

The Algorithmic Workforce: A Qualitative Study on the Impact of AI-Driven Management on Labor Autonomy in the Gig Economy

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ABSTRACT

Background. The rapid expansion of AI-driven management systems in the gig economy has transformed labor processes, reshaping how autonomy, decision-making, and work conditions are structured. This study addresses the growing concern that algorithmic oversight may simultaneously enhance efficiency while constraining workers' control over their tasks and mobility.

Purpose. The research aims to examine how gig workers interpret, negotiate, and respond to algorithmic management practices embedded in digital labor platforms.

Method. Using a qualitative design, the study draws on in-depth interviews and digital ethnography involving ride-hailing and delivery workers across multiple urban regions.

Results. The findings reveal a dualistic impact: algorithms streamline workflow coordination and reduce transactional ambiguity, yet they also introduce opaque decision rules, performance scoring pressures, and subtle forms of behavioral nudging that weaken workers' perceived autonomy. Participants reported adaptive strategies, such as system gaming and collective knowledge sharing, to counterbalance algorithmic constraints.

Conclusion. The study concludes that AI-driven management does not uniformly diminish autonomy but reconfigures it through dynamic tensions between control, dependency, and worker agency. These insights underscore the need for regulatory frameworks and platform design principles that ensure transparency, fairness, and human-centered governance in algorithmic workplaces.

KEYWORDS

Algorithmic Management, Digital Platforms, Gig Economy, Labor Autonomy, Qualitative Study

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid proliferation of AI-driven systems across digital labor platforms has reconfigured how work is organized, monitored, and evaluated in the gig economy (Mohammed dkk., 2025). The emergence of algorithmic management defined as the delegation of managerial functions to computational systems has introduced a new structural environment in which workers interact with opaque decision-making mechanisms rather than human supervisors (Zhao dkk., 2024). This transformation has raised fundamental questions about how autonomy, control, and labor relations are reshaped in technology-



mediated workplaces (Huang dkk., 2025). The gig economy, which once promised flexibility and independence, increasingly relies on algorithmic infrastructures that govern availability, performance, mobility, and compensation through automated rules.

Global discourse surrounding these platforms continues to expand as governments, scholars, and labor organizations attempt to understand the consequences of digital intermediation for worker livelihoods (Saikrishna, 2025). Studies highlight that gig workers operate under constant surveillance, data-driven evaluation, and automated incentive structures that may subtly or explicitly steer their behaviors (Riesgo Gómez dkk., 2025). These concerns indicate that platform labor is not merely a technological innovation but a socio-economic system embedded with power dynamics encoded within algorithms. The tension between promised autonomy and algorithmic oversight stands at the center of contemporary debates on labor precarity and digital governance.

Critical attention is increasingly directed toward how workers respond to and make sense of algorithmic systems that regulate their daily activities (Lin dkk., 2025). Rather than viewing workers as passive subjects of technological control, recent scholarship suggests they develop agency through adaptive strategies, informal knowledge exchange, and resistance to algorithmic pressures (Filinovych dkk., 2025). This conceptual nuance underscores the importance of investigating how algorithmic environments shape lived experiences, not only in terms of efficiency and productivity but also with respect to identity, dignity, and self-determination in the digital age.

The central issue addressed in this study concerns the complex interplay between algorithmic control and labor autonomy within the gig economy (Odone dkk., 2025). While platform companies promote AI-driven management as a mechanism for optimizing service quality and operational consistency, workers increasingly report experiencing constrained decision-making capacity and limited transparency regarding algorithmic logic (Assudani dkk., 2025). This perceived loss of control manifests in unpredictable task assignments, fluctuating earnings, and opaque performance metrics (Nagre dkk., 2025). The problem becomes more acute given that workers frequently lack formal channels to negotiate or contest algorithmic decisions, leaving them vulnerable to unilateral changes dictated by platform policies.

