier work'. This is a useful contribution because I am drawing attention to how being specific can make scholarship on digital platform-enabled work easier to compare. The second contribution is a conceptual framework on the relationship between gig couriers and their work.

The Gig Courier Typology

The typology introduced in *Chapter Three: Navigating Nomenclature and the Challenge of Characterising Couriers* is the most important contribution of this thesis because it can be used in three different ways to understand work. The first usage is its face-value explanation of how gig couriers differ in orientation to and relationship with gig courier work. The second benefit is through how the typology is ready to be used to study other kinds of work in the gig economy to see if Survivors, Side-Hustlers and Free Agents can be found elsewhere. The third application is that the typology can be used to explore the flexible working practices and precarious conditions outside of the gig economy. The typology was originally introduced in *Chapter Three: Navigating Nomenclature and the Challenge of Characterising Couriers,* but I have reproduced it to show how the typology can be used to make sense of my relationship with work during the PhD.

Type	*Income*	*Symbiosis*	*Gig Values*	*Engagement*	*Why Work*
Survivors	Dependent	Obligate	Illusionary	Continuous	Accessibility, Need Money
Side-Hustlers	Top-Up	Facultative	Unimportant	Intermittent	Hobby, Pocket Money, Exercise
Free Agents	Secondary	Can be both	Integral	On-Demand	Freedom and Flexibility, Entrepreneurship

Table 3.1 Typology of Gig Courier Work

Being an ESRC funded PhD student meant undergraduate teaching was not mandatory. It also meant that each condition for a Side-Huster relationship with university teaching was able to be met. First, the scholarship performed the role of a primary job in that it provided consistent income that was sufficient to provide economic security (which enabled undergraduate teaching to function as "top-up" income). Second, the relationship between myself and the university was facultatively symbiotic (see Table 3.1), which means the relationship was mutually beneficial but neither I or the university were dependent. Third, the gig values of flexibility and freedom were unimportant in comparison to the income it provided. Fourth, engagement with university teaching was intermittent in that I taught on modules I *chose* to suit my weekly schedule. Nonetheless, once my funding ended, I no longer met the conditions for a Side-Hustler relationship with work and I quickly transitioned into a Survivor relationship with work. I became economically dependent and this meant that obligate symbiosis (see Table 3.1) now described my relationship to work. Freedom and flexibility became distant as the goal was to make enough money to pay the rent and support myself and my partner. Finally, my engagement became continuous *and* I started juggling different opportunities for work with different employers simultaneously. From here, it is possible to see how 'multi-apping' for universities becomes an idea, and it is for this reason that the gig economy is a *symptom* of a paradigmatic shift in the world of work. Indeed, throughout this PhD, precarious working conditions and have been a key theme, and this is well-reflected by the industrial action that has taken place in Higher Education, in the Civil Service and in the NHS (Goddard 2016; Bergfeld 2018). Therefore, whilst the primary purpose of the typology was to articulate the world of gig couriership, it was always intended to be able to speak beyond the gig courier.

The objective of the typology was to be able to contain yet not restrict an individual's relationship with their work, yet at the same time, it also needed to maintain explanatory

power if and when an individual's relationship with work changed across time. In these ways, the typology *is* a success, however, the fact that the typology is able to do this led to a clear limitation. The core problem with the typology is that in an attempt to make sense of the relationship between gig couriers and their work, the Survivor, the Side-Hustler and the Free Agent can easily become reified. It is important to remember that Survivors, Side Hustlers and Free Agents do not actually exist. Throughout this thesis, I have used the label for all the gig couriers to highlight key aspects of their relationships to gig courier work, but this does not mean it is appropriate to 'diagnose' a gig courier as a type. This is tricky because whilst you *can* glean 'characteristics' or 'traits' by observing and speaking with gig couriers, you cannot determine if a gig courier is a Survivor in the same way as a medical test can identify a condition.

This has important methodological and analytical consequences because it is difficult (if not impossible) for a researcher to deductively examine the efficacy of the gig courier typology as a characterisation of the relationship between people and their work. This does not mean the typology is unsubstantiated or that the findings cannot be corroborated; it simply means that subsequent research could use abductive reasoning to see how the gig courier typology compares to other typologies when applied to another 'case' (e.g., Uber drivers or Amazon Mechanical Turk coders), another place (e.g., gig couriers in Spain) or another time (e.g., when/if the (mis)classification of employment situation changes).

