



Modern Slavery in the Gig Economy: Analysing the Exploitation of Gig and Freelance Workers through AI-Driven Communication Strategies and Automated Surveillance

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Purpose: In modern corporate slavery, especially in Gig and freelance there is a significant gap concerning the critical analysis of AI-driven communication technologies and automated surveillance instruments in continued exploitation. This article aims to explore how modern communication and AI technologies contribute to modern slavery within the gig economy by focusing on understanding the mechanisms through which AI-driven communication systems and automated surveillance techniques impact the autonomy, earnings, and rights of gig and freelance workers.

Study design/methodology/approach: Through qualitative research, this article responds to how AI-driven communication and automated surveillance practices aggravate or mitigate the exploitation of gig and freelance workers. The authors interviewed twenty-two gig and freelance workers and six managers who employed gig and freelance employees. Moreover, Foucault's Theory of Surveillance (Panopticism), Labour Process Theory (LPT), and Technological Mediation Theory (TMT) helped to understand the crossroad between technological control, economic exploitation, and moderated communication.

Findings: The results demonstrated that AI-powered communication systems improve efficiency and task distribution. However, they concurrently create power imbalances. Besides, this encourages continuous monitoring and algorithmic control, which creates employee dissatisfaction and marginalization.

Originality/value: This research reinforces the discourse on labor practices within the digital economy by emphasizing the convergence of AI and modern slavery. On the other hand, it offers organizations insights into ethical AI usage for transparent communication practices in corporate slavery.

Introduction

The modern corporate ecosystem is sophisticated, offering management and practitioners the opportunities for technological use into workforce, to experiment and engage, which is becoming the norm and challenge for many organizations globally (Gabelaia et al., 2024). Notably, while the gig economy is still considered a fad, temporary work has existed in one form or another for many years. The gig economy continues to grow and engage more and more workers. Workers seek flexibility and better work-life balance, while businesses search for a new way to optimize costs and increase effectiveness and efficiency.

The term "gig economy" originated from the entertainment industry and was meant to describe short-term assignments. However, today, it is a significant part of the labor market, where

workers engage in temporary and flexible jobs through digital platforms (Khang et al., 2024). This transformation of the labor ecosystem is projected to continue developing as businesses strongly rely on freelance and contract-based mastery. Tan et al., (2021), stated that there are two main types of labor-based platforms such as crowd-work platforms and work-on-demand platforms.

The gig economy is undergoing rapid global evolution. It is anticipated to surpass \$475 billion by next year, with freelancing alone rising at a 16% annual rate through 2026. Today, about 15% of workers take short contracts weekly, and this number doubled between 2017 and 2022 (World Economic Forum, 2020). However, while this model proposes freedom to workers, it also introduces challenges. Income instability, benefits, taxes, and automated surveillance are those symptoms. Besides, for managers, this approach reduces long-term obligations but introduces legal and compliance risks. Furthermore, the gig economy shows signs of modern corporate slavery and exploitation, as the ecosystem is not regulated. On-demand or “gig” workers show up to a workplace without walls, organizational routines, managers, or even coworkers (Cameron, 2022).

Today, without traditional employment protections, gig/freelance workers are forced to accept inconsistent wages, work unreasonable hours, and perform without healthcare, insurance, or legal aid. As the gig economy grows, it is necessary to ensure that flexibility and innovation do not come at the cost of self-respect.

Notably, there are disparities in the critical analysis of AI-driven communication technologies and automated surveillance tools, particularly in how they may support exploitation within the gig economy. Moreover, these technologies with unclear algorithms can hide responsibilities and power imbalances by closely monitoring gig/freelance worker behavior, executing algorithmic discipline, and minimizing human oversight. Consequently, workers' exploitation can continue unnoticed and unchallenged.

This article explores how AI-driven technologies contribute to modern slavery within the gig economy, primarily through AI-driven communication systems and automated surveillance techniques impacting the autonomy, earnings, and rights of gig and freelance workers.

The following sections offer insight into the research procedure and show the discourse around modern slavery in the gig economy.

Literature Review

The Overview of Gig Economy

The gig economy is a labor market using short-term contracts or freelance approaches through digital platforms (Khang et al., 2024). Instead of traditional 9-to-5 employment, millions earn income through on-demand "gigs," from driving for ride-hailing apps to freelancing online (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021). In 2024, the global gig economy's market size was assessed at \$556.7 billion, projected to triple to \$1.847 trillion by 2032 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). This rapid growth brings flexibility and new income opportunities but also concerns worker protections, income stability, and regulatory frameworks (World Economic Forum, 2020).

