

Labor Market Transformation in the Hospitality Gig Economy in a Post-pandemic Era: Impacts of Institutional Governance

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Abstract

Purpose: The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the food delivery sector to boom as people continue to rely on services provided by online catering platforms (OCPs). However, due to the nature of sharing economy employment, gig workers' contributions went largely ignored until intervention from institutional governance. This study explores the impacts of labor market transformation after the Chinese government issued guidance to promote gig workers' welfare as a focal case.

Methodology: Focus groups and the Delphi technique were used to explore associated impacts on OCPs and gig workers based on governance theory.

Findings: Results show that institutional governance negatively affected OCPs' operating cost structure but sustained gig workers' welfare. The dual effects of market mechanism and institutional governance in the sharing economy are needed to be balanced for labor market transformation.

Originality: We suggest that moving from market governance to stakeholder governance, as mediated by state governance, could transform gig workers' labor structure in the gig economy. This study presents an integrated governance theory to enhance the epistemology of institutional governance.

Research Implications: Long-term equilibrium can be fulfilled given the growing food-related demand for the market mechanism. Social reciprocity is expected to be realized through institutional governance for gig workers' welfare.

Limitations: Qualitative in-depth investigations limit findings' broader generalizability.

Keywords: COVID-19, gig economy, labor market transformation, gig workers, institutional governance

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has sparked an economic downturn touching various industries (So *et al.*, 2021). The online food delivery sector is an exception in the hospitality domain (Kaur *et al.*, 2021, Wang *et al.*, 2021), given people's reliance on services provided by online catering platforms (OCPs). Issues related to OCP gig workers' welfare have also become more prominent during the pandemic due to complex circumstances. First, OCPs' sales have grown substantially thanks to governments' physical distancing policies that led citizens to stay home and limit non-essential contact with others. Yet these increased sales solely benefit suppliers, not gig workers. Second, OCPs have partnered with conventional restaurants to sustain the traditional catering industry. Many restaurateurs temporarily laid off staff and shut down due to the pandemic (Chan, 2020). Some restaurants survived because they could cooperate with food delivery platforms to offer takeout, leading to gig worker exploitation based on heavier workloads. Third, OCPs provided informal employment and an economic lifeline to many individuals who lost their jobs amid the pandemic (Baum and Hai, 2020, Baum *et al.*, 2020): as the hospitality industry endured thousands of closures during COVID-19, many practitioners turned to gig employment to survive the economic decline (Leung and Low, 2020, Southey, 2020). Welfare-related concerns have yet to be rectified.

Little research has considered free-market and institutional-governance mechanisms present in the gig economy when the labor market failed because of gig economy attributes. Gig workers contributed to food suppliers, consumers, and OCPs in the face of COVID-19 restrictions. Hao *et al.* (2020) recommended that hospitality businesses reformulate their human resource strategies to cope with the pandemic's ongoing negative impacts. Hospitality businesses have been encouraged to reduce non-essential labor cost flexibility by utilizing gig workers through service socialization (Hao *et al.*, 2020). However, the gig economy's human resource practices have violated many well-defined labor guidelines. The catering and food delivery sectors have relied on OCP gig workers to withstand the pandemic, but employers have not addressed their profound contributions. Gig worker practices thus present new issues (Godovykh *et al.*, 2022) as conventional hospitality businesses seek to optimize human resource costs by capitalizing on work flexibility prevalent in the gig economy (Healy *et al.*, 2017).

This study conceptualizes the initial transformation of shared human resources upon which platform intermediaries (e.g., food delivery platforms) operate by connecting service requesters (e.g., organizations or consumers) with on-demand gig workers (Meijerink and Keegan, 2019, Wu *et al.*, 2019). The gig economy has long been viewed through a post-Fordist lens owing to its worker autonomy, flexibility, skill development opportunities, and employment opportunities (Vrasti, 2021). Meanwhile, many scholars have dissented based on Taylorism (Ahsan, 2020, Kaine and Josserand, 2019, Lamberton, 2018, Moragra, 2017, Stewart and Stanford, 2017, Todolí-Signes, 2017). Tan *et al.* (2021) separated ethical and legal concerns about the gig economy into three categories—the new organization of work, the pristine nature of work, and workers' latest status—to encourage deliberation and policy responses. The prototypical employer-employee relationship

has been redefined in this economy; workers are classified as partners or independent contractors so that employers can offload contractual responsibilities (Furunes and Mkono, 2019). McKeown (2016) asserted that the gig economy challenges prevailing orthodoxies: it falls through systemic regulatory and conceptual gaps based on traditional employment notions and places work exploitation in the gig economy under a spotlight (Ahsan, 2020, Lamberton, 2018, Moragra, 2017).