Another fair critique of the typology is that it could be argued to be yet another attempt to categorise 'gig work'. This may become more of an important critique over time as further research on the gig economy is published. The reason this typology is different from others is because it is grounded in creating distinction between 'types' or 'sectors' of work in the gig economy rather than an attempt to create a universal framework that can contain all kinds

of platform work. In sum, the typology has limitations and if I was beginning this PhD project today; I would include a research question on existing gig courier typologies supported by a sub-question on how they could be refined.

Gig Organisational Socialisation

The main contribution of *Chapter Four: Getting into Gig Courier Work* is the idea of gig organisational socialisation. Gig organisational socialisation is in contrast to traditional organisational socialisation whereby the structure is built on a philosophy of 'resupply and replace' rather than investment for the future. As a result, this is an idea that can be used to understand the 'employment' relationship between digital platforms and independent contractors and how these organisations can plan to exist across time.

As a digitalised and turbo-charged version of the flexible firm (Atkinson, 1984), gig companies are an advanced organisational structure that utilises traditional organisational socialisation to develop and maintain a skilled core workforce for administration and conventional business processes. Meanwhile, the 'resupply and replace' strategy is enacted to source and recycle pools of low-skilled labour without needing to move location to find another pool of labour to exploit (Cowie 2019). The strategic process of gig organisational socialisation has profound impact on work identity as it removes the need for an organisation to act as a holding environment for the cultivation of identity to reproduce an organisation across time, and in return, provide workers with a sustainable and endurable life. For this reason, the idea of gig organisational socialisation and the recruitment dynamic of membership versus resupply and replace is important to understand the changing structure and condition of contemporary work.

Service on Standby and the Types of Waiting

Chapter Five: Service on Standby: The Practice and Lived Experience of Gig Courier Work focusses on explaining how geographically-tethered on-demand services are able to function as a result of gig couriers on-standby. The main contribution of this chapter is the explanation of an on-demand service as the result of gig courier sacrifice and opportunity. Gig courier work occurs in the physical world and it is (currently) completed by human beings who are unable to be suspended in space and time without consequence because they are corporeal beings. Moreover, gig courier work normally involves the transport of a perishable physical product from one location to another which requires strict time and energy management, and this means that the temporal relations of gig couriership is a key factor in the practice of gig courier work.

The second contribution of this chapter is a conceptualisation of waiting and the affectual responses that are evoked by different types of waiting. Waiting is a central to understanding the experience of gig courier work and how the hierarchy and social value of time in an on-demand service is managed and distributed between producer, gig courier, algorithm and consumer. Waiting is a multi-faceted experience that is tempered by circumstance and the individual skill and techniques of gig couriers. Making sense of waiting is also sociologically significant because waiting is a core lesson of gig organisational socialisation in that it underpins the power dynamic and the idea of gig couriers as second-class citizens, which is an interesting idea that can be developed further when the inequalities between gig couriers are considered, for example, the difference between citizens and migrants (Orth 2023; Altenried, 2022).

Precarity, Risk and the Gig Economy

The first contribution of *Chapter Six: At the Crossroads: Risk and Precarity in the Gig Economy* is its application of Beck's (1992) concept of 'risk society' and Bauman's (2013) idea of the unholy trinity (unsafety, insecurity, uncertainty) to the gig economy to discuss the emergence of gig economy conditions and how they are able to be endured. In the same way as Strangleman (2007) explained that beneath the rhetoric a profound change had occurred in the 1990's-2000s, it is a contribution to state that another shift has taken place in the 2010's. Through applying the structural lens of 'risk society' to the personal experience of risk through the ideas of 'uncertainty', 'unsafety' and 'insecurity' to the world of gig couriership, it is possible to explore what was once a cautionary tale (Bauman, 2013) as reality for gig couriers who live and work in a gig economy. This is important because it indicates how previously unacceptably risky and precarious conditions are able to be reconciled (or even championed) when filtered through the gig values of freedom and flexibility.

