Gen Z's Attraction to the Gig Economy: A Social Cognitive Career Theory Perspective

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Abstract

The "on-demand economy" concept has evolved significantly; over the past decade, the 'gig economy' has risen from obscurity to become synonymous with the contemporary digitalized labour market. This category includes occupations as varied as interpreters and consultants, IT specialists, artists, and creative workers, and is frequently called the independent professionals category. The rapid growth of the gig economy has meant that there is a need for more research to understand gig economy workers and their motivation for being gig workers. This study aims to examine what motives Gen Z workers' participation in the gig economy. Social Cognitive Career Theory used to develop the conceptual framework of the study. Knowledge characteristics, social characteristics, task characteristics, and contextual characteristics are included as the determinants. The target population of this study was Gen Z people engaged in or interested in gig work. 450 sample was selected based on a purposive sampling technique using online platforms that are popular amongst Gen Z, such as Instagram and TikTok. Multiple regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses. The findings revealed that all four hypothesized characteristics had a significant impact on Gen Z's attraction to gig work. Task characteristics (β = 0.263, p < 0.001) were the strongest predictor, followed by contextual characteristics (β = 0.218, p < 0.001), social characteristics (β = 0.350, p < 0.001), and knowledge characteristics (β = 0.123, p = 0.018). Under the current circumstances where many individuals face unemployment, gig economy becomes a quick alternative for Gen Z people who have dependents to be taken care of. The study proposes a comprehensive framework illustrating the interplay of task, knowledge, social, and regulatory forces affecting Gen

Z's attraction to gig work in order to foster a more equitable gig economy. Future research should conduct longitudinal studies along with qualitative approaches to understand nuanced experiences and experiences across cultures to inform cross-cultural comparisons and studies.

Keywords: *Contextual characteristics; Generation Z; Gig economy; Knowledge characteristics; Social characteristics; Task characteristics*

1. Introduction

Technological advancements such as the advent of smartphones and widespread mobile internet access catalyzed a shift toward a dynamic economic model characterized by immediate service fulfillment and flexible employment arrangements. The concepts "gig economy "platform economy", or "on-demand economy" have evolved significantly (Pilatti et al., 2024). A "gig" refers to a job with no long-term connection to a particular business (Nasir et al., 2024). Gig or on-demand work involves project-based or short-term employment arranged through online platforms. Many organizations increasingly rely on the gig economy for higher business performance and gains in competitive advantage. As such, remote platform work does not require physical proximity between workers and customers (Martindale et al., 2024).

Unemployment in the traditional labour market naturally has a significant effect on the supply of labour in online markets and push the unemployed and underemployed individuals to search a new form of employment. Gig economy paradigm leverages temporary, flexible jobs often facilitated by digital platforms. An annual survey conducted in the USA, UK and Australia indicate that approximately one-third of their workforce participates in the gig economy; skilled professionals who work independently use online platforms to find clients and adult population have earned income from gig labour platforms (Nasir et al., 2024). Currently gig economy exists in virtually every industry and include writers, graphic designers, app and web developers, accountants, legal experts, translators, and more (Larsson, 2020; Pilatti et al., 2024). The trend is likely to continue and spread (Ovretveit, 2020).

Although the gig economy is an innovative approach to youth unemployment, gig workers cannot benefit from the kind of stability that people expect from employment.

Because of their demand-based income, most are generally inconsistent and many gig workers suffer unsafe working conditions without a safety web of protective legislation (Aslam, 2020; Taylor, 2017). Gig workers also suffered an inadequate social protection and possibly without future savings (Galière, 2020). Gig employees faced financial uncertainty because of their irregular earnings because a lack of social protection makes them potentially vulnerable to future savings (Aslam, 2020).