According to Taylor et al. (2023), the 'gig economy' is an economic model where businesses temporarily hire independent contractors to complete 'gigs' as demand via digital engagement. Moreover, Tan et al. (2021) argued that the gig economy is a rapidly growing phenomenon that significantly changes how contemporary economies are managed. However, its evolution is not unproblematic. Furthermore, Berastegui (2021) stated that in the 'gig economy,' this commerce is moderated through online labor platforms, either outsourcing work to a geographically dispersed crowd or allocating work to individuals in a specific area.

Taylor et al. (2023) argued that communication technologies allow businesses to bypass traditional boundaries and outsource tasks to the everyday labor market that makes up the gig economy. However, informal employment poses intrinsic risks to employees, such as safety, income, and job security. Moreover, Malik et al. (2021) and Cameron (2022) stated that advancements in sophisticated communication technology are the key source of positive and negative disruption. Accordingly, the possibility of linking employers and employees via online digital platforms has become a new sensation to explore (Khang et al., 2024). Therefore, according to Montgomery & Baglioni (2021), the gig economy has come to symbolize, for some, an opportunity for flexibility to earn additional income through short-term opportunities. However, for others, it meant a decline in the quality of employment (Khang et al., 2024).

Digital platforms are the newest technological surge, reshaping the economic and labor landscape (Taylor et al., 2023; Lata et al., 2023). Moreover, the gig economy is a significant and expanding labor market (Tan et al., 2021). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic added value to platform-mediated gig work (Lata et al., 2023). Besides, the pandemic provoked an explosion in client requirements for digitally mediated gig work (Khang et al., 2024; Arriagada et al., 2023). Further, the gig economy is expanding rapidly geographically, creating market penetration for people and communities (Tan et al., 2021). Platform companies subsequently had increased revenue, with many digital platforms seeing soaring success (Cameron, 2022; Orth, 2024). However, this success did not automatically translate into success for workers (Lata et al., 2023; Arriagada et al., 2023).

Alternative arrangements to traditional employment have become a promising area in the gig economy (Behl et al., 2022). According to Taylor et al. (2023), gig economy platforms are suitable due to limited entry barriers, qualifications, and training requirements. However, the worker is exposed to asymmetric power and has little to no control over the commission and performance expectations associated with their work (Tan et al., 2021; Khang et al., 2024). Whilst access to gig work via platforms allowed workers to access the income, it did not necessarily mean more security for workers or a better quality of life (Lata et al., 2023; Orth, 2024; Arriagada et al., 2023).

Today, the exact scope and scale of the gig economy remain challenging (Tan et al., 2021). Despite its rapid growth and innovation, the gig economy faces significant challenges (Khang et al., 2024). For instance, Gig workers trade stability and security for flexibility (Malik et al., 2021). They usually value independence regarding when/where to work, but this comes at the cost of economic uncertainty and minimal labor protections (Montgomery & Baglioni, 2021). Hence, these challenges have prompted discussion about improving gig work conditions without losing flexibility (Herrmann et al., 2023; Orth, 2024). Moreover, the gig economy is expanding rapidly due to cultural changes and has disrupted today's education system (Batmunkh et al., 2022). For instance, approximately 53% of gig workers, primarily aged 18–34, count on gig work as their primary source of income (Sannon et al., 2022; Khang et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, on the negative side of gig work, the relations on digital platforms are still complex, such as being unable to modify the working conditions that workers must agree with (Silva & Moreira, 2022). Further, gigs often include low pay, uncertain income, risk of termination, poor remuneration, insecure work conditions, and low-quality of entrepreneurial activities (Katta et al., 2024). However, the gig economy is a global trending phenomenon (Khan et al., 2024; Arriagada et al., 2023). Even though the gig economy has positive and negative impacts, it is a new normal in work and employment relations (McDonnell et al., 2023). Therefore, the only challenge is adjusting it sustainably to various economies (Batmunkh et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2021).

Still, many businesses see the advantages of the gig model, such as lower fixed labor costs and access to a broad talent pool (Umair et al., 2023; Mouazen & Hernandez-Lara, 2023). The key concerns are mechanisms of algorithmic surveillance and managerial oversight (Tan et al., 2021; Woodcock, 2021). These platforms aggregate labor supply and demand through apps and management algorithms (Han et al., 2024; Bunders et al., 2022). Digital platforms use reputation systems as a trust mechanism to promote economic exchanges (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2022). Reputation scores and ratings for gig workers, based on feedback from customers, are used to supervise workers and monitor the quality of their work, as well as to allocate and match workers with requesters (Duggan et al., 2023; Umair et al., 2023). However, these systems often lead to unequal distributional outcomes as workers need minimal training or supervision as they are navigated by the app (Arriagada et al., 2023; Altenried, 2024).

