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Surviving the Gig Economy in the Global South: How Cape Town Domestic Workers Cope

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Abstract. The gig economy continues to disrupt different traditional markets such as transport, accommodation, and domestic work in the global South. The gig economy offers flexibility, autonomy and higher earning potential for gig workers. However, it is not without its challenges such as precarious working arrangements, occupational hazards and employment uncertainty. This study explores key survival strategies employed by domestic workers offering their services through one of South Africa's prominent gig platforms that specializes in domestic work. The study used semi-structured interviews with questions based on an adapted conceptual framework based on Folkman's cognitive theory of stress and coping. Three main categories of challenges face domestic workers in the gig economy: application induced technology challenges such as platform usability; occupation-specific challenges such as exposure to dangerous and unhealthy environments; and gig work induced service perceptions such as unrealistic expectations. These challenges result in negative consequences such as personal trauma, exhaustion and financial loss. Workers report feeling exploited and unsure about their relationship with the platform. The workers adopt various problem-focused, emotion-focused, support-seeking, and meaning-making survival strategies that include avoiding bookings by previously problematic customers, negotiating alternative terms with customers outside of the app, enduring traumatic experiences and complying with unreasonable demands. Platforms should consider financial and relationship transparency in their relationship with gig workers as well as affording gig workers more choice and flexibility regarding client bookings.

Keywords: Gig economy; gig worker challenges; domestic workers; coping mechanisms; survival strategies; South African labour.

1 Introduction

Digital platforms mediate between service providers and consumers on an on-demand basis; a trend that continues to date and is sometimes referred to as uberization [1]. Examples of such platforms range from global giants such as Airbnb and Uber, from

which the term uberization is derived; to local South African platforms such as Freelance Cape Town or M4Jam. Collectively, these platforms and their eco-systems are referred to as the gig economy [2].

Globally, there are over 67 million domestic workers [3] of which at least 1 million are based in South Africa [4]. With such as sizeable population and as is the case with other traditional service sectors such as transport and accommodation; domestic work has also attracted a number of digital platforms that are on a quest to revolutionize it for the better [3]. Though the exact wording differs per platform, most claim to offer affordable domestic services for households and flexible well compensated economic opportunities for domestic workers [5]. Based on the fact that one of the gig work platforms in South Africa already boasts of over 7 million cleaning hours and has over 11000 signed up domestic workers [6], it can be concluded that a considerable number of South African consumers and domestic workers are convinced by the benefits. However, the sector is also known for substandard employment conditions, limited employment benefits and low occupational prestige [7]. Considered as the last bastion of colonialism, perceptions about domestic worker exploitation are rife in South Africa – one of the most unequal countries on the planet [8]. This research serves to give voice to the workers in light of their continued marginalization and exploitative work arrangements.

The objective of this study was to gather information on challenges modern day Cape Town domestic workers that use gig platforms to secure jobs face, and their coping strategies and processes. To achieve this objective, two main questions were posed: What challenges do Cape Town domestic workers that utilize gig platforms encounter? How do they cope with the challenges they face?

Following the literature review, a discussion of the theoretical framework and an explanation of the research methodology, the paper presents an in depth set of findings focussing on occupational challenges, coping strategies, outcomes and platform recommendations. The paper ends with recommendations for future research.

2 Literature review

This section puts the study into perspective by explaining core concepts underlying this study and providing historical and theoretical contexts under which the study occurred.

2.1 Gig economy

The term gig economy is often used interchangeably with other terms like sharing-economy, crowd-work, on-demand economy, freelance economy, and platform economy [9]. This research adopts Donovan et al [2]'s definition of the gig economy as a collection of internet accessible markets that match service providers to service consumers on a gig or job basis. Services offered on such platforms can range from highly specialized services such as software development to services that do not require specialization such as house cleaning and transportation services. In their view, gig econ-

omy platforms have three distinctive characteristics: they keep a proportion of job-earnings; they control the brand and thus regulate who operates on their platform and they control relationships between service providers and service consumers.

Based on data collected from seven African countries, Rwanda, Tanzania, Kenya, Mozambique, Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa, estimated that only 2% of the population in these countries has earned money from gig platforms [10],. Although one study estimated there were roughly 7000 domestic workers registered on gig platforms in South Africa [11], the CEO of a domestic cleaning gig platform disclosed that there were over 11000 domestic workers registered on the company's platform alone [6].