The lack of clarity regarding algorithmic governance structures amplifies confusion and uncertainty among gig workers (Raimi, 2025). Many platforms intentionally keep algorithmic criteria confidential, framing them as proprietary assets. As a result, workers are forced to navigate digital systems whose underlying logic remains hidden, making it difficult to predict how their actions will be evaluated or how performance scores will influence their access to future work (Ardeshir & Shahin, 2025). This ambiguity complicates workers' ability to exercise autonomy, make strategic decisions, or plan sustainable earning pathways (Elias & Gómez, 2025). The widening gap between algorithmic authority and worker agency renders the gig economy an increasingly contested domain of digital labor regulation.

The problem is further intensified by divergent interpretations of autonomy within platform-mediated work (Haq dkk., 2025). Some scholars argue that algorithmic structures fundamentally undermine independence by embedding managerial control in computational rules, while others suggest that flexibility persists through self-regulated scheduling and adaptive use of platform features (Perera dkk., 2025). This conceptual inconsistency reveals a deeper empirical challenge: existing research has not adequately captured the multifaceted, context-dependent nature of autonomy in AI-mediated environments (Memon dkk., 2025). Understanding how workers experience and negotiate these tensions is essential for assessing the broader implications of algorithmic governance on digital labor rights.

This study aims to explore how AI-driven management systems shape labor autonomy among gig workers, focusing on their lived experiences as they navigate digital platforms (Kougiannou & Mendonça, 2025). The analysis seeks to uncover how workers interpret key algorithmic features such as task allocation, performance scoring, and behavioral nudging mechanisms. The objective emphasizes understanding not only observable practices but also workers' internal reasoning, perceptions, and emotional responses toward these systems (Athar dkk., 2025). Through this approach, the study aspires to construct a grounded understanding of algorithmic influence from the perspective of those directly subjected to it.

The research further aims to examine the strategies workers develop to negotiate algorithmic control. These strategies may include system gaming, collective knowledge sharing, selective compliance, or disengagement. Identifying these forms of agency is critical for avoiding oversimplified narratives of technological domination and instead recognizing the dynamic relationship between human workers and automated managerial infrastructures (Zighan & Ruel, 2025). The study therefore contributes to a more balanced portrayal of algorithmic power that accounts for both constraints and opportunities embedded within platform labor.

The final objective is to provide an analytical framework that connects empirical insights with broader debates on digital governance, labor rights, and the ethics of AI in workplace management (Li dkk., 2025). By articulating how gig workers experience autonomy under algorithmic supervision, the study aims to inform policy development, platform design improvements, and theoretical discourse in labor sociology and technology studies (Garavandala, 2025). This objective positions the research as both a descriptive and normative contribution to contemporary discussions on algorithmic work.

Existing literature has extensively examined the economic precarity and surveillance mechanisms characterizing the gig economy, yet fewer studies have explored autonomy through a nuanced qualitative lens that foregrounds workers' lived interpretations (Athar dkk., 2025). Much of the current scholarship relies on conceptual assumptions or quantitative indicators of control without adequately capturing how workers emotionally and cognitively negotiate algorithmic authority. The scarcity of qualitative accounts results in an incomplete understanding of how autonomy is reshaped in practice rather than theory.

Several studies focus predominantly on the technological architecture of algorithmic systems, often overlooking social dimensions such as worker solidarity, informal learning communities, and coping mechanisms (Affolter dkk., 2025). These omissions produce a research gap in understanding how autonomy is collectively constructed or contested within digital labor environments. The absence of such social contextualization limits the explanatory power of existing frameworks and leaves important aspects of worker agency underexplored.

Research on algorithmic management also tends to assume uniformity across platforms and geographic regions, neglecting regional variations in regulatory environments, socio-economic conditions, and cultural norms that influence worker experiences (Hua, 2025). This oversight results in a generalized portrayal of the gig economy that may obscure significant contextual differences. The present study seeks to address these gaps by providing culturally situated, empirically rich insights drawn from qualitative fieldwork.