Basically, it is important to understand satisfaction and motivation on workers so the management and relevant authority can provide required support as needed (Nelson et al., 2020). Thus, this study aims to investigate the degree to which a broad range of factors influence the Gen Z workers' participation in the gig economy in Sri Lanka. The study seeks to present a framework through the lens of social cognitive career theory. Three key segments of the gig economy (delivery, ride hail and digital) that span local and remote types of platform work were considered in this study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Gig economy

The gig economy refers to a labour market characterized by short-term contracts, temporary positions, and freelance work, as opposed to permanent, full-time employment (Christie & Ward, 2019). This economic model has been facilitated by the rise of digital platforms that connect workers with customers for various services, including ridesharing, delivery, and online freelance work. While definitions vary, the gig economy is marked by high worker flexibility and autonomy and potentially greater job insecurity than traditional employment (Christie & Ward, 2019). McFeely and Pendell (2018) posit the existence of two types of "gig" economy jobs: independent workers and contingent workers. Independent workers are their own boss; include people such as online platform workers and independent contractors. Contingent workers, on the other hand, provide a cautionary tale for all those who are suspicious of the gig economy.

While we know that Gen Z are digital natives who have grown up with smartphones, social media, and on-demand services (Weligodapola et al., 2023), it is an open question whether these generation look more like gig workers. As Gen Z enters the workforce,

they bring unique perspectives and expectations that may differ from previous generations. They value diversity, prioritize work-life balance, and seek personal and professional growth opportunities. When applied to the workplace, generation theory predicts that different generations will prefer varying work styles, motivations and expectations (Leighton & McKeown, 2015). Thus, it is worth to investigate how Gen Z's distinct generational experiences shape their perceptions and engagement with the gig economy.

2.2 Social Cognitive Career Theory

According to Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals are significant determinants of career choice behaviour and development (Lent et al., 1994). It appreciates the impact of the personal roles attributable to contextual supports and barriers. Successfully entering the gig economy will depend on Generation Z's self-efficacy, and Generation Z's high digital literacy and comfort with technology may help them succeed. Much of the gig economy is mediated via online platforms and tools. Inside, robotsier thinking also has the potential for positive outcome expectations regarding the benefits of gig work, such as being one's boss or being locational flexible (Dangmei & Singh, 2016).

SCCT also proposes that enhancing Gen Z's self-efficacy and coping skills for navigating the challenges of gig work, providing support and reducing barriers, and promoting positive and realistic outcome expectations will facilitate their career success in this domain (Lent et al., 2002). Nonetheless, individual differences in goals, backgrounds and circumstances also need to be considered. While gig work's flexibility, autonomy, and transactional nature may align with some of Gen Z's values and expectations, insecurity, isolation, and lack of support may also pose risks to their well-being and development. Understanding these nuances can inform strategies for optimising gig work design for this cohort.

Thus, the study focused on the factors related to the nature of work tasks, the knowledge and skills required, the social context of work, and the broader environmental and technological landscape as the key drivers of Gen Z's engagement with the gig economy. These factors therefore organised into four key categories: task, knowledge, social, and contextual characteristics.

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2.3 Determinants of gig economy participation

Digital platform familiarity appears to positively predict gig economy participation for Gen Z. A survey of U.S. Gen Z workers found that those who frequently used online platforms for social media, entertainment, and shopping were likelier to have engaged in gig work. For this cohort, this is evidence that technological savvy and gig economy appeal go hand in hand (Nelson et al., 2020).

For Gen Z, financial necessity seems to be perhaps a more powerful driver of gig work than any other generation. According to a study, Gen Z gig workers were also more likely than Millennial and Gen X gig workers to identify paying for basic expenses and saving for the future as among the top reasons they sought gig work (Gomes et al., 2023). This implies that economic insecurity is a main push factor for Gen Z to enter the gig economy (Christie & Ward, 2019).

As it turns out, Gen Z is much more interested in entrepreneurship, which bodes well for a more positive outlook on the gig economy. A survey of U.S. college students found that those who want to start a business or be self-employed had more positive views of the gig economy as a career path (Allon et al., 2023).

With regard to the task characteristics, gig work is enabled by completing remote work, and the produced work products can be submitted electronically (Johns & Gratton, 2013). For workers, task autonomy and variety are often cited as appeals of gig work compared to traditional jobs. Some gig work is micro-task heavy and can be as simple as repetitive, while others may require specialised skills.