The emergence of gig economy has disrupted a number of traditional sectors and in the process created income opportunities for multitudes of people across the globe, albeit it too has challenges [12, 13]. Although gig economy has a lot of positives such as job creation and scheduling flexibility, the working conditions fall short of International Labor Organization (ILO) Decent Work Standards [14]. Bajwa et al [15] categorize gig economy challenges into three groups:

- **Platform challenges,** which arise due to design, functional and business model flaws of gig platforms. These include functionalities that are not inherently bad such as rating systems employed by most gig platforms to establish trust between service consumers and providers but can inadvertently subject gig workers to prejudice, customer-bias and stress [16]. Other common challenges in this category are information asymmetry; and no-control over the rates platforms charge [15].
- **Precarity challenges,** which arise due to the short-termism and contingent nature of gig work. These include lack of employment benefits often associated with traditional jobs; deprivation of ability to engage in collective bargaining [5]; limited career growth opportunities [17]; low wages; limited legal protection [18]; anxiety and depression arising from precarious nature of gig work [17].
- **Occupational challenges,** which are associated with the kind of work they are performing. These include the danger of entering unfamiliar houses for domestic workers; musculoskeletal injuries for gig workers that perform repetitive tasks such as typing; and increased likelihood of car accidents for ride-sharing applications' drivers [15, 19].

The Fairwork Foundation uses five global core principles for fair work in the platform economy (fair pay, fair conditions, fair contracts, fair management and fair representation) to measure how fair platforms are [20]. In its second year of South African ratings, the foundation scored three local platforms 8 out of a possible score of 10 (SweepSouth, NoSweat, GetTOD), which was significantly better than well-known gig platforms such as Uber, Uber Eats and Bolt who scored 4 out of 10, 3 out of 10 and 1 out of 10 respectively [20].

2.2 Domestic workers

Convention No. 189 of the ILO [21] defines domestic work as work that is performed in or for a single household or multiple households, and a domestic worker as any in-

dividual that is engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship. Examples of domestic work provided by the convention are tasks such as house cleaning, preparing meals, doing laundry, taking care of children, elderly and sick members of a family, gardening, guarding the house, driving for the family, and taking care of household pets. However, this study focused exclusively on domestic workers that specialize in house cleaning.

The sector is well-established and substantial in size. According to a report by Overseas Development Institute (ODI), there were around 67 million domestic workers globally in 2016 of which 80% were women and 17% were migrants. In that year, domestic work contributed 7.5% of global women's wage employment [3]. According to ILO [22], of the 5.2 million domestic workers in Africa, 1.1 million were in South Africa. This statistic has since dropped to approximately 995 000 according to Statistics South Africa [4].

The post-apartheid governments sought to redress domestic workers' historically dismal working conditions by stipulating regulated working hours, contracts, minimum wages, and unemployment benefits [7]. However, the sector remains characterized by low wages, few employment benefits and low occupational prestige. In addition, racial distribution of domestic workers remains highly uneven in South Africa: 91% are classified as Black Africans and the remaining 9% as Coloured [22].

2.3 Domestic work and the gig economy

There are numerous gig platforms that specialize in domestic work in operation across the globe and in the global South. Examples include MyDidi in India; UberCare and Find-A-Babysitter in Australia. Until recently, South Africa had two specialist domestic worker gig platforms; SweepSouth and Domestly (as this manuscript was being prepared, news broke that Domestly is closing operations). The consumer's motivations for using domestic work gig platforms include:

- **Perceived convenience**, given that traditional ways of sourcing domestic workers often involve relying on referrals or engaging placement agencies [23].
- **Better service quality:** platforms take quality measures including domestic work knowledge examinations, requiring prior paid domestic work experience, and in some cases providing training to service providers [3].
- **Reliability:** a major attraction since platforms can send alternative workers if prearranged workers are unable to fulfill the task [3].
- **Non-committal relationship:** the relationship with on-demand workers is less personal than the traditional employer-employee relationship and does not require the employer to get involved in the worker's affairs [23].

Benefits for workers include:

- **Flexibility:** Domestic workers in the gig economy have the liberty to choose when and for how long they want to work [24]. In addition, a two-way rating system allows for domestic workers to choose who they want to work for [6].

- **Higher earning potential:** In South Africa, the National Minimum Wage Act [25], stipulates that domestic workers are legally entitled to a minimum hourly rate of R15, Dreyer et.al [23] established that domestic workers in the South African gig economy receive an hourly rate of between R25 and R30.

In addition to challenges that are common across all gig platforms the following challenges are more amplified on domestic work gig platforms:

- **Biases** effected by platforms' recruitment strategies and rating systems. One-sided, customer-only rating systems used by most platforms can encourage discrimination and even violent treatment of domestic workers who can endure mistreatment in exchange for high ratings [26]. However, some platforms are tackling this rating system bias by introducing two-sided rating systems whereby domestic workers can rate their customers.
- **Exclusion due to digital divide:** women without smartphone are denied access to platforms [27].
- **High operational costs for domestic workers:** platform-based domestics use a significant portion of their earnings to cover operational costs such transport and mobile data costs [3]. The cost of transport is particularly high in South Africa due to apartheid legacy which has left poorer communities, where most domestic workers are based, living considerably long distances from affluent suburbs where consumers are saturated [23].
- **Travelling difficulties:** Unlike in traditional settings where domestics work at a few regular locations, gig economy domestic workers are more likely to find themselves having to find new locations in quick succession [23].

