

---

# Gigging as Resilience: Managing emergent life situations and job transitions

**Zefeng Zhang**

Syracuse University  
Syracuse, NY 13006, USA  
zzhan208@syr.edu

## Abstract

Current discourse on life transition focuses on the role that social media platforms such as Facebook play in enabling people to navigate life disruptions. Yet, little is known about how gig platforms help people through emergent life situations and transitions. With China's booming gig economy, a number of US K-12 teachers have begun offering their services via Chinese education gig platforms. This study reports on a qualitative interview study with 19 US gig teachers to explore their practices and motivations. We found that

Permission to make digital or hard copies of part or all of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. Copyrights for third-party components of this work must be honored. For all other uses, contact the owner/author(s).

*CHI 2020 Extended Abstracts, April 25–30, 2020, Honolulu, HI, USA.*

© 2020 Copyright is held by the owner/author(s).

ACM ISBN 978-1-4503-6819-3/20/04.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1145/3334480.XXXXXXX>

\*update the above block & DOI per your rightsreview confirmation (provided after acceptance)

teachers are subjected to emotional labor and face systematic marginalization in traditional contexts. Gig platforms enable teachers to reconfigure their daily routines and to manage emergent life situations. However, additional challenges and emotional work are also created, subduing teachers. We then conclude discussing the importance to further understand how gig platforms are a social technology that can help people build resilience while in transition.

## Author Keywords

Interview; Qualitative Methods; Gig Economy; Emotional Labor; Learning, Education and Family.

## CSS Concepts

• **Human computer interaction (HCI); User studies; Human Factors, Empirical studies in HCI**

## Introduction

When professionals encounter transitions, which include job changes and emergent life situations, social support from family and friends has been an important avenue to help them go through predicaments. Advances in Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) have not only introduced new avenues for people to collaborate and communicate, but also the creation of

**This project was initially inspired by the burgeoning of online gig education platforms in China, as well as news reports regarding US K-12 teachers embracing the gig economy to cope with their struggles in schools. To guide our study, we focused on the following research questions:**

RQ1: What are US K12 teachers' motivations on online gig platforms?

RQ2: What are the challenges and perceived advantages of teaching online?

new forms of employment [20]. Such advancement in ICTs also enables people to build resilience, meaning people's ability to bounce back from threat or vulnerability [11] in transition. ICTs have unshackled normative working structures by enabling new types of work organization that grant additional flexibility and assign works based on demand and availability[7]. One of the most salient trends is the rise of the "gig economy", which refers to "individuals performing small tasks as independent contractors through digital platforms."<sup>[1]</sup>.

In this study we focus on the job transition of US K-12 (kindergarten to 12th grade) brick-and-mortar teachers in the gig economy. Previous work on the gig economy has focused on popular platforms including TaskRabbit, Uber, Lyft and Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk)[20][8] [16][2][12], covering topics including earnings[9], employment bias[8], cost-benefits risks[6], legal concerns[1][20], income disparity[3][5], and information infrastructure[17]. Recently, a growing body of research on the gig economy has focused on Algorithmic control[18]; for instance, researchers have discovered that Uber is a totalitarian system as it utilizes algorithmic-based management[13], "automated implementation of company policies" to discipline drivers' behaviors and practices[15]. However, there is a dearth of work to understand gig platforms through the lens of resilience in an education setting. This study intends to fill the gap.

We focus on VIPKid, the largest education gig platform in China, which offers Chinese children 25-minute one-on-one online English lessons from native speakers in North America. VIPKid was founded by Chinese entrepreneur Cindy Mi in 2013. Currently, it is the largest platform of its kind, with over 600,000 students

and 70,000 teachers. Other similar platforms include Gogokid and Whales English. Such platforms use live-streaming technology to create a real-time online English learning environment. Teachers are hired as independent contractors and are paid on a per-class basis.

## **Method**

We interviewed 19 US brick-and-mortar schoolteachers from 14 states (15 white and 4 non-white) between March and April 2019. Our interviewees are well educated (nine BA and 10 MEd), with ages ranging from 27 to 58. To address our research questions, we applied qualitative methodology, as outlined by Strauss and Corbin[4] and Yin[19]. The semi-structured interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 4.5 hours, averaging approximately 90 minutes each.