The final contribution is the idea of 'social obsolescence' which is an idea that attempts to grasp how what could have been previously unacceptable working conditions become acceptable over time. As I explained in the introduction to this thesis, preserving social order amid crisis and disruption is important, and speaks to a larger question of, why does the world and the future feel so fragile? Precarity in my research mirrored the precarity in my own experience and my future. A precarious existence can drive behaviour but it can also crush the spirit, and it is problem that I discuss shortly in the implications section.

Contributions and the Research Aims and Objectives

In this section, I will address how the contributions relate to the research aims and objectives I presented at the beginning of the thesis.

Develop understanding of the nature and construction of the gig economy through an empirical study of gig courier work

This objective was important for this research because in the beginning of this project the gig economy was still emerging and empirical accounts on the experience and practice of work in the gig economy were in short supply. Over the course of this project, other researchers have managed to complete and publish empirical studies on the gig economy, however, as I discussed in *Chapter Two: Studying Gig Courier Work*, research on the gig economy is temporally and spatially situated, and this means the data generated for this project captures a specific moment in the development of the gig economy in the English context as well as against the backdrop of COVID-19.

I originally intended to use ethnography to study the world of gig couriership, however, I managed to generate rich data on the nature and construction of the gig economy through semi-structured interviews with gig couriers and focus groups with consumers. Even though the data generated from focus groups did not readily fit into an empirical chapter, consumption is an important piece of understanding the nature and construction of the gig economy. As the gig economy continues to grow and more people become involved with the gig economy, prosumption will become an even more important aspect of the model. Prosumption is a portmanteau of 'consumer' and 'producer' and is often used to discuss user-generated content creation (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010), however, there is an interesting dynamic in that gig couriers are often awarded with vouchers from gig companies that they could use to get a discount on food-delivery for themselves. As a result, many gig couriers themselves are consumers of gig economy services and this is an aspect that could be addressed by subsequent research.

Critically examine the lens of existing sociological literature and themes on flexible capitalism, and their usefulness for engagement with the gig economy

This research objective was important for challenging the novelty of the gig economy, and it was addressed in *Chapter One: Digital Platforms and a New Economy* and *Chapter Six: At the Crossroads: Risk and Precarity in the Gig Economy.* In the beginning on the project, the novelty of the gig economy was questionable and I spent time looking into its relationship with formalisation and scientific management. At different stages of the project, I had various frameworks and ideas that I was using to make sense of the gig economy, however, the majority of these did not become part of the final thesis and became references instead. For example, rhythmanalysis would likely have been a key part of the project if the ethnography had gone ahead (Snyder 2016; Lyon 2016; Lyon 2018). In the end, sociological contributions such as Beck's (1992) 'risk society' or Bauman's (2013) liquid modernity and the unholy trinity demonstrate how existing literature is useful as a point of comparison, and also, how they can be used to study new forms of work. At the same time, Fincham's (2008) work on bicycle messengers is useful to demonstrate how work identity has a different function in gig couriership despite being comparable forms of work.

Explore the gig economy as a foundation for the future of work.

Throughout this project I have endeavoured to present a balanced view of the gig economy as a basis for the future of work. A gig economy reforms organisational structure and redefines norms and values, and this means it does have the capacity to be a foundation for

the future of work. However, there are many different trajectories the gig economy can take from here. If gig economy equates to labour facilitated and mediated by digital platforms (Vallas and Schor 2020; Woodcock and Graham 2019), it is almost certain that if other forms of work can be augmented by digital platforms, they will be. This is because gig companies are neoliberal and are an example of the process of creative destruction to reform and reimagine through innovation (Harvey 2006). Importantly, the point of contention remains on the classification of labour and what rights and responsibilities will be attached to it.

Implications for the Future of Work Strangleman (2023:305) argues that by rediscovering our historical imagination we become confident with the past, and this equips sociologists to engage with the future. Strangleman refers to Warwick and Littlejohn's *Coal, Capital and Culture* (1992) as an example of how understanding the problems of the present can be used to plot trajectories for the future. For deindustrialisation, this makes sense because it is logical to predict that a geographically isolated mining town populated by miners and their families will be ruined by closing the mines that its social structures are built on. It is challenging to make predictions for the future of the gig economy because the gig economy is essentially under a decade old and it has a strong habit of defying experts because the pace of change is so fast. For example, gig companies are able to enable or disable entire labour markets at will, and they can automate these decisions to occur simultaneously across the globe.