Algorithms are used because they make operations more efficient, accurate, and unbiased (Muldoon & Raekstad, 2023; James, 2022). Nowhere is algorithmically moderated customer control more evident than in platform companies (Cameron & Rahman, 2022). However, proof suggests that algorithms can continually aggravate structural inequalities, injustices, and freedom rather than alleviate them (Duggan et al., 2023; Muldoon & Raekstad, 2023; Woodcock, 2021).

Algorithmic operations construct distinctive relationships between managers and workers moderated through digital technology (Bunders et al., 2022; Orth, 2024). Workers taking commands caused by an algorithm may have less room to negotiate specific aspects of their work schedule and may be subject to more rigorous and demanding workplace control (Duggan et al., 2023; Muldoon & Raekstad, 2023; Orth, 2024). Besides, the mixture of systems of algorithmic management and their possibility of automated management, control, and measurement is the core of the gig economy (Umair et al., 2023; Shaw et al., 2023; Woodcock, 2021; Altenried, 2024).

Regulators struggle to catch up with a rapidly evolving labor market. The gig economy has changed traditional policy frameworks, forcing creative new approaches. Governments globally are experimenting with laws and regulations to address gig work challenges, especially around worker classification, labor rights, taxation, and social protection. Table 1 highlights how key regions try to regulate the gig economy.

Table 1. Summary of Key Regions Regulating the Gig Economy (Developed by the Authors)

Region	Regulatory Approach & Key Measures
United States	Principally treats gig workers as independent contractors under labor law. No federal reclassification. Some state/local laws and protections. Overall, U.S. regulation has ongoing legal battles over classification and growing pressure for portable benefits, but no universal solution yet.
European Union	Moving toward an employment presumption model. The new EU Platform Work Directive requires member states to implement a rebuttable presumption of employment for platform workers controlled by an app. Also mandates algorithmic transparency and human oversight of automated decisions. Many EU countries already had court rulings or laws in favor of employee status for gig workers. By 2026–27, numerous European gig workers are expected to gain employee-style rights.
United Kingdom	Addressing through case law. UK courts have classified certain gig workers as “workers” (intermediate status), not mere contractors. The UK has improved some rights for gig workers via these decisions. No comprehensive new legislation yet, but the trend is toward granting basic labor rights within a flexible work status.
India	Recognizes gig workers in law as a distinct category eligible for welfare schemes. Implementing a gig worker social security fund is in progress. No changes to employment classification.

Asia- Pacific	Singapore is creating a new framework where gig platform workers will contribute to national pension and get insurance, without altering contractor status. In Australia, it is proposing an “employee-like” status, enabling to set minimum standards for gig workers and allowing collective negotiations. The Philippines is passing a Freelancers Protection Act and China uses administrative guidance to push platforms to improve pay and conditions.
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Theories of Gig Economy

Foucault’s theory of panopticism is a foundational concept in surveillance studies, drawing from Jeremy Bentham’s 18th-century architectural design of the panopticon. Foucault revitalized and extended this model in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), emphasizing how the *threat* of constant observation leads individuals to internalize control mechanisms, resulting in self-surveillance and disciplined behavior. Scholars have since applied this view to modern digital surveillance, arguing that data monitoring functions as a digital panopticon (Lyon, 2006; Zuboff, 2019).

Labor Process Theory (LPT), appearing in the mid-20th century, questions how capitalist systems structure labor to maximize control and efficiency. Harry Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974) catalyzed this framework by critiquing Taylorism and its de-skilling of labor through mechanization. LPT views work organization not as a neutral technical process but as a contested space where capital seeks to dominate labor through surveillance, standardization, and technological control (Thompson, 1990). The theory resonates with Foucault’s ideas, especially regarding the normalization of surveillance and self-regulation in workplace practices. Contemporary expansions of LPT explore how digital technologies—like algorithmic management—intensify worker monitoring and shape emotional and cognitive labor (Moore, 2018).

Technological Mediation Theory (TMT), advanced by Peter-Paul Verbeek (2005), examines the role of technology in mediating human perception, action, and social experience. Unlike deterministic or instrumental views, TMT asserts that technologies actively shape moral and political life by guiding behaviors and framing the way individuals relate to themselves and others (Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2011). Integrating TMT with LPT and panopticism offers a robust framework for understanding contemporary control in digital capitalism.

Research Methodology

Theoretical Framework

Furthermore, to continue exploring, the authors selected three theoretical frameworks: Foucault’s Theory of Surveillance, Labour Process Theory (LPT), and Technological Mediation Theory. These theories were selected due to their practicality and relevance to the research problem theme, shown in Table 2. Foucault’s Theory of Surveillance explores how algorithmic monitoring positions as a disciplinary mechanism. Moreover, Labour Process Theory delivers an economic critique emphasizing how gig platforms use AI technologies to control and de-skill workers. Finally, Technological Mediation Theory augments this research by exploring how AI-mediated communication transforms the interaction between platforms and workers. Together, these frameworks show how AI-driven technologies change the dynamics of modern slavery in the gig economy. Table 2 summarizes all effects.

