

Exploring Employee Identity Formation on Gig Economy Platforms: A Narrative Inquiry

Christine Jimenez Concepcion

School of Business and Accountancy Holy Cross Colleges, Inc.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51583/IJLTEMAS.2026.150900049>

Received: 14 September 2026; Accepted: 19 September 2026; Published: 07 October 2026

ABSTRACT

This narrative inquiry examines how gig workers construct and sustain professional identities while working through digital labor platforms. Twenty workers completed semi-structured online interviews lasting 45 to 60 minutes. From this pool, eight information-rich narratives were selected for focused analysis through purposive maximum-variation sampling across work types. Thematic analysis identified three connected processes: negotiating professional identity through agency and opportunity, negotiating identity under external pressure, and adapting through resilience and peer support. Participants described themselves as independent professionals and small-business operators, yet their self-understanding remained vulnerable to algorithmic visibility, customer ratings, income instability, family expectations, and occupational stigma. Flexibility supported autonomy and skill development, but it also shifted risk and responsibility to workers. The findings show that gig-worker identity is neither wholly self-created nor determined by platforms. It develops through repeated negotiation among personal agency, platform governance, and social context. The study offers implications for fairer rating and review procedures, accessible skills development, worker support networks, and labor protections that preserve flexibility. Because the analysis centers on eight focal narratives and does not permit systematic regional comparison, the findings are analytically transferable to similar platform-work settings rather than statistically generalizable.

Keywords: gig economy; platform work; professional identity; narrative inquiry; algorithmic

INTRODUCTION

Digital labor platforms connect clients with workers who perform location-based services, such as transport and delivery, or online services, such as writing, design, and administrative support. Unlike conventional employment, platform work usually offers no stable organizational membership through which workers can develop a title, career path, or shared occupational culture. Workers must therefore explain what they do, demonstrate competence, and maintain a credible professional self while moving among short assignments and clients.

This arrangement creates a persistent tension. Platforms can expand access to work and give workers discretion over when, where, and how much they work. The same platforms may also allocate tasks, rank workers, set visibility rules, and discipline performance through ratings and automated systems. Research accordingly describes platform work as a combination of autonomy and algorithmic control rather than as unrestricted independence (Wood et al., 2019; Vallas & Schor, 2020). That tension matters for identity because workers interpret platform feedback as evidence of competence, legitimacy, and belonging.

Professional identity refers here to the meanings workers attach to themselves in relation to their work. It is produced through stories about skills, responsibility, status, relationships, and future direction. Narrative inquiry is appropriate because these meanings unfold over time and are expressed through how workers connect experiences of opportunity, uncertainty, recognition, and coping (Bruner, 1991; Clandinin, 2013). The present study therefore asks how gig workers interpret everyday platform interactions and how emotional and psychological experiences shape their professional identities.

The study contributes an integrated account of identity formation that links worker agency with platform conditions and social pressures. Its central argument is that gig-worker identity remains negotiated. Workers actively present themselves as skilled professionals or entrepreneurs, but ratings, client reactions, income needs, family responsibilities, and community attitudes can strengthen or unsettle that identity. Adaptation and peer support help workers maintain continuity when work remains unpredictable.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Autonomy and Algorithmic Control

Platform work is often promoted through flexibility, yet flexibility has different meanings depending on a worker's bargaining power and economic dependence. Workers may choose their schedules while having little influence over prices, task allocation, account suspension, or how ratings affect future access to work. The International Labour Organization (2021) identifies this uneven distribution of control as a defining concern across online and location-based platforms.

Wood et al. (2019) similarly show that autonomy over working time can coexist with extensive algorithmic monitoring and competitive pressure.

These findings challenge accounts that treat workers as either autonomous entrepreneurs or controlled laborers. Both positions can be present in the same working relationship. A favorable rating may confirm competence and strengthen an entrepreneurial self-image; a sudden decline in visibility may instead make the worker feel replaceable. Platform mechanisms therefore operate as identity cues as well as managerial tools.

Identity Work and Occupational Belonging

Workers outside conventional organizations must create forms of stability that employers previously supplied. Independent workers use routines, places, professional connections, and personal narratives to sustain a coherent sense of self (Petriglieri et al., 2019). In platform settings, profiles, portfolios, client reviews, and repeat transactions become resources for this identity work. They allow workers to present a recognizable professional story even when individual tasks are brief.

The literature nevertheless disagrees on whether platform participation produces durable occupational belonging. One view emphasizes entrepreneurship, portfolio careers, and direct access to clients. A contrasting view emphasizes precarity, weak collective representation, and the transfer of market risk to individuals (Ashford et al., 2018; Vallas & Schor, 2020). Rather than assuming one outcome, the present study examines how workers move between these positions in their own accounts.