Potential worker exploitation has sparked academic debate about whether intermediaries should be legally regulated within the traditional independent contracting framework (Wu *et al.*, 2019). Given fundamental differences between gig workers and independent contractors (Stewart and Stanford, 2017), many scholars have called for specific regulations of labor protections in the gig economy rather than extending existing labor laws (Kaine and Josserand, 2019, Todolí-Signes, 2017). Despite its market-oriented nature, the gig economy demands government interventions to operate within a well-developed governance system and support a new labor transformation (Tronsor, 2018). These regulations can contribute to flexible and welfare forms of production (Goods *et al.*, 2019, Robinson *et al.*, 2019). Governance issues in the gig economy are attracting ongoing attention (Vallas and Schor, 2020). Even so, most studies have been conceptual in encouraging government-led governance (Wu *et al.*, 2019), leaving a significant knowledge void surrounding the effectiveness of specific governance from gig workers' points of view (Ashford *et al.*, 2018).

One of the most current and vital governance systems, the “Guides on Implementing the Responsibilities of Online Catering Platforms for Effectively Protecting the Rights and Interests of Food Delivery Personnel” (the Guides), was jointly issued by seven departments in mainland China (including the State Administration for Market Regulation of China) in July 2021. This newly launched governance system serves as government intervention against platform capitalism in the gig economy. OCPs must now shoulder responsibility for gig workers' welfare, resulting in additional operating costs (Yu *et al.*, 2021). In addition to impacts on OCPs, the Guides tackle the unregulated marketplace of the gig economy to promote flexible and welfare forms of labor productivity in the second labor market transformation, as described by Tronsor (2018). Li and Singal (2021) systematically reviewed 120 hospitality studies on governance and argued that most works had considered the effects of governance on firms (e.g., OCPs) while overlooking consequences for employees (e.g., gig workers). The current study thus explores the Guides' impacts on the shared labor market from 1) the supply side (i.e., gig workers' human resource transformation) and 2) the demand side (i.e., OCPs' role in the gig economy). We specifically discuss the long-term problems associated with OCPs' exploitation of gig workers. This study contributes to governance theories to answer questions about gig workers' welfare issues while urging OCPs to pursue innovative hospitality operations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Online Catering Platforms' Growth via Dynamic Equilibrium amid COVID-19

Various stakeholders have commended OCPs' impressive sustainability and resilience in the face of ambiguity, such as the pandemic (Baum and Hai, 2020, Baum *et al.*, 2020, Heylighen, 2017). A recent article from Food Navigator titled "Online food delivery 'one of the only winners' in coronavirus outbreak" captures a phenomenon in which the pandemic has boosted the OCP sector in both revenue and user numbers (Leung and Low, 2020, Southey, 2020) due to prevention and control measures. Deliveroo, an OCP in Hong Kong, reported that the company's sales and orders doubled in the first quarter of 2020 (Leung and Low, 2020). In these times, OCPs represent more than an "innovative disruptor" in the economy (Guttentag, 2015); they have unveiled a cooperative relationship between the conventional hospitality industry and broader society (Mahato *et al.*, 2021, Spurk and Straub, 2020).

As an economic structure supported by demand and supply, the OCP sector has skyrocketed during the pandemic. For example, Deliveroo reported a 25% jump in restaurant partners in 2020. Restaurants' inquiries for collaboration with Food Panda have also quadrupled. Generally, the price equilibrium remains stable when suppliers quickly meet rising demand by increasing their food delivery capacity and employment (Cernuschi *et al.*, 2018). Henderson (2020) reported an approximate 150% rise in gig workers in the United States, contributing more than \$1 trillion to its economy. The scale of the OCP sector is expected to grow continuously—based on not only a rapid shift in societal attitudes toward informal employment (Zafar and Perepu, 2020) but also a workforce transition from full-time to self-employed workers in the hospitality industry (Cheremond, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has simultaneously accelerated OCPs' growth and gig workers' welfare issues as a result.