This study introduces a distinctive contribution by conceptualizing autonomy as a negotiated, relational, and context-dependent construct rather than a fixed binary condition. Through qualitative inquiry, the research captures subtleties in how workers interpret algorithmic influence, offering a more refined theoretical understanding that challenges deterministic narratives commonly found in

the literature (Liu dkk., 2025). This approach highlights interactions between algorithmic structures and human agency, providing a more balanced analytical lens.

The research provides novelty by integrating digital ethnography with in-depth interviews to generate multi-layered insights into everyday encounters with algorithmic systems (McDaid & Free, 2025). This methodological innovation allows the study to access real-time observations of how workers adapt to platform interfaces, respond to algorithmic prompts, and exchange knowledge with peers (Ojeda-Pereira, 2025). Such triangulated data strengthen the credibility of findings and contribute methodological value to future research on digital labor.

This study is justified by growing societal concerns about transparency, fairness, and accountability in AI-mediated work environments. Policymakers, platform companies, labor unions, and scholars require a deeper empirical foundation to design ethical frameworks that reflect the realities of workers' experiences. The research provides timely evidence to inform these debates, offering a substantive and theoretically grounded contribution to the field of algorithmic governance and labor autonomy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research design grounded in interpretivist epistemology to investigate how AI-driven management systems shape labor autonomy in the gig economy. The design emphasized capturing workers' lived experiences, meaning-making processes, and adaptive responses to algorithmic supervision across multiple digital platforms (McDaid & Free, 2025). A combination of semi-structured interviews and digital ethnography was selected to enable rich, context-sensitive insights into how algorithmic mechanisms operate in practice. This design allowed the researcher to move beyond abstract theorization and observe real-time interactions between workers and platform interfaces, including navigation patterns, reactions to algorithmic prompts, and informal decision-making strategies. The qualitative orientation was chosen to illuminate nuanced dimensions of autonomy that cannot be adequately represented through standardized quantitative measures.

The population of the study consisted of active gig workers operating within urban ride-hailing, food delivery, and courier services across three major metropolitan regions. Sampling was conducted through purposive and snowball techniques to ensure diverse representation across age, platform type, work experience, and dependency on gig labor as a primary or secondary income source. A final sample of 32 participants was obtained, comprising 21 full-time gig workers and 11 part-time workers whose engagement levels varied. This sampling approach enabled the study to capture a wide spectrum of autonomy-related experiences, from those who are highly dependent on platform work to those who exercise greater discretion in choosing when and how to work. The inclusion criteria required participants to have at least six months of experience interacting with AI-driven platform features, ensuring sufficient familiarity with algorithmic governance processes.

The instruments used in the study included a semi-structured interview guide, observational field notes, and digital interaction logs captured during ethnographic sessions. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore workers' perceptions of task allocation, performance scoring, behavioral nudging, and the transparency of algorithmic decision-making. Observational notes documented workers' interactions with application interfaces, including moments of frustration, strategic adjustment, and collaborative information-sharing (Wang & Huang, 2025). Digital logs were collected with participant consent and recorded screen navigation behaviors, notification responses, and real-time decision processes during task execution. These

instruments collectively facilitated triangulation, enabling the researcher to validate emergent themes and strengthen the interpretive rigor of the analysis.