The knowledge and skills required for gig work span a broad spectrum. Online talent platforms have revolutionised the gig economy, making it easier for organisations to access workers with niche expertise as needed. The algorithmic matching of workers to tasks based on skills and reputation scores enhances efficiency, providing a convenient and effective way to find the right talent for the job (Johns & Gratton, 2013). At the same time, the short-term, project-based nature of gig work enables knowledge workers to gain exposure to a diversity of challenges and continuously develop their skills across multiple organizations. Learning quickly, picking up new skills, and adapting to different work contexts is essential for success in the gig economy (Gomes et al., 2023).

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The social context of gig work is characterized by dynamic, loosely coupled networks rather than stable organizational hierarchies and teams. Gig workers are more likely to be physically dispersed and have limited face-to-face interaction with clients and coworkers. Relationships tend to be transactional and project-specific rather than long-term (Leighton & McKeown, 2015). At the same time, online platforms are creating new opportunities for gig workers to connect, collaborate and share knowledge. The social features of these platforms, such as forums, chat functions and virtual teams, can foster a sense of community (Malone et al., 2012). Reputation systems and performance ratings introduce an element of social capital. High-performing gig workers can cultivate a personal brand and following.

Several contextual factors have created a conducive environment for the gig economy's growth. Advances in digital technologies and connectivity are a key driver, enabling work to be dissected, distributed and delivered online (Johns & Gratton, 2013). Economic conditions and labour market trends have also played a role. More broadly, the shifting power dynamics between employers and workers, erosion of job security, and decline of traditional employment benefits have normalized non-standard work arrangements (Dangmei & Singh, 2016).

As Allon et al. (2023) opined there is a need for more studies exploring how gig platforms can align with Gen Z's preferences and understanding of Gen Z's engagement with the gig economy and inform strategies for optimizing gig work design and support systems for this cohort. Thus, this study aims to examine what motives Gen Z workers' participation in the gig economy utilizing the social cognitive career theory

3. Methodology

The study adopted a positivist philosophy of having objective knowledge, which assumes systematic observation and measurement of the object. That aligned to identify generalizable factors that affect Gen Z's engagement within the gig economy. From a positivist stance hypotheses were developed and tested about the relationships between key variables. Because this philosophical approach fits so well with the study's goal of measuring quantifiable relations between work characteristics and the gig economy's popularity for Gen Z, positivism focuses on empirical evidence and statistical analysis.

Acknowledging the aforementioned literature, the study used four dimensions in independent variable namely knowledge characteristics, social characteristics, task characteristics, and contextual characteristics, and the dependent variable as engagement of the gig economy. intention to adopt crowdfunding. The measurement items of the selected variables were based on established scales from the literature. Table 1 shows the measurement items of each of the variables.

Accordingly, the study postulates the following hypotheses: -

H1: Task characteristics of gig work positively influence on engagement of the gig economy among Gen Z.

H2: Knowledge characteristics of gig work positively influence on engagement of the gig economy among Gen Z.

H3: Social characteristics of gig work positively influence on engagement of the gig economy among Gen Z.

H4: Contextual characteristics of gig work positively influence on engagement of the gig economy among Gen Z.

The measurement items of the selected variables were based on established scales from the literature. Table 1 shows the measurement items of each of the variables.

Table 1: Measurement Items

Variables	Dimensions	Measurement Items	Source
Task characteristics	Diversity of work activities Impact on others Completion of projects from start to finish	1. Gig work allows me to complete different tasks in the selected subject. 2. The gig tasks I perform have an impact on others. 3. I can see the positive results of my work in gig assignments.	Morgeson & Humphrey (2006)

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Variables	Dimensions	Measurement Items	Source
		4. I have the freedom to decide how to complete my gig work tasks. 5. Gig work provides me with clear feedback on my performance.	
Knowledge characteristics	Use of diverse skills Application of specialized knowledge Requirement for creative problem-solving	1. Gig work allows me to use my specialized skills and knowledge. 2. I often learn new things while completing gig assignments. 3. Gig work requires me to be creative in solving problems. 4. I can apply a wide range of skills in my gig work. 5. Gig assignments often challenge me to expand my knowledge.	Colbert et al. (2016)
Social characteristics	- Support from other gig workers - Interaction with clients/customers - Feedback on performance from others	1. Gig work allows me to interact with a diverse group of people. 2. I feel part of a community through my gig work. 3. I receive support from other gig workers when needed. 4. Gig platforms provide opportunities for meaningful social connections. 5. I can collaborate with others on gig projects when I choose to.	Malone et al. (2012)