2.2 *Employment Structure in the Gig Economy*

The unanticipated social upheaval associated with COVID-19 has altered the hospitality industry's employment structure (Baum, 2015). Hao *et al.* (2020) recommended that affiliated businesses reformulate their human resource strategies to cope with the consequences of the pandemic. In particular, hospitality businesses have been encouraged to "reduce non-essential costs by utilizing gig workers" (Hao *et al.*, 2020). COVID-19 has shown how the gig economy's human resource structure can change the hospitality labor market by introducing more flexible, creative work settings (Kastelle, 2013). PricewaterhouseCoopers urged companies not to ignore employment trends in the gig economy, suggesting that firms should consider incorporating this employment structure into their operations (Osztoivits and Nagy, 2015). Informal employment represents a critical work trend in a post-COVID-19 world. More than 32% of organizations plan to replace their full-time employees with contingent workers as a cost-saving measure (Cheremond, 2020). The labor market is now mixed, with more informal employees being present.

Employing part-time and temporary workers is nothing new in the hospitality industry; work has been overhauled to emphasize flexibility and cost savings since the 1980s (Watson *et al.*, 2003). However, the pandemic has led gig work to prevail in hospitality to optimize human resource allocation by capitalizing on work flexibility. Stewart and Stanford (2017) summarized four unique

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characteristics of gig workers: working an irregular schedule based on customer demand, self-supplying some work-related materials (e.g., vehicles or mobile phones), receiving salaries at a piece rate, and receiving instruments (e.g., work schedule and location) from online platforms. Healy *et al.* (2017) described gig workers as “additional go-between platform companies and buyers in the form of couriers” (p. 233), with Zervas *et al.* (2017) stressing workforce flexibility as a catalyst for gig economy growth.

OCPs have enjoyed blooming market share and revenue but have neglected to acknowledge gig workers’ contributions. Meanwhile, these workers find themselves in high-stress settings facing heavy workloads, long hours, low job security, and limited socialization (Jabagi *et al.*, 2019, Kaine and Josserand, 2019, Watson *et al.*, 2003). Relevant discussions have revolved around enhancing gig workers’ job satisfaction and reducing turnover intention (Ariza-Montes *et al.*, 2018). However, OCPs did not truly contemplate solutions to gig workers’ welfare issues until the Guides were implemented in China.

2.3 Reforming Through Institutional Governance

The gig economy is an innovative system that effectively uses fragmented production factors, including human resources, which have been outsourced to third agents based on the ontology of economic self-interest (Kirchner and Schüßler, 2020). Despite the gig economy’s resilience and flexibility, governments hold conflicting views on intervening in and governing the cost-shifting nature of gig-based human resources. Haveman and Nedzhvetskaya (2022) asserted that only a well-developed governance system could balance liberal capitalism and social welfare in the gig economy. Equalizing the market mechanism and government intervention is challenging but necessary (Lamberton, 2018, Todolí-Signes, 2017).

Countries typically adopt two tactics to mitigate human resource obstacles tied to the gig economy. These methods can be conceptualized on a continuum ranging from prohibition to protection (Nica and Potcovaru, 2015). The first approach is akin to prohibiting governments from taking drastic action against gig business operations. Courts have declared that transportation-sharing services with non-professional drivers are illegal in Belgium, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands. The U.S. state of California similarly fined Uber \$7.3 million for illegally treating drivers as contractors and suspended the company’s operations state-wide. However, the effectiveness of this strict approach remains doubtful. Many gig workers continue not to heed government mandates: they either operate until they are noticed and then fight back in court or educate stakeholders on the benefits of the sharing economy until the government finally relents (Marchi and Parekh, 2015). Bansal (2020) asserted that this method is unrealistic because OCPs in the gig economy has already permeated the hospitality industry.

The second tactic involves designing and passing regulations to protect the legal operations of gig economy businesses. For example, the Singaporean government allowed transportation-sharing service providers who attended a 25-hour vocational license course to operate legally (Lim, 2017). While these practices seem to favor protection over prohibition when regulating the sharing

economy (Nica and Potcovaru, 2015), they are primarily designed to benefit consumers; the strategies do not serve any essential protective role for gig workers (Katta *et al.*, 2020). Robinson *et al.* (2019) maintained that such protection guidance has lagged behind all-industry comparisons. (Leung and Magramo, 2020), Leung (2020) also identified underdeveloped regulations in gig economy employment because many food delivery gig workers do not receive sick leave or compensation even if they are injured on the job. Underdeveloped laws have led many scholars to view the gig economy from a neo-Fordist perspective. Researchers have hence criticized the rhetoric around post-Fordist notions of flexibility and authority that have obscured possible labor policy violations in the gig economy (Goods *et al.*, 2019, Lamberton, 2018, Ravenelle, 2019).