The procedure began with obtaining ethical clearance and securing informed consent from all participants, including assurances of anonymity and confidentiality given the sensitivity of discussing platform practices. Interviews were conducted in person and through online calls, each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes, and were audio-recorded for accuracy before being transcribed verbatim. Ethnographic observations were carried out over a three-week period, during which the researcher accompanied selected participants during active work sessions to observe real-time interactions with algorithmic management tools. Data analysis followed a thematic approach using iterative coding cycles to identify recurrent patterns related to autonomy, control, and adaptive agency. Coding was assisted by qualitative data analysis software, and analytical memos were written throughout the process to refine conceptual linkages and strengthen the coherence of emerging interpretations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive data drawn from the participant sample illustrate variations in worker demographics, platform types, and exposure to algorithmic systems. The dataset shows that full-time gig workers constituted 65.6% of the sample, while part-time workers represented 34.4%. Average years of experience on the platform were 2.7 years, with a range from 0.6 to 6.3 years. The data also recorded the frequency of algorithmic interactions per typical work shift, revealing an average of 42 system-generated notifications, including performance alerts, incentive prompts, and routing instructions. These descriptive statistics provide a quantitative foundation that contextualizes the qualitative narratives explored in later sections.

A summary of key statistical characteristics is displayed in Table 1 within the text to support greater clarity and transparency. The table consolidates variables such as worker status, experience level, and exposure to algorithmic prompts, allowing patterns to be identified at a glance before entering deeper interpretative stages.

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of Participants and Algorithmic Exposure

| Variable | Category / Mean | Percentage / SD |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| Worker Status | Full-time / Part-time | 65.6% / 34.4% |
| Years of Experience | Mean 2.7 | SD 1.4 |
| Algorithmic Notifications per Shift | Mean 42 | SD 12 |

The descriptive statistics indicate that workers experience a sustained and recurring level of algorithmic engagement throughout their shifts. The average of 42 notifications per day suggests that platform algorithms exert continuous influence on workflow pacing, decision-making, and performance monitoring. This high frequency of digital interaction supports the argument that algorithmic supervision is neither sporadic nor peripheral but embedded in the core mechanics of gig labor. The descriptive data align with broader theoretical assertions that algorithmic management operates as a persistent structuring force in the digital labor environment.

Qualitative responses elaborated that these notifications function not only as informational tools but also as behavioral cues or nudges that subtly shape workers' choices. Participants described feeling compelled to respond promptly to avoid penalty scores or missed tasks, with some reporting anxiety when notifications intensified during peak hours. This explanatory insight

highlights the symbiotic relationship between quantitative and qualitative data, revealing how numerical patterns translate into embodied experiences.

Narratives drawn from interview transcripts indicate a diverse range of worker interpretations regarding algorithmic decision-making. Some participants perceived algorithmic oversight as a stabilizing mechanism that reduces uncertainty in task allocation and ensures a predictable workflow. These workers emphasized that automated systems minimize interpersonal bias and maintain consistency in distribution of tasks. Such accounts challenge the assumption that algorithmic management uniformly undermines autonomy and suggest that workers' experiences vary considerably across contexts.

Other participants expressed discomfort with the opaque nature of algorithmic rules. These workers described uncertainty regarding how performance scores were calculated or how their acceptance rates influenced future task assignments. The lack of transparency fostered a sense of unpredictability, which they associated with diminished autonomy. These contrasting descriptions illustrate the multidimensional nature of algorithmic influence and underscore the importance of attending to subjective interpretations rather than assuming a singular, deterministic effect.