Moreover, gig companies are able evaluate existing infrastructure and the grey-areas of labour law to go 'regime shopping' to find hospitable environments (Zwick, 2018). The political economy of the gig economy has developed from a nascent question of whether or not we should take it seriously (Healy *et al*, 2017) to how can workers be safeguarded from

being exploited and dominated by the gig economy (Hickson, 2023). As Hickson (2023: 321) explains, the discourse of freedom that underpins gig work is a 'structural vulnerability that exposes [gig workers] to extraordinary forms of dominion, compromising their freedom', especially in comparison to 'typical employees in advanced capitalist labour markets'. If the central point of working in the gig economy is the pursuit of liberty and the opportunity to obtain freedom as an economic agent then the gig economy (especially in the delivery sector) actively fails to provide a market that is both 'free from inference' and that enables 'self-authorship' (Hickson, 2023: 324). For example, in the delivery sector in particular, whilst gig couriers might be 'freed from the shackles of the 9-5 office work' (Sinicki in Hickson, 2023: 325), they receive an inability to negotiate the value of their work, are subject to surveillance on their personal devices and are eligible for at-will dismissal irrespective of local labour laws. For this reason, the political economy of the gig economy and its conditions are not only important for consider for the welfare of those who work in the gig economy, but also, for the influence these debates will have on other sectors of the economy.

Crucially, the infrastructure of digital and platform economies is 'built' on top of pre-existing infrastructure (e.g., mobile phone towers, internet and roads) and this means that if deindustrialisation has a long half-life (Linkon 2018), the gig economy has the shortest half-life of a socio-economic shift. There are no socially significant buildings, there is no archetypal worker, and there is little need (or desire) for social or political organisation. Consequently, when a gig company decides to pull its services from an area or even an entire nation, what is left behind when the service is deactivated? There is little to no cultural or social residue because there is no transcendental spirit in the gig economy, and instead of a sense of loss, I expect gig couriers would respond by rationalising the removal of service as a regrettable but data-led decision, or perhaps, the cost of living in a nation inhospitable to

the gig economy. For this reason, it will be interesting to see how the 'digital ruins' of abandoned platform economies will look over time (Miller and Garcia, 2019).

The problem with the gig economy and its relationship to the future of work is that the role of humans in change and the 'human element' of work (Chapter 6) are often undervalued in the conversation. As it stands, the current iteration of the gig economy is based on vulnerable Survivors filling in the cracks, however, is this a feature or a choice? The earlier reference to the gig economy escaping Pandora's box is important because 'hope' was the only remaining 'evil' in the box (Panofsky and Panofsky, 2019), and the problem with hope is that it is an anaesthetic to action (Weisleder, 2012). Instead of *hoping* for decent future of work, we must actively work towards establishing one, otherwise, what will prevent the neoliberal dystopia from being realised? (Martin, 2016). The gig economy and the technology that enables it provides excellent opportunities and significant pitfalls, but we continue to remain at the crossroads.

The Gig Economy: What Next?

The 'gig economy' has always been a placeholder to describe a new form of organising work, but it is quickly becoming a misnomer. In the same way as I have used *gig courier* in this thesis to specify an exact form of work to mitigate against the ambiguity of 'gig worker', I anticipate that we will soon need to specify which kind of gig economy we are talking about. The reason I say this is because the longevity of the gig economy is dependent on its relationship to the nation state, and not all nation states are equal in their relationship with the gig economy. I am interested in the role that transnational corporations have as an actor

on the global stage (Bennett and Sharpe, 2014; Bélanger and Edwards, 2006), and this is the foundation of my Warwick and Littlejohn-esque prediction. Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (2002) argues that the modern structures of the nation state and the market economy were complimentary and developed simultaneously to produce a single 'market society' which reflected a change in values and the organisational structure of society. This is important because it reflects how economic activity becomes embedded within social structures (Granovetter, 1985).