2.4 Typology and Application of Governance Theory

Governance has long been an area of interest in the hospitality literature to quell the argument around free-market or state governance mechanisms from industry and gig workers' perspectives (Ruhanen *et al.*, 2010). The hospitality industry's dynamic external environment has spawned numerous governance mechanisms (Singal, 2015). The emphasis on transitioning from top-down forms of bureaucracy to bottom-up decision-making input to develop competitive advantages (Zeppel, 2012) follows two lines.

First, many scholars have viewed governance from a strategic management standpoint regarding how industry structure and firm attributes contribute to competitive advantages. The hospitality industry has historically consisted of small to medium enterprises. Numerous investigations have thus pondered how governance should be leveraged to address corporate problems (Guillet and Mattila, 2010). Foci include fostering firm transformation (Utami *et al.*, 2020), achieving better firm performance (Madanoglu *et al.*, 2018 & Ozdemir, 2018), promoting corporate social responsibility (Uyar *et al.*, 2020), and solving agency problems (Altin *et al.*, 2016).

The second research area assumes a political economy stance. Different from the first line of work, which suggests that competitive advantages are born from corporate strategies, this perspective argues that governments and institutions are more critical to such advantages (Beaumont and Dredge, 2010, Hall, 2013). Destination governance scholars have primarily harnessed this state-centric approach to determine how governments and destination management organizations should wield national policies and institutional frameworks to establish competitive advantages in the tourism industry (Amore and Hall, 2016, Go and Trunfio, 2012, Wang *et al.*, 2022).

Even though these viewpoints seem contradictory in conceptualizing competitive advantages, they are complementary in their mutual neglect of each other's insights (Murtha and Lenway, 1994). Strategic management overlooks the instability of the external environment implying that a highly competitive economy with limited market intervention can realize optimal competitiveness. By contrast, the political economy perspective ignores industrial and organizational differences to promote a managed economy and build competitive advantages. Griffiths and Zammuto (2005) proposed four governance mechanisms: 1) state governance, 2) stakeholder governance, 3) market governance and 4) corporate governance along two axes (i.e., state involvement–market-driven

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and value chain integration–value chain fragmentation). Figure 1 depicts the governance theory typology that can balance business competitiveness with gig workers’ welfare. As a flourishing sector, OCPs comprise a flexible and market governance mechanism in delegating control among OCPs who retain authority over key economic activities for profit (Vallas and Schor, 2020). Thus, OCPs’ cost–profit nature leaves gig workers’ welfare concerns untouched until government interventions are implemented to tackle possible worker exploitation (Lamberton, 2018).

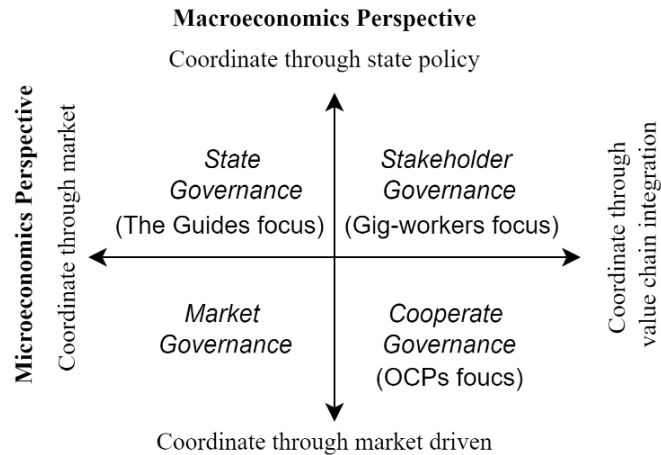


Figure 1. Typology of Governance Theory

2.5 A Governance System in Mainland China for OCPs

The Chinese food delivery sector has contributed more than one-third (\$38.4 billion) of global revenue (\$95.4 billion) (Zhao and Bacao, 2020). The launch of the Guides in 2021 drove an ongoing shift from cooperative or market governance to state governance in the OCP industry. Li and Singal (2021) echoed this observation by pointing out that gig-economy growth continues to strengthen cooperative or market governance mechanisms that need to be balanced. They further called for a transformational mechanism (e.g., a state governance mechanism) to balance corporate competitiveness and gig workers’ welfare.