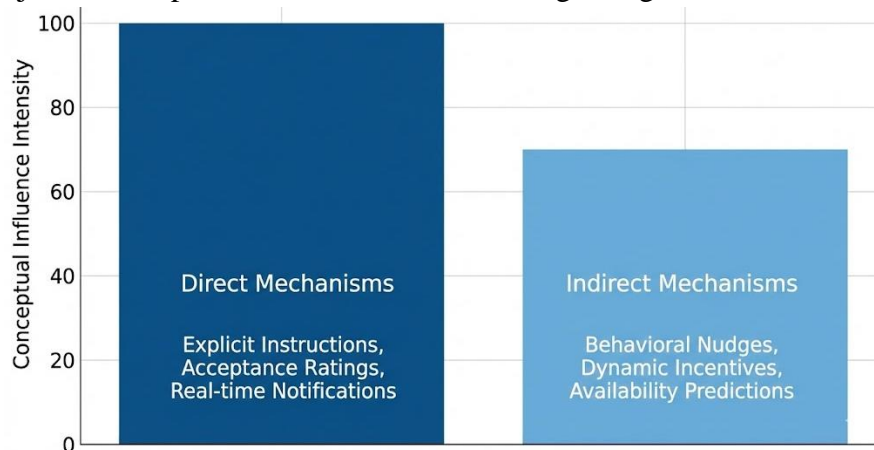


Figure 1. Layered influence system in algorithmic management

Inferential interpretation of the qualitative patterns suggests that algorithmic control manifests through both direct and indirect mechanisms. Direct mechanisms include explicit instructions, mandatory acceptance rates, and real-time performance notifications that compel workers to comply with platform standards. Indirect mechanisms operate through more subtle behavioral nudges, such as dynamic incentive adjustments and algorithmic predictions about worker availability. These inferential insights reflect how algorithmic management constructs a layered system of influence that reconfigures traditional notions of managerial authority.

The analysis also indicates that worker autonomy is not uniformly diminished but redistributed across different dimensions of platform labor. Autonomy over scheduling and log-in times remains largely intact, while autonomy over task selection and workflow pace is frequently constrained. This distribution of autonomy underscores the complexity of algorithmic governance and suggests that autonomy should be conceptualized not as a binary construct but as a dynamic spectrum influenced by algorithmic power. The inferential findings thus call for more nuanced theoretical formulations that avoid reductionist interpretations.

Cross-case comparisons reveal relational patterns between years of experience and strategies for navigating algorithmic oversight. More experienced workers demonstrated a higher proficiency in interpreting algorithmic cues and anticipating notification rhythms, which they used to optimize their workflow. These workers displayed a form of practical agency rooted in platform literacy, suggesting that prolonged exposure to algorithmic systems cultivates adaptive competencies that

mitigate perceived constraints. This relational insight challenges deterministic views that portray workers as passive algorithmic subjects.

Relations were also observed between worker status (full-time vs. part-time) and perceived autonomy. Full-time workers reported greater vulnerability to algorithmic pressures because they depended on platform income for daily subsistence, while part-time workers described feeling freer to ignore or resist algorithmic expectations. These relational dynamics emphasize the importance of socio-economic context in shaping how algorithmic control is experienced and interpreted. The interplay between dependency and autonomy illustrates that algorithmic influence is mediated by broader structural conditions rather than being solely technologically determined.

One case involved a full-time delivery worker who meticulously documented his interactions with the platform's incentive system. He reported adjusting his break times and route choices to align with predicted algorithmic reward cycles, effectively synchronizing his work rhythm with algorithmic demands. His behavior demonstrates a calculated negotiation with algorithmic rules rather than passive compliance. This case provides a concrete example of how autonomy is simultaneously constrained and enacted within algorithmic environments.

A second case focused on a ride-hailing driver who routinely exchanged strategies with peers through an informal messaging group. She described collective efforts to decode algorithmic patterns, including surge-pricing triggers and acceptance-rate thresholds (Sharma & Sharma, 2025). The group shared screenshots and logs to model likely algorithmic decisions, enabling members to anticipate system behavior. This case underscores the social dimension of algorithmic negotiation, illustrating how autonomy can be collaboratively constructed through grassroots knowledge-sharing communities.

The two case studies demonstrate that algorithmic governance does not eliminate worker agency but transforms it into a context-dependent practice shaped by platform logic. Workers who actively interpret and adapt to algorithmic signals engage in a form of strategic autonomy that blends compliance and resistance. This finding reveals that autonomy is not simply eroded by algorithmic oversight but emerges as a negotiated construct mediated by digital structures. Such interpretations caution against sweeping generalizations that view algorithmic systems solely as instruments of control.