Table 2. Comparative Table of Theoretical Frameworks (Developed by the Authors)

Framework	Key Concepts	Relevance	Application
Foucault’s Theory of	- Panopticism - Discipline and power	Explains how AI platforms use surveillance to impose	Analyze how workers internalize control due to algorithmic surveillance

Surveillance (Panopticism)	- Surveillance as control	self-discipline among gig workers.	
Labour Process Theory (LPT)	- Labor commodification - Managerial control - Deskilling - Alienation	Reveals how AI and platform-based communication tools serve as mechanisms for labor control without formal employment structures.	Review how gig work replaces human supervision with algorithmic control, decline labor protections and bargaining power.
Technological Mediation Theory	- Human-technology relations - Mediation of communication - Intentionality and perception	Useful for examining how AI tools mediate communication and decision-making between platforms and workers, affecting their autonomy and sense of identity.	Analyze how chatbots, auto-generated feedback, and algorithmic tasks shape gig workers' experience, motivation, and emotional responses

Research Methods

The authors used a qualitative research approach to explore the impact of AI-driven communication technologies and automated surveillance tools on modern slavery within the gig economy. Semi-structured interviews permitted gathering detailed understandings of the experiences, perceptions, and perspectives of gig/freelance workers and managers.

The authors interviewed 28 respondents, including 22 gig and freelance workers across different industries and six managers who currently or previously hired gig and freelance workers in platform-based or remote settings. The demographics are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Profile of Gig/Freelance workers vs managers (Developed by the Authors)

Category	Gig/Freelance Workers (<i>n</i> = 22)	Managers (<i>n</i> = 6)
Industry	IT, Marketing, Design, Transport, Education	IT, Marketing, Transport
Experience	<1 year (3), 1-3 years (7), 4-6 years (8), >6 years (4)	1-3 years (1), 4-6 years (2), >6 years (3)
Region	North America (8), Europe (6), Asia (5), Latin America (3)	North America (3), Europe (2), Asia (1)
Gender	Male (12), Female (9), non-binary (1)	Male (4), Female (2)
Age	18-25 (4), 26-35 (10), 36-45 (6), >45 (2)	26-35 (1), 36-45 (3), >45 (2)

Furthermore, respondents were selected using purposive sampling. This allowed the authors to reach respondents from multiple industries, geographical regions, age groups, and experience levels to gather diverse viewpoints that impact autonomy, earnings, and worker rights in the modern slavery concept within the gig economy.

The data collection started with semi-structured interviews. Based on the literature, the authors created 15 questions for two groups, highlighted in Table 4. The questions were designed to explore autonomy, algorithmic pay systems, communication, privacy, Surveillance, and more. Interviews were conducted using Zoom software. All authors participated in the process, which lasted approximately 35-40 minutes. Also, all participants heard informed consent as it was read to them before the interview, and they were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

Table 4. Interview Questions (Developed by the Authors)

No.	Question for Gig/Freelance Workers	Questions for Managers Employing Gig Workers
1	Describe your experience with gig/freelance work.	Describe your experience managing gig/freelance employees.

2	What platforms or tools do you primarily use?	Which platforms or tools do you use to manage gig workers?
3	How has AI-driven communication influenced your work environment?	How do AI-driven communication tools influence worker management?
4	What automated surveillance tools have you encountered at work?	What automated surveillance systems do you employ and why?
5	Do you feel these technologies impact your autonomy? How?	How do surveillance tools impact worker autonomy?
6	Can you share instances where digital communication led to exploitation or unfair treatment?	Have you observed instances of exploitation linked to AI-driven tools?
7	How do these technologies affect your earnings?	In what ways have automated technologies affected workers' earnings?
8	Do you think these tools affect your rights as a worker? How?	Do you believe AI tools impact the rights of gig workers? How?
9	Describe any resistance strategies you have used against unfair practices.	What strategies do gig workers use to resist perceived exploitation?
10	Are you aware of any regulatory measures protecting your rights against digital exploitation?	Are there regulatory measures you consider when managing gig workers?
11	How would you improve digital communication practices in your job?	How might digital communication be improved to mitigate exploitation?
12	How transparent are gig platforms about data use?	What transparency issues arise from using these platforms?
13	Have you received training or support regarding your digital rights?	Do you offer training or support related to digital rights?
14	How would you describe your overall job satisfaction?	What feedback have you received about gig worker satisfaction?
15	What role do you think digital communication plays in exploitation or its resistance?	How significant is digital communication in exploitation practices?