As an initial model of a state governance mechanism, the Guides cover seven areas to promote gig workers’ labor welfare and well-being: 1) guaranteeing labor income; 2) ensuring labor safety; 3) maintaining food safety; 4) improving social security; 5) optimizing the work environment; 6) strengthening organizational construction; and 7) providing conflict resolution mechanisms (Table 1) (Chinanews, 2021). Despite not yet containing explicit laws, the Guides have generated extensive conversation regarding their possible impacts on the sector (Xu and Gao, 2021). The adverse effects of state governance mechanisms on firm performance are well documented in hospitality (Chen *et al.*, 2017, Wang *et al.*, 2014). The Guides were expected to induce additional operating costs and reduce OCPs’ profitability. This argument is reflected in OCPs’ market situation; the Hong Kong stock price for Meituan, mainland China’s food delivery giant, has fallen by more than 15% (Yu *et al.*, 2021).

Table 1. Details of the Guides

Areas	Details
1. Guaranteeing labor income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow the local minimum wage standard Relax the delivery time limit
2. Ensuring labor safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve the platform order dispatch mechanism Provide traffic safety education and training Reduce labor intensity
3. Maintaining food safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide food safety knowledge training Formulate food safety regulations for food delivery services
4. Improving social security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer social insurance for food delivery personnel Offer pilot job injury insurance for food delivery personnel Provide diversified commercial insurance protection schemes
5. Optimizing the work environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide wearable devices such as smart helmets Provide temporary accommodation for food delivery personnel
6. Strengthening organizational construction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote the establishment of trade union organizations Improve the support and security system Promote labor rights
7. Launching conflict resolution mechanism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a coordination mechanism to promote labor rights and interests Implement territorial responsibilities

However, as a governance mechanism developed to tackle worker exploitation and promote gig workers' welfare, the Guides are anticipated to influence OCPs' operations and gig workers' experiences. The Guides address gig worker exploitation and the lack of job welfare. The impacts of the Guides are not necessarily positive from gig workers' perspectives, mainly because these workers' dissatisfaction with formal bureaucracy was a primary motivation for joining the gig economy from the outset (i.e., for flexibility) (Lin *et al.*, 2020). Ashford *et al.* (2018) advocated for more empirical investigations into how governance mechanisms affect stakeholders in the gig economy. Li and Singal (2021) subsequently pointed out the paucity of work amplifying gig workers' voices in the hospitality literature.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

This study adopted a mixed-methods qualitative design to present exploratory in-depth insights about the Guides' impacts on concerned stakeholders. Because of pandemic circumstances, a focus group and the Delphi technique were implemented through online and offline mixed conferencing. The study design is outlined in Table 2, indicating measurement credibility and sampling distributions without bias (Lohr, 2021). Focus groups are discussion-based interviews that produce verbal data generated via group interaction (Millward, 1995). First, five university and five institutional panels related to China's food delivery sector were recruited via snowball sampling to discuss the Guides' effects on OCPs and gig workers to provide academic and practical viewpoints. All panel members were familiar with the Guides and knowledgeable about the

sharing economy. Data obtained from the focus group captured dynamic perspectives through which people interact, express, and develop their views (Litosseliti, 2003). Evidence was recorded upon observing non-verbal behavior and noting paralinguistic features such as interruptions, overlapping speech, and tone of voice. The verbatim content of discussions constituted the corpus of material for content analysis. Data were acquired via notetaking online and offline audiovisual recordings. Second, the Delphi technique was carried out to obtain the most reliable opinion consensus by subjecting panel members to a series of in-depth questionnaires interspersed with controlled opinion feedback (Dalkey and Helmer, 1963). Eight participants (four scholars and four food delivery practitioners) were recruited through convenience sampling to formulate predictions based on summarized focus group data from the previous stage. The first qualitative round involved a semi-structured questionnaire. The following two quantitative rounds included Likert scale-related and quantitative measures under the Delphi technique until data saturation was reached (see Table 2). Data collection and analysis were performed using an iterative mixed-methods approach for qualitative credibility (Cataldi and Sena, 2021). All surveys fulfilled ethical requirements regarding consent, confidentiality and anonymity, and low risk of harm.