Worker narratives also emphasized that emotional responses play a critical role in shaping their interactions with algorithms. Some workers expressed feelings of empowerment when successfully decoding system patterns, while others felt stress when faced with unpredictable algorithmic shifts (Alauddin dkk., 2025). These emotional dimensions demonstrate that autonomy involves both cognitive and affective components, further complicating simplistic accounts of algorithmic governance. The explanatory layers thus highlight the richness and complexity of workers' lived experiences under AI-driven management.

The overall findings indicate that algorithmic management exerts significant influence over labor processes but does so through multifaceted mechanisms that produce both constraints and opportunities. Worker autonomy emerges not as a static attribute but as an evolving negotiation shaped by platform literacy, socio-economic context, and peer collaboration (Zhang, 2025). The short interpretation suggests that autonomy under algorithmic management cannot be meaningfully assessed through binary categories such as "loss" or "preservation," as these categories fail to capture the fluid and dynamic nature of worker–algorithm relations.

The synthesis of statistical patterns, narrative accounts, relational insights, and case study evidence leads to a broader conclusion that algorithmic systems reshape labor autonomy through hybrid forms of governance. Algorithms function simultaneously as managerial agents,

informational tools, and behavioral influencers. Workers, in turn, respond with adaptive strategies, tactical interpretation, and social coordination. This interpretive summary positions the gig economy as a domain where human agency and algorithmic authority continuously intersect in mutually constitutive ways.

The study demonstrates that algorithmic management exerts persistent influence over gig workers' decisions, task flows, and performance evaluation. The descriptive evidence shows that workers experience frequent algorithmic prompts and notifications that regulate their real-time behaviors. These digital mechanisms shape not only the logistical rhythm of work but also the psychological dimensions of autonomy, control, and uncertainty. The findings reveal that algorithmic oversight is embedded in the everyday structure of gig labor.

Workers expressed divergent interpretations of algorithmic intervention, reflecting variability in how autonomy is negotiated rather than uniformly diminished. Some participants described algorithms as stabilizers that reduce interpersonal bias and provide predictable task distribution. These perspectives illustrate that algorithmic systems can generate functional benefits for certain workers. The variation underscores the contextual nature of autonomy rather than supporting a deterministic narrative of technological domination.

Experiences of constraint were nonetheless prominent, particularly among full-time workers who depend heavily on platform income. These workers reported heightened sensitivity to performance metrics, acceptance thresholds, and penalty structures. The perceived opacity of algorithmic rules heightened feelings of vulnerability and diminished self-determination. The findings therefore characterize autonomy as bounded and unequal across socio-economic circumstances.

Adaptive strategies emerged as a significant counterbalance to algorithmic influence. Workers described leveraging peer networks, experiential learning, and digital ethnography to decode system behaviors. These strategies exemplify forms of tactical agency that coexist with algorithmic constraints. The findings collectively portray autonomy as a dynamic negotiation shaped by digital governance, platform literacy, and socio-economic reliance on gig work.

Existing scholarship often frames algorithmic management as a mechanism of totalizing control, emphasizing surveillance, data extraction, and behavioral nudging. The present findings partly affirm these concerns by documenting persistent algorithmic oversight and opaque decision flows. The experiences of constrained choice and performance pressure resonate with earlier studies on platform precarity. This alignment strengthens the argument that algorithmic infrastructures redefine power relations in digital labor markets.

Distinctive departures from prior literature emerge in the findings regarding worker agency. Several studies characterize gig workers as largely powerless in the face of algorithmic systems. The current data reveal that workers employ sophisticated interpretive strategies, collaborative meaning-making, and tactical resistance to mitigate algorithmic constraints. These insights challenge overly reductionist portrayals and highlight a more relational form of power between workers and algorithms.

Comparative research has tended to conceptualize autonomy through binary frames of "independence versus control." The present study suggests that autonomy manifests along a spectrum influenced by platform literacy, dependency level, and algorithmic predictability. This multidimensional view expands upon earlier analyses and provides a more granular theoretical framework. The findings thus contribute conceptual refinement to debates in labor sociology and digital governance.