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Variables	Dimensions	Measurement Items	Source
Contextual characteristics	Flexibility of work environment Comfort of work setup Physical requirements of tasks	1. Gig work allows me to work in a variety of physical settings. 2. I have control over my work environment in gig assignments. 3. Gig work provides me with a good work-life balance. 4. The technology used in gig work is up-to-date and efficient. 5. Gig work allows me to avoid traditional office politics and hierarchies.	Leighton & McKeown (2015)
Engagement of gig economy	Perceived appeal of gig work Likelihood of participation Preference over traditional employment	1. I find gig work to be an attractive employment option for my career. 2. I am likely to engage in gig work opportunities in the near future. 3. The gig economy aligns well with my work preferences and lifestyle. 4. I would recommend gig work to other members of my generation. 5. Gig work platforms are my preferred method for finding employment opportunities.	(Leighton & McKeown, 2015).

The scope of this study includes the Gen Z (18-25 yrs) people engaged in or interested in gig work. When the traits that samples are anticipated to have are uncommon and difficult to find, a non-probability (non-random) sampling approach known as purposive sampling is used. Targeted recruitment of individuals for whom they could provide appropriate insights into the research questions was enabled by this approach. Primarily, online platforms that are popular amongst Gen Z, such as Instagram and TikTok, were used as the first points of contact. These platforms were chosen for this platform because the target demographic has high usage rates for them and can reach a variety of Gen Z'ers regardless of geography and or background.

In a population greater than 1,000,000 with a 5% margin of error, Krejcie and Morgan (1970) showed a sample size of 384 participants at a 95% confidence level. To account for non-response or invalid data, which is typical of survey research and especially common with online distribution methods, the target sample size was increased to 450. Thus, the oversampling strategy was designed so that even if some attritions were to occur, the final sample would meet or exceed the desire of 384 participants.

The cross-sectional online survey method was chosen to collect data from the desired sample. A structure questionnaire was constructed, including a total of 35 items to collect primary data from the desired sample. The items were measured by five-point Likert scale type questions with strongly disagree and strongly agree as end points.

In quantitative approach, data analysis consists of three steps: measuring the sample profile, testing the goodness of the data, and testing the hypotheses. The sample profile is measured using frequency analysis. The measurement items' reliability and validity were tested to ensure the measurement goodness. Factor analysis, construct reliability, average variance extraction, Cronbach's alpha values, and discriminant validity were all tested. Multiple regression analysis is used to test the hypotheses.

4. Results and Discussion

Sample Profile

The study gathered data about respondents' characteristics such as gender, age, level of education, and business characteristics. Out of 384 respondents, 384 257 were male and 127, female. The majority of respondents (78%) were between 24-25 years old, with

the remaining 22% falling in the 21-23 age range. This distribution suggests that the sample primarily represents the older segment of Gen Z, who are likely to have more work experience and may be more actively engaged in or considering gig work. The sample was evenly split between urban (52%) and rural (48%) locations. This balanced distribution allows for comparing gig economy perceptions across different geographical contexts. With regard to the education level of respondents, overwhelming majority (96%) of participants held a bachelor's degree, with only small percentages having A/L qualifications (3%) or diplomas (1%). This high level of education among respondents may influence their perceptions and engagement with gig work, potentially viewing it as a means to leverage their educational background in flexible work arrangements. As the current employment status, largest group consisted of full-time employees (52%), followed self-employed/freelancers (14%) and part-time employees (13%). Finally, respondents' experience levels with gig work indicates that 47% had 6 months to 1 year, 19% had 1-2 years, and 12% had more than 2 years of experience.