In the 21st century, the platform economy has influenced a change in behaviour and values to reflect on-demand just-in-time production; however, the nation state is inconsistent with this. Yet, there are alternative ways to organise society that could provide the foundation for a decent gig economy. For example, the idea of a Universal Basic Income is now a seriously debated way for a nation state to guarantee economic subsistence for its citizens in the developed and developing world (Hoynes and Rothstein, 2019; Bidadanure, 2019).

The level of economic independence is the key determinant of the relationship between an individual and their work, however, enacting a Universal Basic Income would greatly change the role of work, especially if it enabled subsistence by itself. Nonetheless, the creation of the welfare state and other social liberal principles were once considered strange too. However, I do want to highlight that there is a key critique here in that if economic independence is guaranteed by the nation state, this would mean that the nation state would become *more* powerful, and I think most people would all like to avoid a nation state that acts as a *Leviathan* (Hobbes, 2016). As important parts of the social contract such as the state pension are unlikely to exist for my generation, the current social organisation of society will inevitably change. For this reason, I anticipate that each nation state will develop their own relationship with their gig economy, and that this relationship will be a key transformation as different kinds of gig economies and futures of work will emerge.

Gig Couriers: Where Next?

What about the gig couriers? Gig couriers are an interesting feature of the gig economy because they are the vanguard of what could be the beginning stages of the foundation for the future of work. Independent contractors operating on an on-demand basis via digital platforms does not need to be limited to gig courier work either. When I discussed this with gig couriers, they offered the familiar responses of anticipation and resignation. Gig couriers might be happy with flexible working practices whilst they are a student at university, but what about if they graduate and they find gig engineers, gig doctors, and gig teachers? Some gig couriers, particularly the youngest, relished this and saw it as an opportunity to be free from the 'job for life'. Others such as David (31, Side-Hustler, Bicycle) who was studying medicine were less impressed and explained that a gig doctor would be a 'Tories wet dream'. Suffice to say, the work trajectories of gig couriers vary significantly, and gig courier attitudes towards their chosen or desired occupations becoming a part of the gig economy is contested.

At the moment, participating in the gig economy has the most significant consequences for a minority who have a Survivor or Free Hustler relationship with the gig economy, and this is because they are disconnected from a traditional career trajectory. This is a problem to be addressed in the future because as the gig economy grows and more people begin working in the gig economy, the proportions of Survivor, Side-Hustler and Free Agent might be similar, but the numbers within these types will increase significantly, and as discussed previously (Chapter 6), working in the gig economy as a gig courier becomes more unsustainable as you get older. Consequently, problems will be encountered when a 40-yearold feels they are too old to continue with gig courier work but their only work experience is gig courier work. This means low-skilled platform-enabled work could create a

ceiling. Survivors know this and intend to use the gig economy for as long as it delivers a feasible and competitive income, meanwhile, this is a negative future that Free Agents could face if their other income streams are interrupted or fail.

Building an economy that works for everyone is a popular bi-partisan ideal (Schwab 2021; Dromey and McNeil 2017). Consequently, if the gig economy is to be a foundation for the future of work, it needs revision because it is currently designed for Side-Hustlers and depends upon the sacrifice of Survivors and the investment from and skill of Free Agents to function. This is important because the idea of 'winners' and 'losers' in the gig economy (Chapter 6) can be obscured by the idea of meritocracy. Capitalist societies are unequal; however, a desirable capitalist economy is one where opportunity is accessible to all and systematic disadvantage is mitigated.

As it is currently organised, flexibility in gig courier work means a gig courier is free to work at their discretion, but they can only earn money if they work at particular times and in particular ways. In this way, flexibility in the world of gig couriership is reminiscent of 'you can have any colour car as long as its black' (Duncan, 2011). In the situation of an unfavourable opportunity cost, the Survivor is limited in their capacity to negotiate and takes the job, the Side-Hustler will likely give up and go home, and the Free Agent's current income streams determines whether or not they are even at work in the first place.

A similar problem can be said to exist for freedom in gig courier work. If behaviour is rewarded by the algorithm and other behaviour is unrewarded or even punished, what incentive is there to go against the expected? The freedom to make decisions is limited, and for this reason, gig courier work is a type of gig economy that resembles a gilded cage because it shrouds its nature with language, however, eventually, the nature of Weber's cage reveals itself (Mitzman 1971; Weber and Kalberg, 2013).