3 Theoretical Framework

Occupational stress is an old phenomenon that precedes the emergence of the gig economy, and as a result a number of theoretical frameworks and models that differ in popularity and statistical support have been developed to study it [28]. This study was informed by Folkman's Cognitive Theory of Stress and Coping [29]. The employed constructs and rationale are provided in Table 1, while the schematic presentation is shown in Figure 1. The theory views coping as "a phenomenon that involves both cognitive and behavioral responses that individuals use in an attempt to manage internal and/or external stressors perceived to exceed their personal resources" [30]. In this study, the workers response to occupation-induced stress (their coping) is theorized as both a cognitive and behavioral reaction to the precariousness of gig platform labour. The theory provides a solid framework that facilitates a critical and systematic elaboration of the influencing factors, the coping strategies (survival approaches) as well as the outcomes of the survival strategies.

Table 1. Conceptual framework constructs and their relevance to the study.

Constructs	Description

Influencing factors	These are factors such as fear and loss that trigger stress in an environment: they are influenced by personal (e.g. demographics) and environmental circumstances.
Coping	Coping refers to cognitive and behavioral efforts taken to combat or tolerate situations and events one appraises as stressful. Problem focused coping strategies are concerned with the alteration and management of the problem that is causing distress whereas Emotion-focused coping strategies employed by individuals to manage their emotional state and distress
Outcome	The results of the strategy that has been employed.

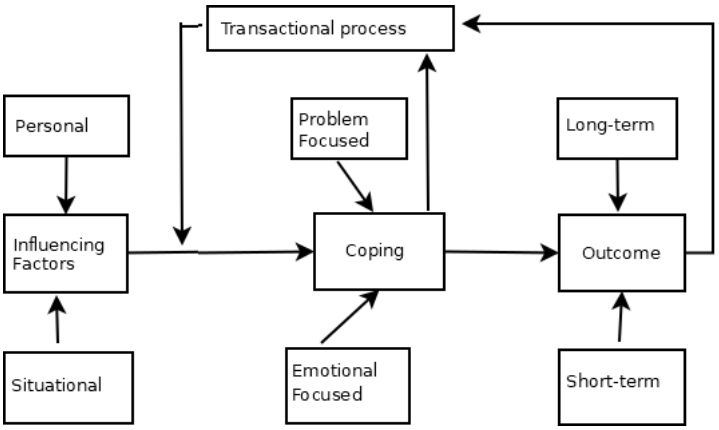

Fig. 1. Conceptual framework developed from Folkman's cognitive theory of stress [29].

4 Research Methodology

This research viewed its subject matter, occupational stress, as a social phenomenon whose perceptions differ from one individual to the next; are highly influenced by personal and situational factors; and cannot be studied without incorporating the worldview of research subjects. This research was therefore interpretivist and followed a qualitative approach as it sought to gain deeper understanding of challenges individual gig economy domestic workers face and how they cope with them by focusing on the underlying reasons expressed by participants, thoughts, experiences and opinions. We applied semi-structured interviews whose questions were based on the conceptual

framework explained above; the research protocol is available on simple request. However, the chronological order of the questions differed per interview. All interviews were conducted face to face in locations most convenient for interviewees.

The respondents *(N=15)* all worked in Cape Town (South Africa) as domestic workers through "Platform1" (not the real name of the platform for purposes of anonymization). Platform1 is accessible through web and mobile applications to connect households and offices with vetted cleaning professionals referred to as GigCleaners (also not the real designation, for anonymity).

A typical gig economy domestic worker in South Africa is a black female that comprehends written English (since the platforms are available in English only), owns a smartphone and is capable of using third-party applications such as Whatsapp [3]. In developing countries, the rising middle class is the main consumer of on-demand domestic work.

Because Platform1 does not publicize their contact details, snowball sampling was used by booking a few domestic workers on the platform, then asking to refer acquaintances that also used the platform. The initial interviewees were purposively selected (sufficiently knowledgeable and experienced gig worker) from different regions of Cape Town metropolitan area to encourage diversity; each participant was asked to refer two acquaintances at most; and the referral chain was stopped at the third level. Each interview was voice recorded, translated and transcribed; coded and analyzed using NVivo Software following a thematic analysis technique as defined by Braun and Clarke [31]. The analytical was repeated until data saturation was reached [32]. Ethical clearance was secured from the University's Ethics in Research Committee (EiRC); consent was explained and obtained prior to every interview. Names have been changed to ensure anonymity. Table 2 below shows the interviewee overview.