The interview protocol was designed to explore teachers' life histories and experiences gigging online. We asked about their life stories before, during, and after transitioning to gigging. At the end of the interview, we asked our interviewees if we could friend them on social media networks or access their gig platform profiles, as we saw these as important sources from which to retrieve and validate prior experience.

We used an approach derived from grounded theory [4] to analyze our interview data. We conducted interactive and inductive analyses of the 19 interview transcriptions using open coding and memoing, followed by different levels of analysis. Several codes - which included managing emergent life situations, feeling burned out, being treated like glorified babysitters, and feeling underappreciated - emerged. Then, we created different categories for the emergent

### **Teachers perform emotional labor in school**

*Obviously people, they praise teachers or praise you for wanting to become a teacher, but teaching is looked at as kind of second rate (laugh) as far as other people's perception of education in general; people like to say that it's a noble profession, but they definitely don't treat it as such. (T6)*

*The people I worked with, like lived, ate, slept, and breathed working for their students in the classroom; it happened to me... I don't regret working in an environment like that, but at this point in my life, I can't be that kind of crazy anymore, because I have my own children who need to stay alive, and I have to put my own children ahead of the students that I teach. (T10)*

codes and reached a consensus on distinct themes after collapsing and merging codes.

### **Results**

#### *Motivation and challenges in teaching*

Teachers have a very strong propensity for social good. Their motivations to teach are emotionally tied and deeply embedded in their identities, where identity is defined as a person's self-concept[11]. Among 19 interviewees, 13 perceive teaching as a natural choice, as it aligns well with their personalities. However, emotionally taxing brick-and-mortar teaching and a stifled educational infrastructure inhibits teachers' ability to adapt to new changes, as we next describe.

Consistent with prior research, we found that teachers perform emotional work in brick-and-mortar institutions[21][14]. The majority of teachers experience burnout from their work. They spend significant time and energy engaging in non-teaching-related work, including dealing with students' behavioral issues. Teachers also reported facing diminishing respect from students' parents, institutions, as well as society in general (e.g., with teaching being viewed as a second-rate profession (T6) and with teachers being treated like glorified babysitters).

A stifled education infrastructure imposes additional challenges to teachers. Most of our interviewees revealed that they experience financial struggles, low pay, and static salaries. This rigid system also doesn't offer enough support to teachers who experience changes in their lives. When P10 found out that her job couldn't really support her family, she had to resign.

After becoming a new mother, T14 experienced tiredness due to a lack of sleep, but she said that she was still expected to "give a hundred percent" without any excuses.

#### *Gig platforms enable resilience*

We found that education gig platforms enable resilience by offering teachers a way to positively reconfigure their lives. Our interviewees revealed that such a system facilitates a way to manage emergent life situations such as having children (T2, T3), retirement (T12, T17), job changes (T3, T4, T9, T10), and meeting family needs (T5,T6,T8,T13,T17). Six interviewees revealed that they are still passionate about teaching but they either feel stuck or no longer want to teach in brick-and-mortar institutions. Gigging online became a desirable alternative for them. It also offers a support path for teachers who encounter severe sickness. T11, an Asian American teacher, was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease back in 2013. Her illness changed the outlook of her career, as teaching in school became both physically and mentally challenging. In 2017, she resigned and moved to a different state. Missing the challenge of teaching, T11 signed up for to an online teaching platform, which allows her to continue her teaching practice.

Such education platforms were designed in a way that enables teachers to follow their initial motivation while helping them to reconfigure their life. Teachers are allocated based on their availability and expertise, which affords them "flexibility", as reported by 15 interviewees. Teachers are also paid by the number of classes they teach, with a competitive rate. The system also transforms the teaching environment from an individualistic to a collective one through livestreaming.

### **Reconfiguring emotional labor via gigging:**

*I didn't have any alternatives, what I knew, and had I had another option, I don't know that I would have chosen to go back into teaching. It was a necessity, I needed to get a job, and that was the easiest job I could get, because I was used to it, and it was the norm... I was looking for an alternative to get out of the situation that I'm in. This [gigging] looks like a very good alternative (T19)*

*I am working at my current job, but I would like to also have something on the side. Our plan is that once we do get pregnant and have a baby, I most likely won't be going back to my brick-and-mortar job, I would only be doing something like VIPKid at home so I'm able to have the flexibility to stay home with my children. (P3)*

Teachers also benefit from the differences in US and Chinese attitudes toward teachers. Instead of being treated as "equals"[10], the teachers are placed at the center of the education process and granted with respect. Most of our interviewees feel more respected by parents and students from China. Meanwhile, the majority of teachers' non-teaching-related work is delegated or solved through design. Thirteen interviewees reported that they have a much lower workload and have more energy for their students and families due to the design of such platforms.