If the end of the 'job for life' has arrived, the gig economy provides an organisational structure and a set of ideas that can be the foundation for the future of work. However, as society and the nation states are currently organised, the gig economy is an insecure, unsafe and uncertain way to earn a living. As a result, decent and sustainable futures of work are dependent on the development of individual gig economies that serve individuals, their communities and their nations.

Appendices

Information Sheet

University of Kent | School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research

Information Sheet

Research Title

From a 'job for life' to a gig economy: Rethinking work, time and economic life.

Hello! I would like to invite you to take part in my research.

I am Jack Warner, a PhD student in Sociology at the University of Kent. My project is a sociological study, and is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. By taking part in this research, you will be help to understand how the gig economy works and what it is like to be a gig worker. There are unlikely to be any risks to you by taking part. All data will be stored securely and is in compliance with data protection legislation. This research has been approved by the University of Kent Ethics Board.

What is this project about?

This project is looking at the "Gig economy" and is interested in how gig workers feel about their work. Sometimes gig work is a positive experience, other times it may be a more negative one. I am equally interested in both, and this is project is an opportunity for you to talk about your work as a courier. Your experiences will help to make sense of the gig economy.

What do I do and how long will I be involved?

Participating in this project means being willing to attend an interview that is interested in your experiences as a courier. Together, we will find a time that works for your interview. An interview will take approximately an hour of your time. During the interview, questions will ask you about your experiences as a courier. Before your interview, I will provide you with a **consent form** which will show that you agree to take part in the study. It also gives you the chance to ask any questions about the interview beforehand. You do not have to take part, and even if you choose to, you are able to leave the study at any time without consequences.

What happens afterwards?

After your interview, I will transcribe it anonymously and I will change your name. When the research is finished, I will provide you with a summarised version of the results. The first use of the research will be converted into a doctoral thesis, research publications and conference presentations. The full data will be also be available in the UK Data Archive, and will be reused by other researchers. If you have any complaints, or wish to contact the researcher you can do so through the following details.

Professor Tim Strangleman (Main Supervisor) https://www.kent.ac.uk/social-policy-sociology-socialresearch/people/1468/strangleman-tim

Dr Dawn Lyon (Secondary Supervisor) https://www.kent.ac.uk/social-policy-sociology-socialresearch/people/1942/lyon-dawn

Jack Warner (Researcher) https://www.kent.ac.uk/social-policy-sociology-social-research/people/2027/www.kent.ac.uk/social-policy-sociology-social-research/people/2027/warnerjack

Thank you for reading!

Consent Form

Consent Form

Title of Project: From a 'Job for Life' to a gig economy: Rethinking Work, Time and Economic Life.

Name of Researcher: Jack Warner

Yes No

Participant Identification Number:

1) I confirm I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have these answered satisfactorily.

2) I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. I understanding I am able to contact the researcher via email at jiw21@kent.ac.uk

3) I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I also agree to have my direct quotes published. ☐ ☐

4) I understand that my responses will be available for reuse after this project. ☐ ☐

5) I agree to take part in the above research project ☐ ☐

6) I agree to have my interview recorded ☐ ☐

Date:

Name of Participant: Researcher:

X _____ X _____

Participant Researcher

List of Topics for Gig Courier Interviews

Research Question 1: Construction of Gig Work

1. How you came to be in Gig Work
2. Reasons for Engaging in Gig Work
3. Onboarding Experience
4. Practice of Work waiting, priority, rules, safety
5. Relationship with Platform:
6. Alignment with Values: Self-identification question: Flexibility, unfair dismissal, Autonomy, (In)dependent Contactor
7. Meaning and Satisfaction
8. Role of Gig Work in Wider Life – Ensure Questions do not gloss over details (Financial status etc, Division of labour)

9. Previous Work Experience/Parents did for work?
10. Future of Work? Job for life? Reward for normal career? Regs.
11. Collective, Collegiality? Formal and/or informal (Company of One)

Demographic Questions:

Education level

Highest qualifications etc.

Union Membership

Age

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