Table 2. Overview of interviewees

Pseudonym	Age	Origin	Dependents	Education Attained	Additional Income Source
Abby	30	RSA	3	Incomplete tertiary	Social Grants
Lizzy	34	ZIM	2	Currently doing degree	Spouse
Caroline	25	ZIM	1	< Grade 12	None
Julie	37	ZIM	2	Post-School Diploma	None
Ayanda	33	RSA	3	< Grade 12	Social Grants
Shelly	35	ZIM	2	< Grade 12	None
Nicky	30	RSA	3	< Grade 12	Spouse
Puly	30	RSA	3	< Grade 12	Social Grants
Thato	31	RSA	3	Post-School Diploma	Social Grants
Asanda	54	RSA	2	Post-School Diploma	None
Mercy	27	ZIM	0	Post-School Diploma	None
Monica	39	RSA	3	< Grade 12	Social Grants
Mosa	43	RSA	1	Grade 12	None

Sam	32	RSA	1	Grade 12	Social Grants
Cammy	30	ZIM	2	O-Level	Spouse

Origin: RSA = South Africa, Zim = Zimbwabwe

5 Findings, Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Demographics

Data was collected from 15 female GigCleaners based in different areas of Cape Town. Only one identified as Coloured, the rest identified as Black Africans. This is in line with findings by the ILO's [22] findings that 91% of South African domestic workers are Black Africans and the other 9% Coloureds . Only two participants were born in Cape Town; majority were either domestic migrants from the Eastern Cape or Zimbabwean immigrants. The youngest participant was 25 years old while the oldest was 54 years old: majority were in their thirties. Two participants were widowed, five married and the rest were single. Only one participant did not have any dependents, and most had three dependents. Their education levels ranged from incomplete secondary education to one currently doing her first year of a bachelor's degree. In addition to earnings from domestic work, most South African participants also relied on social grants to make ends meet. Except for the married ones, domestic work was the sole income source for Zimbabwean participants' households. Participants' experience using the platform ranged from 3 years to a few weeks at the time of interviewing.

5.2 Situational Factors - Benefits

There are four main themes of perceived benefits:

Flexibility and Autonomy. Most participants perceived using the platforms gives them a high degree of flexibility and autonomy. They appreciate that they are able to take time off as required; decide their availability to accept bookings; work in their preferred locations; and to a certain extent can decline unfavorable bookings. Two participants in particular emphasize this in their responses:

> *... I need more time to study, you see now when I do these jobs I finish half day then I come home I do my studies. So it's not like all about their money it was just for their flexibility..[Julie]*
>
> *…I can tell them how many hours I want to work and when I want to work. Because if you do not want to go to work tomorrow, you can just go on your App say day off; […] You just manage your own things, you are not forced to work…[Lizzy]*

Income Opportunity. With a third of potential employees currently unemployed in South Africa [4], participants were generally appreciative that the platforms has granted them an opportunity to earn some income. As Caroline put it, *"… I can say it's good*

for us, we can get some jobs because to stay at home you know it's not nice so you can get jobs there and you can work nicely...".

Convenience. Some participants prior to joining Platform1 used to convene at popular informal labor hotspots to seek jobs on a daily basis: an exercise that was costly and had slim chances of securing jobs on any day. Thato highlighted this in her response:

> *…because where I was before, going by the road and asks jobs, sometimes I get sometimes I'm not, I am staying too far I have to travel, I don't have money to go home. It's very better because I receive a job while I am staying at home, I don't need to go out if I don't get a job I am at home I didn't spend anything…[Thato]*

Exposure to different world views. Opportunity to go into different households with diverse backgrounds, and different income levels and lifestyles was also perceived beneficial by some participants. They regarded it as an opportunity to get a glimpse into lifestyles of individuals they would not normally interact with and as an opportunity to learn to operate different household appliances. As Shelly puts it, "…I just like to see what the different things are in people's lives, that learning new things every day, like using the machine…"

All the above benefits with the exception of exposure to different world views are in line with findings of previous studies as discussed in the literature review section of this report. Appraising an opportunity to get a glimpse into different households' lifestyles as a benefit might be unique to South Africa as it is likely influenced by persisting apartheid era city structures which to date still enforce segregation along economic class lines.

5.3 Situational Factors - Challenges

Challenges encountered by participants can be classified into three main themes, challenges related to nature of the gig economy; occupational challenges, and occupational challenges exacerbated by nature of the gig economy (Figure 2).