Goodness of Measurements

To reduce the data and purify the items under each study variable, a factor analysis was used. The Kaiser-Meyer-Oklin (KMO) sample adequacy measure was used. According to Hair et al. (2010), a KMO value of 0.60 or higher indicates a good factor analysis. Table 2 shows that the KMO value of the measurement items was greater than 0.50 and that the Bartlett's test of sphericity showed a significant level (p < 0.001), indicating the appropriateness of factor analysis. The reliability of each variable was assessed using Fornell and Larcker's (1981) measure of composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach alpha, as shown in Table 2. The CR and Cronbach's alpha values for each construct were above 0.70, which falls within the acceptable reliability range (Hair et al., 2010). Convergent validity of the constructs was assessed by examining the average variance extracted (AVE). The results presented in Table 2 further shows that AVE values exceed the respective threshold values (above 0.50) ensuring the convergent validity.

The discriminant validity was ensured as the square root values of all AVEs exceed the correlation values of the respective constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) (Table 3).

The values of the square root of the AVE are as given in italic along the diagonals in Table 3.

Table 2: Assessment of adequacy of measurement

Variable	No. of Items	KMO measure	Bartlett's test of sphericity	AVE	Cronbach's alpha
Task characteristics	5	0.843	1144.54	0.584	.899
Knowledge characteristics	5			0.583	.888
Social characteristics	5			0.581	.899
Contextual characteristics	5			0.597	.891
Engagement of gig economy	5			0.513	.785

Source: Survey data, 2025

Table 3: Discriminant validity

Variable	Mean	Std. deviation	TC	KC	SC	CC	EGE
Task characteristics TC	3.5245	1.05614	*0.764*				
Knowledge characteristics KC	3.5797	.95590	.721**	*0.763*			
Social characteristics SC	3.6281	.98746	.601**	0.618**	*0.762*		

Contextual characteristics CC	3.5745	.96198	.604**	.646**	0.631**	*0.772*
Engagement of gig economy EGE	3.7073	.82630	.652**	0.611**	.663**	.584**

0.716

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)*

Source: Survey data, 2025

All correlations were positive and statistically significant at the 0.01 level. The strongest correlation was observed between Social Characteristics (SC) and Engagement of gig economy (EGE) (r = 0.663), followed closely by Task Characteristics (TC) and EGE (r = 0.652). Knowledge Characteristics (KC) and Contextual Characteristics (CC) also showed strong correlations with EGE (r = 0.611 and r = 0.584, respectively). The strong correlations between all independent variables and the dependent variable provide initial support for the hypothesised relationships.

Multiple Regression analysis

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine hypothesized relationships between the independent variables and dependent variable. The regression analysis results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Regression analysis results

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson	F Sig.
.891[a]	.794	.792	.37711	1.892	364.951 0.000[b]

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1 (Constant)	.873	.078		11.169	.635		
Task characteristics	.205	.036	.263	5.648	.000	.252	3.975
Knowledge characteristics	.106	.045	.123	2.374	.018	.202	4.946
Social characteristics	.293	.045	.350	6.500	.000	.188	5.320
Contextual characteristics	.187	.041	.218	4.601	.000	.243	4.114

a. Predictors: (Constant), knowledge characteristics, social characteristics, task characteristics, and contextual characteristics,

b. Dependent Variable: Engagement of gig economy

Source: Survey data, 2025

According to the model summary, the independent factors account for 79.4% of the variance in the engagement of gig economy ($R^2 = 0.794$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.792$). The model's high R-squared value indicates strong explanatory power. The ANOVA results confirm that the regression model is statistically significant (F = 364.95, p < 0.001). The coefficients values provide insights into the individual contributions of each

independent variable. All four predictors show statistically significant positive relationships to engagement of gig economy ($p < 0.001$). Social Characteristics had the most substantial impact ($\beta = 0.350$), followed by Task Characteristics ($\beta = 0.263$), Contextual Characteristics ($\beta = 0.218$), and Knowledge Characteristics ($\beta = 0.123$). In sum, all four hypotheses proposed in this study are supported based on the regression analysis results.

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the factors driving Gen Z's engagement with the gig economy. All four hypothesised relationships were supported, indicating that task, knowledge, social, and contextual characteristics all significantly shaped Gen Z's perceptions and attraction to gig work.

Social characteristics emerged as the strongest predictor of gig economy popularity among Gen Z. That means the chance for networking, collaboration and creating a professional community is especially attractive to this generation. A possibility is that the gig economy's ability to facilitate diverse social interactions and connections will mark the attractiveness that Gen Z workers are looking for.