Psychological Strain and Resilience

Income volatility, social isolation, and continuous evaluation may weaken confidence and well-being. At the same time, schedule control, skill development, and successful client relationships may produce pride and a stronger sense of agency. The relevant issue is not whether gig work is uniformly beneficial or harmful, but which experiences become central to a worker's self-understanding and what resources allow that worker to cope.

Resilience in this study does not mean that workers alone should absorb structural risk. It refers to the practical and relational strategies participants used to maintain professional continuity, including problem solving, flexible scheduling, and contact with peers. This distinction prevents coping from being treated as a substitute for fair platform procedures or social protection.

Social and Local Context

Platform work is embedded in local labor markets and cultural expectations. In communities where secure

salaried work is the main standard of occupational success, gig work may be interpreted as temporary or inferior. Where formal employment is scarce, platform work may instead represent immediate income, mobility, or an entry point into self-employment obligations can intensify both meanings: earning through gigs may affirm responsibility while also pressuring workers to accept excessive workloads.

Evidence from the Philippines illustrates why location matters. A study of GrabFood delivery workers documented how platform work expanded during the pandemic while exposing workers to concerns involving health, income sustainability, and unequal conditions (Yamano et al., 2023). This example cannot substitute for participant-level regional data in the present study, but it demonstrates how local infrastructure, labor-market alternatives, and household needs can shape the meaning of flexibility. The current interview records did not contain sufficiently consistent location data to compare regions; regional variation is therefore treated as an interpretive context and a priority for future research rather than as an empirical finding.

Research Gap

Existing research establishes the coexistence of flexibility and control, but fewer studies show how workers weave these contradictory conditions into a continuing professional identity. Economic measures can indicate income or hours, yet they do not explain how a worker comes to identify as an entrepreneur, a skilled professional, a provider, or a precarious laborer. This study addresses that gap through focused analysis of workers' narratives and the meanings attached to everyday platform experiences.

Research Objectives and Questions

The core purpose of the current narrative inquiry lies in examining and analyzing the complex process of the identity construction of employees who work on online market platforms. The following research objectives guide this study in order to attain the core purpose of the research.

- To examine how gig workers, create their professional identity on online market platforms considering the variables of personal experience, platform attributes, and culture.
- To examine and understand the development, emotional, and psychological variables of gig workers such as precariousness, resilience, and skills acquisition that contribute to their self-perception and social conformity.
- To develop information regarding the opportunities and challenges on these online platforms that can be used to design better policies and improve the platforms for gig workers

Central Question

What is the experience of gig workers in forming their employee identities within gig economy platforms?

Sub-Questions

How do gig workers experience and interpret their day-to-day interactions with gig economy platforms in relation to their sense of identity?

What meanings do the psychological and emotional aspects of gig work have as they shape their employee identities?

Method Research Design

The study used narrative inquiry to examine how participants organized work experiences into accounts of competence, autonomy, pressure, and adaptation. Narrative inquiry attends to both events and the meanings people assign to them over time (Clandinin, 2013). The study combined this orientation with thematic

analysis to identify recurring patterns across individual accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participants and Sampling

Twenty gig workers took part in the interview stage. Eligibility required participants to be at least 18 years old, to have at least six months of gig-work experience, and to be willing and able to discuss their work experiences. The recruitment pool included workers from several forms of platform labor, including ride-sharing, delivery, freelance writing, and other online services.

Eight participants were selected from the interview pool for the focused narrative analysis reported in this article. Selection followed purposive maximum-variation principles: the analysis prioritized information-rich accounts and variation in occupational setting, platform interaction, and experiences of opportunity and pressure. The eight cases were sufficient for the study's bounded interpretive purpose because the analysis sought depth and recurring meaning across contrasting narratives, not population representation. The remaining 12 interviews were not included in the focal thematic table. This distinction between the full interview pool and the analytic subset resolves the participant-count discrepancy in the earlier manuscript.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and were conducted online through videoconferencing platforms such as Zoom or Skype. The format allowed participation across different schedules and locations. Open questions invited participants to describe how they entered gig work, how they understood their occupational role, how platform systems and client feedback affected them, and how they responded to uncertainty. Follow-up questions clarified turning points, emotions, and changes in self-perception. Participants provided informed consent before taking part.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were read repeatedly to establish familiarity with each narrative. Initial codes marked passages related to self-perception, skills, work ethic, platform interaction, opportunity, economic pressure, family expectations, stigma, client feedback, flexibility, problem solving, and peer support. Codes were compared across cases and grouped into candidate themes. The themes were then reviewed against the coded passages and the overall narratives, refined for internal coherence and clear distinction, and named to reflect the process of identity negotiation. The analysis remained iterative: interpretations were revised when a quotation fit more convincingly within another theme. This procedure led to three themes and corrected the earlier table, which had assigned the economic-pressure and stigma accounts to the agency theme.