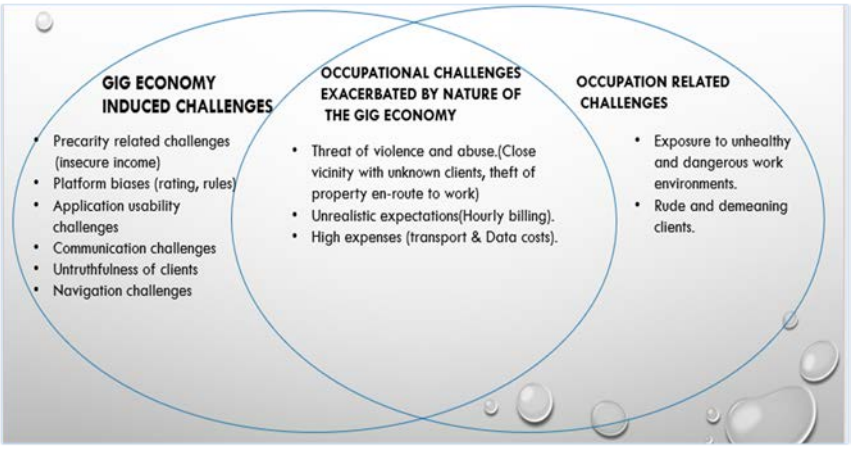

Fig. 2. Challenges encountered by GigCleaners.

Gig Economy induced challenges. This theme encompasses challenges that are induced by the business and operational model of gig platforms, here Platform1.

Navigation challenges. The most appraised group of challenges under gig economy induced challenges was navigation related challenges. The fact that most participants were migrants in Cape Town compounded by not being tech savvy enough to use navigation applications such as Google Maps effectively, resulted in participants often getting lost on their way to bookings.

> *... getting lost because every time you are going to a new place and I am not a Capetonian, I really don't know some places and I am finding it difficult to use google because they only send you the address and you have to use google maps so oh it's very difficult, you get lost like yesterday I got lost and I have to walk you know?[Cammy]*

Other common reasons behind participants having troubles navigating to bookings included clients not updating their physical addresses on their profiles, and clients not providing correct physical addresses.

Platform biases. In line with De Stefano [16]'s findings, many participants perceived the rating system was unfair and biased in favor of clients. Participants perceived some clients used the rating system to punish them for not complying with clients' taxing demands. One participant suggested the platform could require clients to justify low ratings.

> *…on the rating like if the client rate you 4 stars then your reliability score goes down on the 4, it must always be 5 who's perfect? No one is perfect. Sometimes you can clean the house then the client you just clean for 5 hours then if you not done you just tell the client no I'm not done within that 5 hours then you just leave. The client will rate you 3 or 4, they don't ask the client why did you rate this... [Ayanda]*

In addition to rating systems many participants also felt the platform rules were unfair on them. One rule that was mentioned the most is the deactivation rule whereby GigCleaners got deactivated after receiving three warning within a certain period of time. A warning can be received for a number of reasons such as late arrivals and declining booking requests. Impact of the deactivation policy was best expressed by Asanda who at the time of the interview was deactivated

> *…Like I am going to beg tomorrow, I don't know whether they are going to take me back or what. I didn't do anything, I don't steal I don't do anything […] I just got late I didn't offend, and after when I came there Boitumelo! If I was late to you maybe with 30 minutes if I was going to leave you at 1pm, I leave at 2pm between 13:30pm and 2pm, yes I finish all your job I don't count the time because I knew I am at fault... [Asanda]*

Application usability challenges. Many participants also expressed frustrations with the usability of the application. The application often froze, preventing participants to complete administrative tasks such as confirming arrival at a booking.

> *…Two or three times it happens, I'm there at the clients house the App is not working is saying Error, and now I can't say arrived because the client don't know I'm there. I can't access to get the contact of the client, so I can call the client I can't do anything. Then I have to call the office, I'm at the client's house, now they say give me booking ID, I can't access my App.[Julie]*

Communication challenges. Another challenge that was appraised by many participants and was an enabler of other challenges, is the communication challenge. This challenge was multi-faceted: it included clients and Platform1 not responding to GigCleaners on time and booking cancelations not being communicated to GigCleaners on time, resulting in financial losses.

> *…On my way to Sea Point I received a message that the booking has been cancelled then I had to call the lady have you cancelled the booking? No, I am waiting for you, I went there when I reached her place I started calling her, No I have cancelled it… I didn't have money R50 was all that I had that day then I had to walk from Sea Point to Cape Town again. [Cammy]*

Precarity related challenges. As highlighted in the literature review, precarity is one of the leading challenges of the gig economy. Expectedly, many participants experienced it. One participant, Ayanda narrated how, at one point, she went for two weeks without receiving a single booking. This was compounded by inconsistency of rates. Participants complained that their rates fluctuated:

> *…Because it's not like a fixed I'm supposed to earn like R26/hour they will tell you it's not gonna be R26 some will get to R25 some will get to R24, even that one who have reached 400 hours some is 33 some is 32 some is R30. So, you never work like knowing how much you are gonna earn its just working, you don't budget with that money…[Mercy]*

It is worth mentioning that Platform1 platform has recurring bookings functionality and all GigCleaners that had recurring bookings did not appraise precarity as a challenge.