Furthermore, Zoom's recording function was used to record audio and video. Audio files were transcribed using Otter.ai, with manual verification for accuracy and clarity. Lastly, all data was securely stored on an encrypted drive. Next, data analysis followed a thematic coding approach and was conducted using NVivo Software. Phase 1 was Familiarization. Transcripts were reviewed multiple times to gain an initial understanding of the data. Phase 2 was Initial Coding. Transcripts were coded line-by-line using NVivo. The codes were deductive (informed by theoretical frameworks such as Foucault's Surveillance, Labour Process Theory, and Technological Mediation Theory) and inductive (emerging from the data). Furthermore, Phase 3 was Theme Development. The codes were grouped into themes centered on Autonomy and Control, algorithm-wage concerns, Surveillance, and Communication. The last Phase was Pattern Recognition. A cross-case analysis was conducted to compare patterns between workers and managers. NVivo query processes and matrix coding were used to identify narratives. Using multiple data sources and theoretical lenses, the authors applied triangulation to ensure goodness and trustworthiness. Interviewees reviewed their transcripts for accuracy.

Research Findings

Interview Results

The interviews with twenty-two gig and freelance workers and six managers were conducted between September 12th, 2024, and February 2nd, 2025.

Table 3 showed the profile of the interviewees. The gig/freelance workers were primarily from IT, Marketing, Design, Transport, Education, and Creative Arts. Also, six managers were from the IT, Marketing, and Transport sectors. Moreover, gig workers' experience varied from less than a year to over six years, mainly between 1-6 years, while managers mostly had extensive experience, more than four years. Furthermore, respondents represented North America, Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Gig workers mainly represented male respondents. In contrast, managers were comprised of four males and two females. Lastly, age wise, gig workers mainly were between 26-35 years old, while managers were primarily 36 plus. Furthermore, the authors designed 15 questions for semi-structured interview tailored to explore the main research problem. Table 4 showed the breakdown of questions into two categories.

Besides, the authors conducted the thematic coding. The three significant themes, autonomy, earnings, and rights were identified that are influenced by AI-driven communication technologies and automated surveillance instruments.

The interviews allowed the authors to compare gig/freelance versus manager views. Regarding autonomy, gig/freelance workers voiced increased loss of control. They expressed anxiety about continuous monitoring by time-tracking software. Moreover, they revealed that flexibility is an illusion in gig/freelance work. For instance, scheduling and tracking software conflicts with what the gig economy should be. Furthermore, they expressed a lack of personal agency. Respondents noted lessened control in managing tasks due to automated platforms dictating workflows. In contrast, managers underlined reduced oversight burden. They acknowledged that AI in surveillance technologies assists with negligence at workplace that leads to accountability, and productivity.

Furthermore, gig/freelance workers noted concerns about how wages and earnings are calculated algorithmically. They felt that AI-based algorithms periodically favored competitive pricing at their expense, impacting their financial stability. In contrast, managers recognized automated adjustments to wages by AI that minimize cost and maximize profits. Lastly, regarding rights and protection, gig/freelance workers revealed major concerns about personal data privacy and unacceptable monitoring of off-hour activities. Besides, they noted that there are no mechanisms to challenge AI decisions as algorithms decide on workplace penalties based on their KPIs. On the other hand, managers stated that AI technologies protect businesses legally and ethically. They believed that AI tools enforce standards fairly.

Furthermore, to summarize there is an apparent disconnect between gig/freelance workers' problems with autonomy, fair compensation, and privacy and managers' focus on productivity and risk management. Besides, managers misinterpret how AI-driven tools negatively affect gig/freelance workers' mental health and job satisfaction. The authors summarized the professional stories shared by several respondents in Table 5. Table 5 highlights the types of incidents and shows their significance.

Table 5. Stories of Exploitation or Resistance (Developed by the Authors)

Incident	Narrative	Significance
Exploitation	A delivery gig worker expressed continuously adjusting his route to satisfy the AI-driven app's unpredictable algorithmic scoring.	Emphasizes earnings exploitation through unclear algorithmic mechanisms.

	which resulted in extended hours without adequate compensation.	
Resistance	A freelancer successfully arranged transparent time tracking conditions, limiting surveillance outside contracted hours and impacting managerial transparency practices.	Provides evidence of successful resistance and improved transparency.
Exploitation	A freelance writer shared being penalized financially due to automated tracking software that incorrectly analyzed non-activity time as inactivity despite ongoing off-screen tasks.	Demonstrates significant autonomy loss due to inadequate surveillance.
Resistance	Gig workers collectively negotiated lowered invasive digital surveillance from a gig-platform employer, achieving more explicit privacy boundaries.	Illustrates the positive potential of collective action against exploitative practices.