FINDINGS

The eight focal narratives show professional identity as an ongoing negotiation rather than a fixed label. Workers drew confidence from skills, work ethic, flexibility, and successful platform participation. Their identities were also tested by algorithmic visibility, income needs, family expectations, stigma, and client reactions. Adaptation and peer contact helped preserve continuity across these pressures.

Participant	Key codes	Illustrative response	Theme
1	Entrepreneurial mindset; self-perception	"I see myself as running my own small business. Even though the platform gives me tasks, I try to treat it like managing a project, building my skills along the way."	Agency and opportunity

2	Platform interaction; work opportunities	“Sometimes the algorithm favors others, so I feel invisible. But when I get good ratings, it motivates me to keep improving.”	Agency and opportunity
3	Personal skills; work ethic	“I rely on my skills and attention to detail to stand out. It’s hard, but it makes me proud of what I do.”	Agency and opportunity
4	Economic conditions; family expectations	“My family depends on me to make ends meet, so I push myself to accept more gigs even when I feel exhausted.”	External pressure
5	Social stigma; client feedback	“Some people don’t see gig work as real work. Negative comments from clients make me question if I’m doing enough.”	External pressure
6	Flexibility; problem solving	“I like that I can choose my hours, but sometimes I have to be creative to make enough income. It’s like I’m constantly figuring out solutions.”	Adaptation and resilience
7	Peer relationships; emotional support	“Talking to other gig workers online helps me cope with stress and reminds me I’m not alone in this struggle.”	Adaptation and resilience
8	Entrepreneurial mindset; flexibility; work ethic	“I combine creativity and discipline. I treat each gig like an opportunity to learn and grow, even if it’s unpredictable.”	Agency and opportunity

Table 1. Codes, Illustrative Responses, and Emerging Themes

Theme 1 Negotiating Professional Identity through Agency and Opportunity

Participants 1, 3, and 8 used the language of enterprise, discipline, and learning to define themselves. Participant 1 treated each task as a project within a small business, while Participant 3 linked professional pride to skill and attention to detail. Participant 8 combined creativity with discipline and viewed unpredictable assignments as opportunities to develop. These accounts show active identity work: participants converted short-term tasks into evidence of capability and progress. Platform recognition strengthened this process but did not fully control it. Participant 2 described feeling invisible when the algorithm appeared to favor others, yet positive ratings renewed motivation. The same platform mechanism could therefore affirm or unsettle professional identity. Agency was real, but it operated within rules that workers could observe only through outcomes such as visibility, task access, and ratings.

Theme 2 Negotiating Professional Identity under External Pressure

Economic responsibility and social evaluation narrowed the space for self-directed identity. Participant 4 accepted additional gigs because family members depended on the income, even when the workload caused exhaustion. The account frames gig work as responsible provision, but it also shows how financial need can turn nominal flexibility into pressure to remain continuously available.

Participant 5 described a different source of pressure. The belief that gig work was not “real work,” combined with negative client comments, prompted doubt about personal adequacy. Occupational stigma and platform feedback interacted: a critical review carried more weight when the occupation already lacked social recognition. These narratives demonstrate that professional identity is evaluated beyond the worker's private self-concept.

Theme 3 Adaptation and Resilience in Identity Formation

Participants responded to uncertainty by adjusting work practices and seeking connection. Participant 6 valued schedule choice but described constant problem solving to earn enough income. Flexibility functioned as both a benefit and a demand for continuous adaptation. Participant 7 relied on online contact with other gig workers to manage stress and reduce isolation. Peer interaction supplied recognition that the platform itself did not provide.

Resilience connected the first two themes. It helped workers retain an identity based on competence and independence when income instability, client judgment, or stigma threatened that identity. The findings do not imply that individual coping can correct structural problems. Instead, they show why worker communities and fair platform procedures matter to the maintenance of professional self-understanding.



Figure 1. Three-Themed Model of Gig-Worker Identity Formation Note: The arrows indicate reciprocal influence rather than a fixed sequence.

DISCUSSION

The findings support a negotiated account of professional identity. Participants claimed agency by emphasizing enterprise, skill, and work ethic, but platform systems and social judgments continually tested those claims. This pattern is consistent with research showing that platform work combines schedule autonomy with algorithmic control (Wood et al., 2019). The present narratives extend that argument by showing how workers interpret ratings and visibility as judgments about professional worth. The analysis also clarifies the difference between flexibility as discretion and flexibility as transferred responsibility. Participants valued the ability to choose hours or pursue varied tasks. When family needs and unstable income determined those choices, however, flexibility required workers to absorb market uncertainty. This

finding helps reconcile contrasting accounts in the literature: platform work can support entrepreneurial identity while also producing a precarious worker identity. The two are not mutually exclusive.