Untruthfulness of clients. Some participants complained that other clients deliberately lied by understating the number of bedrooms and bathrooms when booking to get lower quotes. Nicky emphasized this in her response, "… some do lie customers do lie then they maybe say they have 2 bathrooms, 2 bedrooms but when you come to their house then it's like a mansion". Closely related to understating the size of their houses was the issue of clients with pets overlooking that a GigCleaner had declared on her profile that she did not work around dogs or cats and booking her anyway.

Occupation related challenges. Domestic work in developing countries is often associated with substandard working conditions and low occupational prestige. This is especially true for South Africa due to Apartheid legacy. Unfortunately, this study has revealed that some of these historic challenges and perceptions about domestic work still persist. This theme covers such challenges.

Exposure to dangerous and unhealthy environments. Some participants narrated how some clients exposed them to environments that were potentially detrimental to their health and well-being. These included clients expecting them to clean with no proper protective gear; being expected to use step ladders to clean windows against Platform1's policy; at times being expected to get rid of used sanitary towels and to clean off blood stains. This was particularly emotive for Mercy as she recalled one such experience:

> *… There was like blood all over the bathroom the mirrors, the walls I said what's going on? In the dinning there was like cigarettes and the house everywhere there are spoons under the bed and everything was like a mess. I ask him, how are you expect me to touch the blood? It's not even healthy I don't know where this blood is coming from.[Mercy]*

The only silver lining is that very few participants appraised this challenge.

Rude and demeaning clients. A number of participants narrated how demeaning and rude some clients were. One participant, Mosa, has had a horrible experience of being referred to as a "kaffir", a derogatory term that is illegal in South Africa as per the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination (Act No.4 of 2000). Other examples of rude and demeaning behaviors GigCleaners endured were: being given rotten and stale food under the pretext that they are being helped; being continuously monitored while working; being asked to leave their hand bags with lunch boxes in toilets or outside the house; and being offered tea in disposable cups. As it can be inferred from Sam's response, "… you see? I must put my bag in the toilet. They treat us like we are not human beings. The human beings to them is the dogs and the cats…"; this is emotionally taxing for GigCleaners. This inhuman treatment towards domestic workers is unfortunately deep rooted in South African history [33].

Occupation related challenges exacerbated by the nature of Gig Economy. This theme covers well known challenges that are inherent to domestic work in South Africa and, based on the participants' responses, are worsened by nature of the gig economy.

High expenses. Apartheid era city structures saw residential areas of Blacks and Coloureds being on the outer edges of cities, meaning long commute distances to get to workplaces. The resultant city structures unfortunately remain largely unchanged to date. Many participants appraised high operating costs as a major drawback of using the platform: "sometimes they force you to take the booking like 3 hours booking it's R80 something and you must travel with R46, how much are you gonna be left with? You gonna be left with R43" [Ayanda]. In addition to high transport costs, using the platform required them to always have access to the internet to complete administrative tasks such as accepting bookings and navigating to unfamiliar areas: "… every 2 days I must buy data for R17 it's about 120 data so after 2 days its finish, it's a weekly data but after 2 days its finish…" [Sam]. It is worth mentioning that Platform1 has attempted to reduce the impact of this challenge by introducing a zero-rated application that should in principle reduce the burden of data costs. However, not all participants were aware of the presence of such an alternative application.

Threat of violence and exposure to abuse. Most participants were of the opinion that using the platform increased their vulnerability to being victims of crimes such violence, abuse and theft. 7am bookings meant GigCleaners had to leave their homes very early; this was especially threatening in Winter due to delayed sunrise. Having to use their mobile phones to navigate to bookings also made them easy targets to thieves. Threat of violence is unfortunately not restricted to when GigCleaners are en-route to bookings; GigCleaners are not any safer in the homes of clients where some have experienced unwelcomed sexual advances.

> *… He asked me do you drink? I told him no, I don't drink at all, then he said to me no! no! just only for today you can drink wine, so I told him no! I don't touch any wine. Then I said okay because I was like to be honest I was desperate to earn that money for that day, I just told him that okay if you say so its fine, just one glass of wine cause I didn't want to like let's say maybe that client will say this GigCleaner of yours did like this so I don't want her I am chasing her back and the office won't understand that because they were not there at the time that happens. I would sit down and take the glass and then the client would go further and say you are looking so beautiful…[Abby]*

This challenge is exacerbated by information asymmetry created by the platform operation model. Although information asymmetry is not unique to Platform1 [15], its potential consequences are particularly chilling for GigCleaners given that the prevalence of gender based violence in South Africa is so high.