Table 2 Mixed-methods Design

Stage	Content	Participants	Duration
<i>Focus groups</i>	• Discuss the Guides’ effects on OCPs and gig workers.	10 ^{Note}	Two weeks
<i>Delphi technique</i>		8 ^{Note}	
Round 1	• Derive Guides’ impacts on OCPs and gig workers. • Sort and organize the derived impacts and remove overlapping ones through semi-structured questions. • Design the questionnaire for round 2 by grouping the influencing impacts.		Two weeks
Round 2	• Encourage the participants to assess (on a 5-point Likert scale) the impacts of the Guides on OCPs and gig workers. • Reflect the results (mean value) in the questionnaire for round 3.		Three weeks
Round 3	• Re-examine (re-rate) the impacts of the Guides. • Verify the agreement level among the participants.		Two weeks

Note: Scholar: To avoid sample bias, the field & gender are both distributed evenly, which are all 50%: 50%

3.2 Data Analysis

Data were assessed through a six-step thematic analysis process. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method to search for themes related to epistemological and ontological propositions (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This method expands the content analysis to “pay greater attention to the qualitative aspects of the material analyzed” (Joffe and Yardley, 2004). As a popular data analysis method in the hospitality literature (Qiu *et al.* (2021), thematic analysis enables unstructured information to be transformed into a structured overview. The research team reviewed the focus group transcripts several times and familiarized themselves with the data before coding transcripts in NVivo 11

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software. Several steps (i.e., reorganizing, exploring, coding, visualizing, exporting, and communicating) were followed to discern specific structures across the dataset.

The Delphi technique was carried out to generate in-depth data in respondents' first language; the analysis process of Wang *et al.* (2017) was followed to ensure that no word unique to the native language was overlooked. The first author, a native Chinese speaker, analyzed all transcripts in Chinese; the second author, a skilled English speaker, analyzed all transcripts in English and compared the initial codes with the Chinese version. The other authors served as auditors, comparing initial codes and resultant themes between versions before finalizing the results. The research team addressed minor coding inconsistencies during meetings to validate the analysis process. Data were then analyzed step by step to determine whether the information exhibited theoretical saturation. NVivo provides results for word frequency queries and content structures.

3.3 Qualitative Research Limitations

This study's findings should be generalized with caution due to three methodological limitations. First, qualitative approaches were chosen because the Guides were recently implemented with OCPs; limited data were available for empirical analysis. China also holds robust governing power; this condition is salient when evaluating governance effects. Second, sample sizes for the focus group and Delphi technique were small and may temper the generalizability of results. However, these in-depth qualitative methods showed that the Guides had specific impacts on OCPs. Soliciting input from other stakeholders, including gig workers, consumers, and local citizens, would offer a more holistic view of the Guides' consequences. Third, findings are limited to the OCP sector in mainland China. This sector has been a unicorn in the gig economy since the pandemic—it has permeated domains such as ridesharing (e.g., Uber and Lyft), caregiving (e.g., Sittercity and UrbanSitter), and home services (e.g., TaskRabbit and Wag). In addition, the explorative results are subject to change with the Guides' ongoing effects on OCPs. Subsequent studies should investigate how different governance systems can be designed to protect gig workers through other measures or legal procedures.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Analysis

Only findings related to items that reach an agreed-upon degree of consensus shall be discussed in the Delphi technique (Petry *et al.*, 2007). All items can thus be listed in order of consensus magnitude (Kranjc Horvat *et al.*, 2021) and the areas about which the panel engaged in debate (see the coding example in Table 3, involving concerned parties and participants).