Furthermore, Table 6 summarizes the major statements from interviewees from both groups. These quotes offer additional insights to the research problem.

Table 6. Interviewee Statements (Developed by the Authors)

Theme	Gig/Freelance	Managers
Autonomy	"The AI system determines when I get work, how much, and even if I can contest a bad review. It is like I have a boss, but an invisible one that never explains itself."	"AI tools help us keep efficient and ensure tasks are assigned fairly. It is not about control; it is about optimization."
Earnings	"I used to make a regular income, but ever since they introduced the algorithm-based pay adjustments, my earnings have changed without explanation."	"The dynamic pricing model provides cost-effectiveness for the company while rewarding the most efficient workers."
Surveillance	"I regularly feel watched. If I take a short break, the system marks me inactive, and I risk losing assignments."	"Real-time monitoring assists us in ensuring compliance and performance. It is necessary to keep operations smooth."
Workload and Stress	"The intimidation to accept every task, stay active, and meet AI-driven performance metrics is exhausting. There is no room for negotiation"	"We rely on automated analytics to ensure workers meet their expected performance levels. It is about productivity, not pressure."
AI communication	"When something goes wrong, I do not talk to a human. I get automated responses that do not make sense"	"AI customer support decreases the management burden and ensures quick responses to worker inquiries."
Rights and Protections	"No real benefits or protections for us. If the AI chooses to deactivate my account, I lose my job instantly, with no way to appeal."	"Gig workers understand the risks when they sign up. The platform is meant for flexibility, not long-term employment security."
Future Work	"If AI continues to control everything without oversight, gig work will become nothing but digital slavery."	"The future is automation driven. Workers must adapt, and we are providing them with tools to succeed."

The gig economy is complex because it offers workers flexibility in scheduling, location, and project types. From available secondary data shows that the global gig economy is significant. Moreover, it is estimated to be worth \$455 billion by 2025, with a 17.4% annual growth rate and a workforce of 1.1 billion (Upwork, 2025; Statista, 2025). Moreover, individuals aged 17-32 are more likely to work within the gig economy. Further, the global gig economy yields \$204 billion in gross volume. Notably, 76% of gig/freelance workers are satisfied with their job

choices, and 82% reveal happiness working on their own. However, autonomy and flexibility are questioned by automated surveillance that cause potential workplace exploitation. Besides, it is noteworthy to accept that managing short-term contracts, tutoring, writing algorithms, ridesharing, food delivery services, etc. are examples of gig economy.

Furthermore, the rise of business models based on innovative platforms has generated opportunities for new work processes (Scuotto et al., 2022). Gig economy platforms have pioneered new business models that capitalize on connecting providers and customers digitally. Moreover, these models vary by the type of service offered but share common principles. Table 7 highlights these models.

Table 7. Platform Business Models, Monetization and Scaling (Developed by the Authors)

Platform Type	Description	Monetization & Scale
On-Demand Service Platforms	- These platforms provide real-time services at the push of a button, usually involving a physical task in the real world. Examples include ride-hailing, food delivery, and more. - Customers request a service via app, and a nearby gig worker fulfils it.	- Monetize by taking a commission per transaction - These models scale by adding more contractors in each locale; highly reliant on network density and use algorithms. - Operational scalability in mapping, routing technology, and customer support.
Online Freelance Marketplaces	- Platforms that connect clients with freelancers for remote, project-based work. Examples: Upwork, Freelancer.com, more. - Clients post jobs or browse freelancer profiles; freelancers bid or offer services.	- Monetized via commission on the payment - Some have tiered pricing and offer paid promos for freelancers or subscriptions. - Key to scalability is a robust system for trust so that even without face-to-face interaction, projects can be successfully completed at scale.
Microtask & Crowdsourcing Platforms	- Platforms that break down work into tiny tasks or leverage crowds for large-scale data work. - Typical tasks include data labeling for AI, image tagging, more. - Often paying cents to a few dollars per task.	- Revenue comes from charging clients per task or project. While margins per task are small, these platforms operate at high volume. - Automation is crucial- tasks are distributed and collected automatically.
Platform Cooperatives & Niche Models	- An emerging alternative model is the platform cooperative or worker-owned gig platform. - These aim to give workers a stake and share of profits, altering the monetization to be more worker friendly.	- Monetization for cooperatives may still be via commissions, but profits are redistributed to worker-owners rather than external shareholders. - These models can address some worker concerns but scaling them is challenging in competition with venture-funded platforms.

The results from the interviews were integrated within key theoretical frameworks. For instance, Foucault allows one to explore power and surveillance, while LPT offers viewpoints on labor exploitation and control, and Technological Mediation shows how AI impacts Communication and decision-making.