Unrealistic expectations. As stated in the literature review, historically, domestic workers have been subjected to unrealistic expectations such as being expected to work long hours a day [33]. Most participants narrated how some clients required them to complete a lot of work within humanly impossible timeframes. This behavior seemed to be largely influenced by the hourly billing model of the platform which drove clients to attempt to get as much value as possible out of their bookings. The frustration unrealistic expectations cause to GigCleaners is best encapsulated in Lizzy's response:

…some other clients, they just rude, they are just rude. Maybe I come to your house with big houses, I am not a machine, you understand? I am not a machine. So, you can't expect me to do everything in maybe 8 hours that you booked me: I will only do what I can. [Lizzy]

5.4 Coping

An overview of main coping mechanisms applied by participants for appraised challenges is provided in Table 3. Problem focused theme encompasses strategies that attempt to either alter or prevent a challenge from recurring, while emotion focused theme covers those that do not necessarily act on the challenge but rather manage emotions associated with the challenge.

Table 3. Overview of coping strategies and challenges.

Coping strategy	Strategy description	Challenges applied on	Examples of application
		Problem-focused coping strategies	
Avoidance	Avoiding encountering the challenge once previously encountered or known of.	Platform biases (bad ratings by clients); High Expenses (low margin jobs); Threat of violence and abuse	*Abby: "…No! even if I am desperate for money I will never [….] I told the office that I don't want to go to that client anymore…"*
Negotiation	Having discussions with clients to come up with workable schedules.	Unrealistic expectations	*Julie: "... So we agreed she won't complain […] I was doing something else"*
Deviating behavior	Making private arrangements with clients through the platform and ignoring platform's rules and regulations to make situations better.	Precarity related challenges; navigation challenges (contacting clients against the rules); Unrealistic rules (using step ladders)	*Sam: "…Yah that one is my private. I take from Platform1."*
Peer assistance	Requesting assistance or financial help from other GigCleaners and acquaintances.	Navigation challenges; Application usability challenges.	*Thato: "…we have a group of WhatsApp so that we can chat, now I am struggling guys I am here then I can't find this place… "*

Reporting	Informing platform administrators.	Communication challenges; Rude and demeaning clients; Application usability challenges	*Mosa: "…So I tell the company yoh that client was very rude they call me a ''kaffir'' so the Platform1 was very-very sad…"*
Improvising	Utilizing ad hoc methods to solve or better challenges.	Exposure to dangerous and unhealthy conditions; High expenses; Threat of violence and abuse.	*Julie: "…I just took a plastic bag and wear it so I could start to pick the blood pads…"*
Persisting	Keep trying.	Application usability; Navigation challenges	*Asanda: "…I walked by foot 3 hours you cannot believe and I am still going to work, I followed the directions. I went, I went, I went…I got to the place"*
Abandoning bookings	Giving up bookings while en-route or already at clients' places.	Navigation challenges; communication challenges; threat of violence and abuse	*Abby: "…I just told him you know what, I didn't come here to do what now you require me to do, let me just go home, and then he said to me no its fine let me just sign in that you did work for the 3 hours and then you can go home. And then I left, I go home…"*
		Emotion-focused coping strategy	
Endurance	Ignoring the challenge and continuing with whatever one was doing or had to do.	Exposure to dangerous and unhealthy conditions; Platform biases; Threat of violence and abuse; Unrealistic expectations; Untruthfulness of clients	*Asanda, "…you come early, and the client will tell you I said 8'oclock you are here at 07:30am, you will stand outside…"*
Submission	Yielding to clients and platform's requirements.	Platform biases; Rude and demeaning clients; Unrealistic expectations	*Thato: "…I am scrubbing what you want me to scrub although I see it's unnecessary, it's fine I'm just do it…"*

Fake smiling	Smiling while hurt to please clients.	Rude and demeaning clients; Unrealistic expectations	*Sam:"… when they say I must do this and this to keep my rating and I'm always put a smile on my face for my ratings, even if you don't want to smile you must smile. "*

While there were many problem-focused coping alternatives, the most employed coping mechanism was endurance. In addition, in most cases problem focused strategies did not yield positive results as discussed in the outcomes' section.