Embedded with collectivist values, online education platforms also enable the labor of teaching to transform from an individual labor to a collective labor, granting teachers autonomy and enabling resiliency. Our interviewees repetitively brought up the human mediators "learning partners" and "firemen" during the interview. Those are mediators hired by the platforms to alleviate teachers' burdens. Such tasks are also delegated to artificial intelligence, to further eliminate teachers' emotional labor. For instance, voice and facial recognition systems are used to report on students' reaction rates and concentration levels. Auto-generated feedback is also sent to parents so that teachers' feedback can mainly focus on what they teach in class.

#### *Challenges in gigging*

Our interviewees also reported challenges while teaching online. Despite AI offloading some of the teachers' burdens, their teaching behaviors end up being under scrutiny. T3 revealed that she observed the company using algorithms to quantify her workload. For instance, a pay raise can depend on the number of classes taught, parents' evaluations and class cancellations. Teachers also reported engaging in

emotional labor online due to the precariousness nature of gig work. To maintain a client base for steady income, our informants broadcast their daily activities via livestreaming and engage in substitute online teaching, investing additional hours to get higher ratings. Teachers employ strategies such as switching platforms and joining online communities to help to maintain their teaching presence. Despite the new challenges, among 19 interviewees, four teachers have switched to teaching online full time, while six plan to make the same move soon. The rest, meanwhile, rely on online platforms solely to manage emergent situations.

### **Conclusions**

In our study, we found that the gig economy enables resilience by facilitating people to manage emergent situations such as having a baby, facing retirement, or changing jobs. Meanwhile, such a system also redirects emotional labor through collective design. However, as our teachers (emotional labor) make transitions from serving as full-time teachers in traditional environments to becoming part-time or full-time teachers through gig platforms, some of the emotionality of the new work remains; they still perform emotional labor after the transition. We propose to further understand how gig platforms as a sociotechnical system enable resilience among emotional labors. Such understanding could not only help us repurpose or build new systems to help professionals manage emergent situations, but also better support emotional workers transitioning from offline to online working environments in the gig economy.

### **Acknowledgements**

I thank Bryan Semaan, my advisor, for his great mentorship, iSchool students Rufeng Chen, Dinesh Challa and Guo Xiang for their comments and help with the transcription, and our interviewees for their time.

## References

- [1] Abi Adams, Judith Freedman, and Jeremias Prassl. 2018. Rethinking legal taxonomies for the gig economy. *Oxf Rev Econ Policy* 34, 3 (July 2018), 475–494.  
DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxrep/gry006>
- [2] Rachael Burke and Jacob Broderick. 2017. Navigating the gig: rideshare drivers and mobile technologies in context. In *Proceedings of the 35th ACM International Conference on the Design of Communication - SIGDOC '17*, 1–6.  
DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1145/3121113.3121233>
- [3] Cody Cook, Rebecca Diamond, Jonathan Hall, John List, and Paul Oyer. 2018. *The Gender Earnings Gap in the Gig Economy: Evidence from over a Million Rideshare Drivers*. National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA.  
DOI:<https://doi.org/10.3386/w24732>
- [4] Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss. 2008. *Basics of Qualitative Research (3rd ed.): Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. SAGE Publications, Inc., 2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks California 91320 United States.  
DOI:<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452230153>
- [5] Eureka Foong, Nicholas Vincent, Brent Hecht, and Elizabeth M. Gerber. 2018. Women (Still) Ask For Less: Gender Differences in Hourly Rate in an Online Labor Marketplace. *Proc. ACM Hum.-Comput. Interact.* 2, CSCW (November 2018), 53:1–53:21.  
DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1145/3274322>
- [6] Mark Graham, Isis Hjorth, and Vili Lehdonvirta. 2017. Digital labour and development: Impacts of global digital labour platforms and the gig economy on worker livelihoods. *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* 23, 2 (May 2017), 135–162.  
DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1024258916687250>
- [7] Damian Grimshaw, Fang-Lee Cooke, Irena Grugulis, and Steve Vincent. 2002. New technology and changing organisational forms: implications for managerial control and skills. *New Technology, Work and Employment* 17, 3 (2002), 186–203.  
DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-005X.00104>
- [8] Anikó Hannák, Claudia Wagner, David Garcia, Alan Mislove, Markus Strohmaier, and Christo Wilson. 2017. Bias in Online Freelance Marketplaces: Evidence from TaskRabbit and Fiverr. In *Proceedings of the 2017 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing (CSCW '17)*, 1914–1933.  
DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1145/2998181.2998327>
- [9] Kotaro Hara, Abi Adams, Kristy Milland, Saiph Savage, Chris Callison-Burch, and Jeffrey Bigham. 2017. A Data-Driven Analysis of Workers' Earnings on Amazon Mechanical Turk. *arXiv:1712.05796 [cs]* (December 2017). Retrieved February 3, 2019 from <http://arxiv.org/abs/1712.05796>
- [10] Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov. 2010. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind, Third Edition*. McGraw Hill Professional.
- [11] Herminia Ibarra and Jennifer L. Petriglieri. 2010. Identity work and play. *Journal of OrgChange*