First, Foucault's vision of Panopticism describes surveillance as a disciplinary instrument that allows self-control but uses invisible monitoring. This invisible monitoring is a significant part of the gig economy, mostly not seen by gig/freelance workers. The workforce around all industries has begun to recognize the benefits of joining the gig economy, but some concerns and issues still exist. Respondents shared a wide range of information that revealed how AI-driven surveillance strengthens a panoptic mechanism. Notably, gig/freelance workers

constantly mentioned vulnerability in terms of self-regulation, anxiety, and fear, which are key indicators studied by Foucault. For instance, gig/freelance workers voiced continued anxiety about performance scores and algorithm-driven penalties. Respondent who is a freelance author remarked, *"It feels like someone is always watching, even if nobody really is and I'm constantly worried about doing things exactly right to avoid algorithmic penalties or reduced ratings."* This is an excellent example of panoptic self-surveillance, where individuals change their behavior to maintain economic stability. Moreover, managers remark that AI surveillance is a positive thing that helps them be transparent and efficient and manage supervising issues. A manager from a delivery app enterprise noted, *"With AI surveillance, workers manage themselves better. They understand they are being monitored and naturally become more efficient."* What is important is that this concept applies well to panoptic intention, as this uses automated surveillance as a powerful disciplinary strategy. This eventually reduces labor management costs and demonstrates modern digital exploitation. Yet again, this dynamic aligns with Foucault's concept of Panopticism.

Second, the labor process theory shows management's control over labor by maximizing productivity and profits, which impacts gig/freelance workers and is considered exploitation. The respondents revealed that AI-driven technologies intensified control of the gig labor process. Moreover, this consequently impacts the wages and compensation of gig/freelance workers. Besides, unclear policies and structures control compensations. For instance, a graphic designer emphasized, *"I never know exactly how much I will earn. The digital platform continuously modifies payments based on criteria I do not understand. I'm forced to accept lower rates because rejecting them means fewer future offers."* This confirms LPT's philosophy, where management controls labor through technology-enabled decisions. This builds dissatisfaction, exploitation, and financial vulnerability.

On the contrary, managers accept the control by algorithms as an economic solution. They believe this makes the labor market more competitive and reduces labor costs. One digital platform manager stated, *"The algorithms ensure competitive pricing; profitability isn't feasible without this. Workers understand the market sets wages, and technology reflects that."* Finally, many managers consciously or unconsciously hide the technological Mediation of labor processes, as it reduces earnings. This is a massive indicator of exploitation and economic logic that LPT critiques. Thus, enforcing control of labor procedures and systematically repressing worker bargaining power.

Third, technological mediation theory believes technologies moderate human relationships, interactions, and communication practices. However, AI-driven communication tools impact the interaction between managers and gig workers, changing power dynamics and autonomy. This reveals a dehumanization concept of the gig economy. A freelance content creator remarked, *"Communication now happens through automated messaging or preset AI responses. It feels impossible to negotiate or have any real dialogue with clients or managers."* This highlights the argument that TMT has, which states that instead of interaction, it increases the gap between workers and management, strengthening isolation or powerlessness. Notably, managers highlighted how AI improves communication, however, they recognized depersonalization. For instance, a digital marketing agency manager stated, *"AI helps us communicate quickly and uniformly, but we've noticed decreased worker engagement. Workers rarely speak up or negotiate."* Consequently, research shows that AI-driven communication tools transform dialogue and limit meaningful exchanges, strengthening exploitative labor conditions.

Synthesizing these theories with interviews offers a rich picture. This is shown in Figure 1 below. This shows that Technological Control (Panopticism) strengthens adopted discipline

among gig/freelance workers through persistent AI surveillance, ultimately enabling economic exploitation (LPT). Furthermore, economic Exploitation (LPT) is stimulated by unclear algorithms and determine wage and is aligned with managerial economic interests. Besides, moderated Digital Communication (TMT) dismisses opportunities for gig/freelance workers to resist exploitative conditions, further isolating workers and easing collective resistance through depersonalized digital communication.