5.5 Outcome

Outcomes of participants' coping mechanism can be grouped into five main groups:

No change. This group encompasses situations where the undesirable situation continued unabated despite active attempts to better the conditions by GigCleaners. Based on participants responses, this is the most likely outcome of any coping mechanism. It is concerning that even reporting challenges to the platform administrators did not result in positive outcomes for participants in most cases. Abby also raised this in her response, *"… But my question is, I told them about the client but on my app I will see them sending that clients booking I will just ask haibo! why these people, they keep sending me this client booking cause I told them that I don't want this client."*

Financial loss. This group covers outcomes where participants lost partial or full earnings. It was the second most common outcome. Coping mechanisms that resulted in loss of income included abandoning jobs; declining bookings; and taking out loans from peers. Enduring also resulted in financial loss especially when used to cope with unrealistic expectations as implied by Sam, *"…Yah if she complains I must do for free cause I don't have a choice."*

Better conditions. This covers situations whereby coping mechanisms resulted in better conditions. Although better conditions is undoubtedly the ultimate aim for attempting any problem focused coping strategy, only negotiation yielded this outcome. Julie's response best shows this: *"… So we agreed she won't complain if there is nothing done, she must just understand I was doing something else. And yes, she does understand, but that was a very big challenge to make her understand…"*

Trauma. *"…I am telling you I was, I couldn't even eat when I got home, it was very bad and until now I can still feel it. The bathroom was something else and there were no gloves to use, nothing…"*, this was Julie narrating the trauma she experienced after

one of her bookings. Mercy also had similar experiences after being exposed to an unhealthy environment. Though only two participants experienced such trauma, their narrations were quite emotive. The platform should consider either setting guidelines on minimal protective equipment clients should have before making bookings or consider supplying GigCleaners with protective equipment itself.

Exhaustion. Like trauma, this outcome was appraised by few participants. It was triggered by walking long distances to bookings and working extended hours without breaks. Participants walked long distances to either cut costs or because they did not know convenient public transport route to take.

5.6 Platform Recommendations

Most participants expressed a wish to have more control on what bookings to accept. They were not particularly eager to accept 3 hours bookings which they deem to be non-profitable. Was it not because of possible repercussions, they would never accept such bookings. Some would prefer picking which bookings to take instead of the platform auto-assigning them.

Most participants did not fully comprehend their relationships with the platform. Although the platform explicitly stated in its published terms and conditions that it did not have an employment relationship with its workers, most participants were under the impression that there was an employer-employee relationship between them and the platform. Some participants narrated how the platform had on past occasions arranged taxi rides for them to ensure they get to bookings on time. The platform should communicate more with the workers to clarify the nature and status of their relationship.

Despite most participants acknowledging that the platform ensured they earn more than the stipulated legal minimum wage per hour, there was an overwhelming believe amongst participants that the platform kept more than its fair share of booking fees. This dissatisfaction was best expressed by Monica when she said, "… they are making lots of money but they give us very little …."

6 Conclusion

This study's primary objective was to gather information on challenges that the modern-day Cape Town domestic workers who use gig platforms to secure jobs face, and their coping strategies and processes. This study posed two questions which it deemed were important to answer in order to achieve its objective.

Firstly, what challenges do Cape Town domestic workers that utilize gig platforms encounter? Domestic workers experience three types of challenges, namely; gig economy induced challenges, occupational challenges, and occupational challenges exacerbated by the gig economy nature. Gig economy-induced challenges are those introduced by the business and operational models of gig platforms such as navigation and communication challenges, application usability, precarity and untruthfulness of clients. Occupational challenges are those that are specific to domestic work regardless of

it occurring in the gig economy context or in a traditional domestic work context: examples are exposure to dangerous and unhealthy environments, and rude and demeaning clients. Occupational challenges exacerbated by the gig economy are high expenses, threat of abuse and violence, and unrealistic expectations by domestic work service consumers.

Secondly, how do they cope with challenges they face? Domestic workers in the gig economy employ a wide range of mechanisms to cope with challenges they face. The main emotion focused strategies which they employ are endurance, submission and fake smiling. The main problem focused coping strategies employed by domestic workers are avoidance, negotiation, deviating behavior, peer assistance, reporting, improvisation, persistence, and abandoning bookings.

Ensuring workers comprehend their relationship with the platform, the pricing model of the platform and the value the platform adds, and adding more flexibility for workers to reject unprofitable or disliked jobs would go a long way in clearing the believe that the platform somewhat exploits them and increase their job satisfaction. This research contributes to the overarching discussion relating to the gig economy by providing insights into challenges global South domestic workers working in the sector face and how they deal with them. In addition, this paper serves as input for gig platform owners, developers and policy makers globally on how to potentially institute occupation-specific protections for gig workers.

The main limitation of this research is the focus on one platform (although this is currently the only major domestic platform in existence in South Africa) and one region (Cape Town). Future research can be longitudinal – investigating the evolution of the identified issues over time; widen the sampling to other regions or platform types; or contrast the views of the workers with those of the consumers and platform managers.

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