- Mgmt* 23, 1 (February 2010), 10–25.  
DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1108/09534811011017180>
- [12]James M. Kendra and Tricia Wachtendorf. 2003. Elements of Resilience After the World Trade Center Disaster: Reconstituting New York City's Emergency Operations Centre. *Disasters* 27, 1 (2003), 37–53. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7717.00218>
- [13]Ning F. Ma, Chien Wen Yuan, Moojan Ghafurian, and Benjamin V. Hanrahan. 2018. Using Stakeholder Theory to Examine Drivers' Stake in Uber. In *Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (CHI '18), 83:1–83:12. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1145/3173574.3173657>
- [14]Mareike Mohlmann and Lior Zalmanson. 2017. Hands on the Wheel: Navigating Algorithmic Management and Uber Drivers' Autonomy. *ICIS 2017 Proceedings* (December 2017). Retrieved from <https://aisel.aisnet.org/icis2017/DigitalPlatforms/Presentations/3>
- [15]Izhar Oplatka. 2007. Managing Emotions in Teaching: Toward an Understanding of Emotion Displays and Caring as Nonprescribed Role Elements. *Teachers College Record* 109, 6 (2007), 1374–1400.
- [16]Alex Rosenblat and Luke Stark. 2016. Algorithmic labor and information asymmetries: a case study of Uber's drivers. *International journal of communication (Online)* (July 2016), 3758-. Retrieved March 11, 2019 from [http://3A%2Flink.galegroup.com%2Fapps%2Fdoc%2FA491909937%2FAONE%3Fu%3Dnysl\\_sc\\_cornl%26sid%3DAONE%26id%3D284e669c](http://3A%2Flink.galegroup.com%2Fapps%2Fdoc%2FA491909937%2FAONE%3Fu%3Dnysl_sc_cornl%26sid%3DAONE%26id%3D284e669c)
- [17]Joel Ross, Lilly Irani, M. Six Silberman, Andrew Zaldivar, and Bill Tomlinson. 2010. Who Are the Crowdworkers?: Shifting Demographics in Mechanical Turk. In *CHI '10 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (CHI EA '10), 2863–2872. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1145/1753846.1753873>
- [18]Will Sutherland and Mohammad Hossein Jarrahi. 2017. The Gig Economy and Information Infrastructure: The Case of the Digital Nomad Community. *Proc. ACM Hum.-Comput. Interact.* 1, CSCW (December 2017), 97:1–97:24. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1145/3134732>
- [19]Alex J Wood, Mark Graham, Vili Lehdonvirta, and Isis Hjorth. 2019. Good Gig, Bad Gig: Autonomy and Algorithmic Control in the Global Gig Economy. *Work, Employment and Society* 33, 1 (February 2019), 56–75. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017018785616>
- [20]Robert K Yin. 2003. *Case study research: design and methods* (3rd ed. ed.). Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, Calif.
- [21]Uber, Taskrabbit, & Co: Platforms as Employers? Rethinking the Legal Analysis of Crowdwork by Jeremias Prassl, Martin Risak :: SSRN. Retrieved March 11, 2019 from [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2733003](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2733003)
- [22]Too emotional to be capable? The changing nature of emotion work in definitions of 'capable teaching': Journal of Education Policy: Vol 22, No 6. Retrieved August 4, 2019 from <https://www-tandfonline-com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/doi/full/10.1080/02680930701625312>