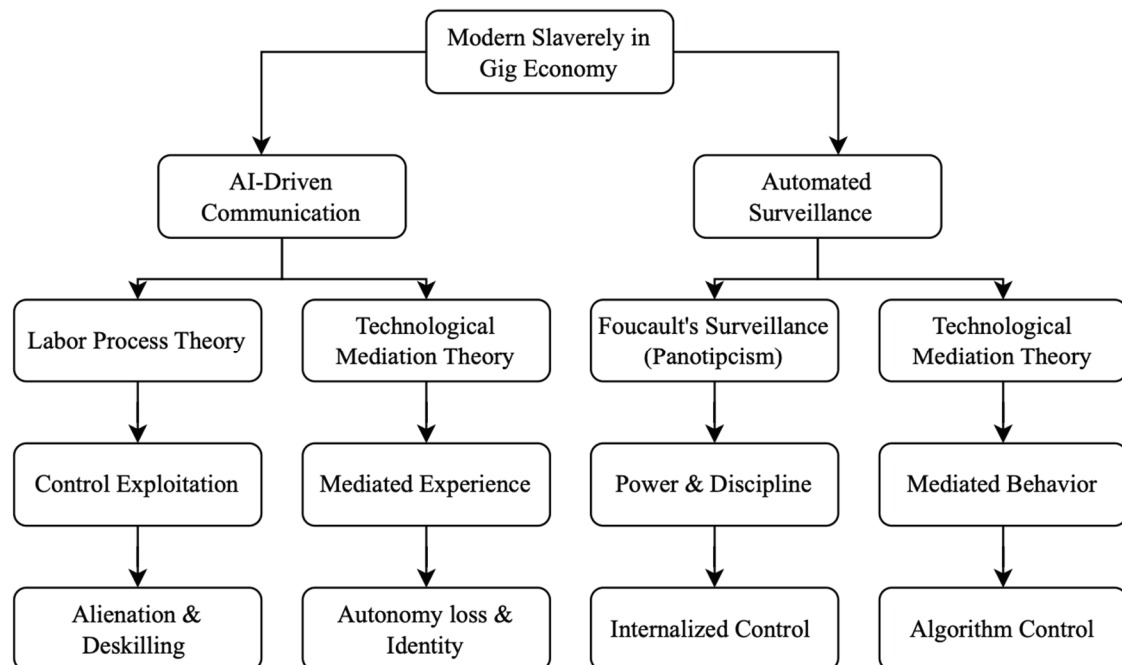


Figure 1: Modern Slavery in Gig Economy through Theories

Conclusion

The gig economy gathers individuals for short-term work appointments. Some can get jobs on various digital freelance platforms, while others could be employed by a business that hires freelance workers for specific jobs. Furthermore, the main reason for gig work is perceived flexibility and remote work. Consequently, gig/freelance workers choose their work hours and completion dates.

The literature review shows that the gig economy has grown and developed significantly in recent years and is predicted to grow at a compound annual rate of 17%. However, gig/freelance workers face financial instability due to irregular income and the need to manage their taxes, expenses, etc.

The interview results revealed and provided significant insights into exploring the Exploitation of Gig and Freelance Workers through AI-driven communication Strategies and Automated Surveillance. First, gig/freelance workers heavily rely on major freelance platforms like Upwork, Fiverr, and Uber. Nevertheless, they communicated significant misery regarding automated surveillance tools. Besides, they expressed having limited autonomy and high perceived exploitation. Conversely, managers supported surveillance tools and expressed that they enhance task efficiency and accountability.

Further, respondents suggested that automated communication and unclear algorithms negatively affect earnings and job satisfaction. However, managers stress the operational efficiencies to achieve programmed tasks. Nevertheless, transparency was highlighted as a critical issue. Gig workers argued that platforms are generally unclear regarding data use,

aggravating feelings of mistrust and vulnerability. On the contrary, managers recognized these transparency issues, though they frequently cited practical limitations in achieving complete openness.

The interview respondents endorsed improved transparency and clear regulatory frameworks to mitigate exploitation and protect gig/freelance worker rights. Both groups acknowledged the significance of aggressive education and training regarding digital rights and digital platform policies. Improved understanding and more precise communication strategies are crucial to fostering balance in the gig economy.

Three selected theories, Foucault's Theory of Surveillance (Panopticism), Labour Process Theory (LPT), and Technological Mediation Theory (TMT)g, were massive in understanding the connection between technological control, economic exploitation, and moderated communication.

Based on the results, the authors offer several recommendations. First, improve transparency by requiring clear disclosures on AI decision-making criteria and automated surveillance data usage. Second, guidelines for AI implementation should be created to protect autonomy and fair earnings. Next, establish regulatory frameworks that allow gig/freelance workers to voice their concerns and provide feedback.

These results add rigor to already existing research on modern slavery in the gig economy, studying issues with autonomy, surveillance, and worker rights. This research is practical for today's managers to really understand the gig economy and its value. Hence, taking care of and supporting existing and new gig/freelance work is mandatory, as it is foreseen as the future of many economies.

This research is based interview results and might create space for bias and generalizability. Hence, the authors recommend future research through quantitative study to explore correlations and regressions based on demographic data of gig economy participants.

Note

This article has been cleaned up on minor grammatical issues and sentence structure using the Grammarly pro version.

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