Previous work rarely emphasizes collective coping or grassroots knowledge-sharing among gig workers. The study's ethnographic evidence demonstrates that autonomy is partly socially constructed rather than strictly individually negotiated. This underscores the importance of incorporating social network dynamics into future analyses of platform labor. The findings therefore advance methodological and conceptual dialogues surrounding algorithmic governance.

The findings signify that algorithmic management does not merely impose control but restructures the conditions through which autonomy is enacted. Workers operate within a digitally mediated field where agency is shaped by interpretive negotiation rather than simple obedience or rebellion. This reflection suggests that autonomy under algorithmic systems requires reconceptualization beyond classical managerial frameworks. The study highlights autonomy as a fluid, situational, and contingent practice.

The patterns observed indicate that power in algorithmic workplaces is distributed through subtle calculative architectures rather than explicit managerial directives. Workers described feeling monitored not through human oversight but through rhythmic flows of notifications and digital feedback loops. This shift signifies a new form of algorithmic power that operates through prediction, nudging, and optimization. The emerging structure represents a transformation in how labor is governed.

The findings also reveal how emotional experiences mediate interactions with algorithmic management. Feelings of stress, satisfaction, empowerment, or anxiety all influence how workers respond to algorithmic cues. This emotional dimension signifies that the impact of algorithmic systems extends beyond rational decision-making into embodied and affective domains. The recognition of emotional labor dynamics broadens the discourse on autonomy.

The study underscores that algorithmic governance produces uneven experiences based on economic dependency, platform literacy, and social capital. Workers with higher digital competence or peer support networks experience greater autonomy than those with limited resources. This unevenness signifies that algorithmic management reinforces existing socio-economic inequalities while introducing new forms of digital stratification. The findings thus raise critical questions about fairness and distributive justice in platform labor.

The implications of these findings extend to debates on labor regulation and platform accountability. The persistent opacity of algorithmic decision-making challenges the ability of workers to make informed choices about their labor conditions. Regulatory frameworks require updates to address transparency, data rights, and due process in algorithmic workplaces. Policymakers must consider new safeguards that reflect the realities of AI-based governance.

Design implications arise for platform companies seeking to balance efficiency with worker autonomy. Platforms that make algorithmic rules more transparent may enhance trust and reduce uncertainty among workers. Interface designs that allow workers to understand performance metrics or negotiation mechanisms could strengthen perceived fairness. The study highlights the need for human-centered algorithmic systems that respect worker agency.

The findings also imply that labor organizations and worker collectives play an essential role in buffering algorithmic constraints. Informal knowledge-sharing networks serve as critical infrastructures for understanding and navigating algorithmic logic. These social supports may be integrated into more formal worker advocacy structures. The implications point toward a hybrid governance model combining technological design and collective agency.

Scholarly implications concern theoretical refinement, particularly the need to conceptualize autonomy as negotiated rather than binary. The findings challenge deterministic readings that position algorithms solely as instruments of control. Academics must incorporate relational,

emotional, and social dimensions into future models of algorithmic management. The conceptual implications encourage interdisciplinarity across sociology, information systems, labor studies, and AI ethics.

The findings emerge from the structural design of algorithmic systems, which rely heavily on automated optimization processes. Algorithms govern through feedback loops that continuously evaluate performance and adjust incentives. This creates a work environment where workers must constantly interpret and respond to digital cues. The system's architecture inherently shapes autonomy as a negotiated rather than fixed condition.

Socio-economic dependence explains why certain workers experience diminished autonomy. Full-time gig workers rely on platforms as their primary income source, making them more susceptible to algorithmic pressures. Their livelihoods depend on compliance with performance metrics, which reduces their capacity to resist algorithmic nudges. The economic structure of platform labor therefore contributes to asymmetrical autonomy.