Peer support emerged as an alternative source of occupational belonging. Without a conventional workplace, participants used online interaction with other workers to normalize stress and preserve confidence. This finding parallels research on independent workers who create relational anchors outside formal organizations (Petriglieri et al., 2019). Platforms that facilitate voluntary worker communities may therefore support identity and well-being, provided those spaces do not become instruments of surveillance.

Local context remains important but under-specified in the present data. Family dependency, stigma, and available labor-market alternatives can change what gig work means, yet the interview records do not support a systematic comparison among cities or regions. The Philippine delivery-work evidence cited earlier offers one relevant contextual example, not a basis for attributing those conditions to all participants. Future research should collect location, platform type, economic dependence, and household responsibility consistently so that contextual differences can be analyzed rather than inferred.

Implications Theoretical Implications

The three-theme model treats professional identity as a process formed through interaction among agency, platform governance, and social context. It adds a platform-mediated layer to social constructionist accounts of identity: customers, ratings, task-allocation systems, and peer networks become audiences through which workers interpret who they are professionally. Resilience links these influences over time by explaining how workers maintain continuity when recognition and income fluctuate.

Practical and Policy Implications

- Platforms should explain how ratings and task allocation affect worker visibility, provide meaningful review and appeal procedures, and prevent isolated client feedback from causing disproportionate harm.
- Skills training, portfolio tools, and mentoring can help workers translate completed gigs into evidence of professional development.
- Worker-led peer communities can reduce isolation and strengthen occupational belonging; participation should remain voluntary and separate from performance monitoring.
- Labor policy should address income insecurity, due process, safety, and access to social protection without assuming that all workers want identical schedules or employment arrangements.

LIMITATIONS AND TRANSFERABILITY

The study has four limitations. First, the focused analysis covers eight narratives from a larger interview pool of 20. This design supports interpretive depth but does not establish prevalence. Second, selection of information-rich cases may favor participants who could articulate identity experiences in detail. Third, the available records do not provide a consistent geographic profile, which prevents comparison across regions or communities. Fourth, the sample combines different forms of gig work; common themes may obscure differences between location-based and online labor.

The findings should therefore be transferred through analytic comparison rather than statistical generalization. They are most relevant to settings in which workers depend on digital platforms, client evaluation, variable task access, and weak organizational membership. Readers and future researchers should assess similarity in platform type, economic dependence, occupation, and local labor conditions before applying the model elsewhere. Larger comparative studies can test whether the three themes recur and how their relative importance changes across groups.

CONCLUSION

Gig workers formed professional identities by interpreting the relationship between what they could control and what the platform and social environment imposed. Skills, work ethic, flexibility, and entrepreneurial thinking supported identities based on competence and independence. Algorithmic visibility, client ratings, income pressure, family expectations, and stigma could undermine those identities. Problem solving and peer support helped participants maintain continuity, but individual resilience did not remove structural risk.

The resulting model presents identity formation as a continuing negotiation among agency and opportunity, external pressure, and adaptation. This account provides a practical basis for platform procedures and labor policies that recognize workers as developing professionals while addressing the uncertainty built into platform-mediated work.

REFERENCES

1. Ashford, S. J., Caza, B. B., & Reid, E. M. (2018). From surviving to thriving in the gig economy: A research agenda for individuals in the new world of work. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 38, 23–41. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2018.11.001>
2. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
3. Bruner, J. (1991). The narrative construction of reality. *Critical Inquiry*, 18(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1086/448619>
4. Clandinin, D. J. (2013). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Routledge.
5. Gandini, A. (2019). Labour process theory and the gig economy. *Human Relations*, 72(6), 1039–1056. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726718790002>
6. International Labour Organization. (2021). *World employment and social outlook 2021: The role of digital labour platforms in transforming the world of work*. <https://www.ilo.org/publications/flagship-reports/role-digital-labour-platforms-transforming-world-work>
7. Petriglieri, G., Ashford, S. J., & Wrzesniewski, A. (2019). Agony and ecstasy in the gig economy: Cultivating holding environments for precarious and personalized work identities. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 64(1), 124–170. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839218759646>
8. Vallas, S., & Schor, J. B. (2020). What do platforms do? Understanding the gig economy. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 46, 273–294. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-121919-054857>
9. Wood, A. J., Graham, M., Lehdonvirta, V., & Hjorth, I. (2019). Good gig, bad gig: Autonomy and algorithmic control in the global gig economy. *Work, Employment and Society*, 33(1), 56–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017018785616>
10. Yamano, T., Taniguchi, K., Akamatsu, N., & Santillan, M. (2023). Gig economy employment during the pandemic: An analysis of GrabFood driver experiences in the Philippines. *Asian Development Bank*. <https://doi.org/10.22617/BRF230265>