The second strongest predictor was Task characteristics which pointed to the high importance of work variety, autonomy, and defined project borders in gig work. While previous research indicated that Gen Z places a high value on the ability to engage in a wide variety of tasks and to see the direct result of their work handling, this study found that they similarly favor opportunities for managers to bring out the best in their employees.

The gig economy was also popular because of its contextual characteristics such as work location and flexibility in work hours. The imbalance in Gen Z's desired work and life balance, demonstrated by having to integrate work in their lives, is something that this conforms with. The variation with knowledge characteristics had very little influence. But this might imply that, despite Gen Z's preference for access to skill deployment and enhancement in gig work, other things like social connections and work flexibility are the real drivers of Gen Z's participation in the gig economy.

The findings of this research have several important implications for both practice and academia. From a practical standpoint, organizations and platforms operating in the gig

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economy can use these insights to tailor their offerings to attract and retain Gen Z talent. The strong influence of social characteristics suggests that platforms should priorities building community features, facilitate networking opportunities, and foster a sense of belonging among gig workers. For example, implementing virtual co-working spaces, mentorship programs, or collaborative project opportunities could enhance the social aspects of gig work.

The significance of task characteristics indicates the importance of offering diverse, meaningful projects with clear deliverables. Gig platforms could consider implementing project variety algorithms that ensure workers are exposed to various tasks or develop more apparent project scoping tools to enhance task identity and significance.

The moderate impact of contextual characteristics underscores the need for continued emphasis on flexibility in work arrangements. Platforms could explore innovative ways to offer even greater flexibility, such as implementing AI-driven scheduling tools that optimize worker preferences while meeting client needs. While knowledge characteristics had the slightest impact, they remain significant. Gig platforms could differentiate themselves by offering targeted skill development programs, perhaps in partnership with educational institutions or industry experts, to address Gen Z's desire for continuous learning. From an academic perspective, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on Gen Z work preferences and the evolution of the gig economy. The findings extend existing theories about work design and generational differences in the context of non-traditional employment arrangements. The strong influence of social characteristics, in particular, suggests a need for further research into how social connections and community building can be effectively fostered in distributed work environments.

5. Conclusion

Results from this study revealed that the gig economy did not appeal solely to Gen Z through specific characteristics but rather that a mixture of social and task attributes is necessary for enticement. The results show that to maximize opportunities for engagement with gig work, we must build platforms and present opportunities that cater to Gen Z's preferences for social connection, work variety, and flexibility.

Understanding and meeting these will be game changers for organisations trying to attract and keep Gen Z talent as the gig economy grows.

It also helps illustrate how technological advancements, shifts in work preferences, and the economics of our world are reshaping the work of the future. As Gen Z continues to grow and more members join the workforce, their preferences and values will continue to influence changes in work design and employment relationships.

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made for gig economy platforms and organisations engaging with Gen Z workers. First, build social features that will enable networking and community building. These would include virtual coworking spaces, peer mentoring programs, and collaborative project opportunities. They provide variety and precise outcomes for design tasks. To keep workers interested and develop their skills, you can practice project rotation systems or make it easy for people to switch among their various tasks. Establish flexible work arrangements to support work and life in equilibrium. This could involve anything from AI-driven scheduling tools that optimize workers' preferences while meeting client needs. Partner with educational institutions or industry experts to provide targeted training programs or micro-credentials, creating opportunities for skill development and knowledge application. To adapt to Gen Z's demand for transparency, improve transparency in project scoping and pay compensation. Start creating extensive well-being programs designed for the particular needs of gig work, like monetary planning help and mental health assets.

This study is not without its limitations. Due to the cross-sectional nature of the study, it was not possible to examine how perceptions change over time. Longitudinally following Gen Z as they age and transition into careers will offer insight into the long-term sustainability of gig work for this generation. Furthermore, while the focus on quantitative measures may have escaped the nuances underlying Gen Z's experience in gig work, the lack of focus on qualitative measures lost insightful information about these experiences. Future studies could use mixed- method approaches, that is, in-depth interviews or focus groups, to gain a clearer, contextualized understanding of Gen Z's motivation and experience in the gig economy.

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