Worker strategies of adaptation and resistance emerge from the need to regain predictability in an opaque system. The absence of transparent rules motivates workers to collectively reconstruct algorithmic logic through experience and peer communication. Their tactics reflect a desire to reassert agency in a system where traditional managerial negotiation is absent. These dynamics explain why autonomy manifests in hybrid forms of constraint and creativity.

Variability in autonomy experiences is explained by individual differences in digital literacy and platform familiarity. Workers who understand algorithmic patterns can strategically optimize their workflows. Those with limited literacy face greater uncertainty and dependence on digital directives. The interplay of technical competence and algorithmic governance explains why autonomy is unevenly distributed across the workforce.

Future research must expand beyond descriptive accounts toward evaluative frameworks that assess the ethical, legal, and social impacts of algorithmic management. Scholars should investigate how transparency interventions, audit mechanisms, or worker feedback tools reshape autonomy in practice. The next phase of research must critically examine how algorithmic systems can uphold worker rights while maintaining platform functionality. These investigations are essential for ensuring equitable digital labor environments.

Platform companies should integrate participatory design approaches that involve workers in shaping algorithmic tools. Worker input may lead to more intuitive interfaces, fairer scoring systems, and more predictable task allocation models. Platforms can experiment with explainable AI models that clarify why decisions are made. These interventions represent promising avenues for improving the balance between efficiency and autonomy.

Policymakers must develop governance frameworks that reflect the complexity of algorithmic labor. Regulatory priorities may include algorithmic transparency, right-to-explanation provisions, and protections against automated unfairness. Policies must acknowledge that digital labor is not governed through traditional managerial hierarchies but through probabilistic systems that require new accountability standards. Action from regulators will be critical as platform economies continue to expand globally.

Labor advocates and worker communities should organize support networks that help workers interpret algorithmic systems. Collective intelligence represents a powerful counterweight to structural opacity. Community-based learning platforms and digital literacy programs may empower workers to navigate algorithmic environments more effectively. Practical interventions in this direction can help restore a measure of autonomy within digital labor ecosystems.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study lies in the identification of autonomy as a negotiated and context-dependent construct rather than a binary condition diminished or preserved by algorithmic oversight. The results demonstrate that workers simultaneously encounter structured constraints and cultivate adaptive strategies that reconfigure their sense of agency within algorithmic systems. This differentiated insight departs from conventional narratives that portray algorithmic management solely as a mechanism of labor control, revealing instead a dynamic interplay between digital governance, socio-economic dependency, and emergent worker agency. The central contribution of this study, therefore, is the articulation of autonomy as a relational and situational practice shaped by human–algorithm interactions in the gig economy.

The research offers substantive conceptual value by advancing a multidimensional framework for understanding algorithmic governance and labor autonomy, integrating interpretive phenomenological analysis with digital ethnographic observation. This approach contributes methodological novelty by capturing real-time interactions between workers and platform algorithms, thereby revealing processes of meaning-making that traditional survey-based models often overlook. The study enriches scholarly discourse by demonstrating how platform literacy, collective knowledge-sharing, and affective responses form critical components of autonomy in algorithmically mediated environments. The conceptual and methodological contributions position this research as a foundation for refining theoretical models of digital labor and expanding qualitative inquiry into AI-driven management systems.

The study is limited by its geographically bounded sample, reliance on self-reported experiences, and focus on ride-hailing and delivery platforms, which may not fully represent algorithmic management across other forms of gig work or international contexts. Future research should incorporate comparative cross-country analyses to examine how regulatory frameworks, cultural norms, and platform design variations shape experiences of autonomy under algorithmic governance. Broader methodological extensions, including mixed-method approaches and experimental interventions, may capture additional dimensions of worker–algorithm interaction. Such expansions would enhance the external validity of the findings and deepen understanding of how algorithmic management evolves within diverse labor ecosystems.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

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