

Postgraduate Seminar Series

Research Findings Seminar– Agency in the Algorithmic Cage: An Investigation into Gig Workers’ Service Experiences

- **Date:** 27 April 2026
- **Time:** 11:30-12:30
- **Venue:** SEK108
- **Presenter:** Mr. GAO Xiangyu, PhD Student of MGT

Abstract: Platform work has transformed the nature of work by utilizing algorithms to connect gig workers with customers for on-demand tasks. While platforms promise flexibility, gig work is typically governed by highly precise, depersonalized algorithmic control aimed at maximizing operational efficiency. This makes worker autonomy contingent on compliance, crystallizing a central tension between agency and control. By examining the daily experiences of gig workers, this dissertation addresses a critical management issue: how workers enact agency, sustain meaning, and build identity under conditions of high algorithmic control and fleeting social contact.

In Study 1, drawing on action identification theory, we propose that gig workers dynamically interpret their work through interactions with customers, who serve as both community members and agents of platform control. We argue that service interactions (positive versus negative; human versus algorithm-mediated ratings) can influence workers’ work interpretations toward either a broader view on contributing to the community (self-transcendence striving) or a narrower view on completing tasks to earn income (bottom-line mentality), which in turn predicts citizenship versus risky behaviors. We further argue that these effects vary by tenure and algorithmic management style. A qualitative study establishes the ecological validity of this theoretical framework. An experience sampling study of delivery riders reveals that positive human interactions increase citizenship behavior and reduce risky behavior by fostering self-transcendence striving and diminishing bottom-line mentality, whereas negative human interactions yield opposite effects. The self-transcendence pathway is stronger for low-tenure workers after positive human interactions and stronger for workers under purely algorithmic management after negative human interactions. Positive ratings also promote citizenship behavior through self-transcendence striving. Furthermore, negative ratings increase risky behavior among low-tenure workers but decrease it among high-tenure workers by shaping bottom-line mentality. Scenario experiments with ride-hailing drivers and delivery riders replicated the core patterns for human interactions.

In Study 2, we explore how gig workers proactively embed themselves in the broader social environment to build a coherent identity and contribute beyond immediate task completion. Drawing on self-expansion theory, we conceptualize gig workers’ daily proactive service behaviors as self-expanding actions that connect them to wider social environments. These behaviors foster daily perceived self-expansion, which in turn strengthens city identification—a salient work-related identity in on-site gig settings where the city can substitute for a stable organizational context. Consistent with identification-based action, stronger city identification predicts next-day citizenship and safety behaviors. Evidence from an experience-sampling study of delivery riders supports the sequential mediation effect. Notably, platform identification serves as a boundary condition, moderating the relationship between self-expansion and city identification, as well as the serial indirect effect on next-day citizenship behavior. These positive indirect paths remained significant only when platform identification was low, whereas high platform identification attenuated the relationships to non-significance.

Overall, this dissertation reveals how gig workers exercise agency within a system characterized by strict control and social isolation. These findings offer actionable implications for platforms, policymakers, and communities striving to build a more sustainable and humane on-demand economy.

All are welcome

Contact:

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