Table 3. Coding example

Interview excerpt (Informant 10)	Initial coding	Identified themes
<p>Based on the Guides, I think <i>online catering platforms can better implement the responsibility to protect the rights and interests of food delivery workers</i>, which is a severe issue in China when many unscrupulous OCPs place profitability over food delivery workers' interests. <u>OCPs do not implement the responsibility to maintain the rights and interests of food delivery workers because business profit is the priority</u>. They <u>cannot increase operating costs because of on-demand labor welfare without legal enforcement</u>. However, <i>the legal foundation of the Guides places all OCPs under the same competition conditions to fulfill the responsibility for food delivery workers</i>. On-demand food delivery workers were expected to be algorithmically managed for OCPs' delivery tasks. For example, for <i>task-related quantitative and time requirements, food delivery workers might violate traffic rules and cause incidents by their responsibilities</i>. OCPs should provide <i>insurance coverage</i>. It is what OCPs should provide for employees working for them. <i>Working for OCPs is an alternative to not working full-time; for example, if you were laid off, you may want to work for OCPs because you need to raise your kids</i>. <i>Business responsibility</i> is essential to sustainable operations. However, OCPs <u>have long ignored the responsibility for these food delivery workers</u>, but it may not be too late for OCPs to follow the Guides. <u>OCPs' service, as a daily requirement with a vast market in China, is inevitable and sustainable</u>. <u>There are more and more customers to be served</u>; even <i>the operating costs of implementing the Guides for food delivery welfare are higher than before</i>. Moreover, OCPs' business image might no longer be a vampire.</p>	OCPs: Better control over operating costs	Strength: High profitability
	OCPs: Lack of motivation to maintain food delivery workers' welfare	Strength: Low costs
	OCPs: All OCPs should obey the Guides with exact operating costs Labor: Better interests Labor: Less work stress	Weakness: Rising operating costs
	Labor: Job responsibility	Strength: Labor supply
	OCPs: Labor source Labor: Alternative job Labor: Family responsibilities Society: Stable, fair Government: Employment	Strength: Labor supply Weakness: Social responsibility costs
	OCPs: Social responsibilities Government: Legal enforcement	Strength: Sustainable operations
	OCPs: Revenue and costs	
	OCPs: Sustainable operations	

Notes. Underlined words indicate comments on OCPs; *italicized words* indicate comments on food delivery workers.

Results are presented here as an integrated summary followed by descriptions of the Guides' impacts from OCP stakeholders' perspectives. Figure 2 presents a keyword evaluation. OCPs' rise in the gig economy has continued with increases in both sales and on-demand gig workers' contributions amid the pandemic. The focus is twofold in this case: 1) how the gig economy's employment structure benefits OCPs' operations with low labor costs from on-demand labor, and 2) the relative lack of attention to gig workers' welfare. Kost *et al.* (2020) advised scholars to ponder how the gig economy can contribute to the supply and demand sides of the labor market beyond mere profits. The Guides offer a possible remedy for gig workers' welfare by regulating institutional governance. Associated practices can then be internalized into OCPs' business ethics and social responsibility. The COVID-19 pandemic offered an opportunity to alter the labor market with a normalized gig worker structure. The future labor structure must attend to gig workers'

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welfare and implement mutually beneficial measures in the sharing ecosystem. Critical impacts of the Guides are discussed in the following sections.

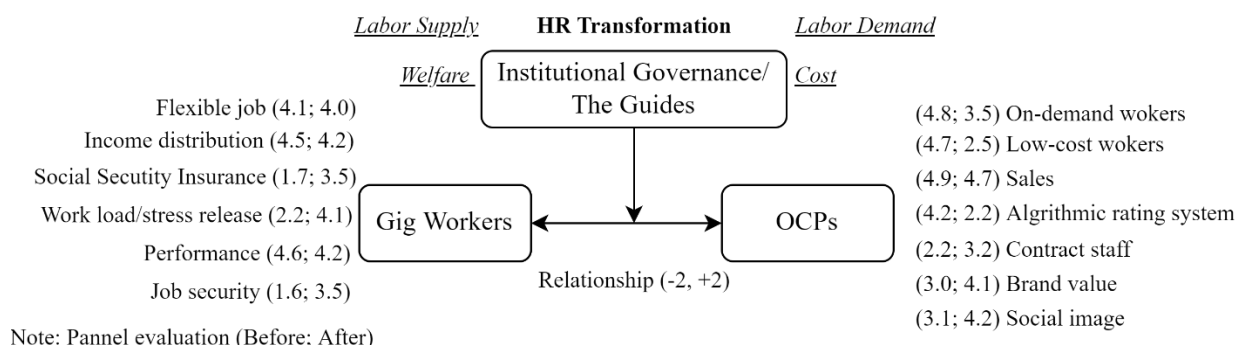


Figure 2. Panel Evaluation Summary

4.1.1 Direct Impacts

The Guides’ most direct effect has been raising OCPs’ operating costs, which has also informed labor allocation. OCPs’ previous labor employment model lacked fair and legal mechanisms (e.g., labor income distribution and social security insurance), leading to low-cost advantages during operations. The Guides’ institutional governance now requires OCPs to take gig workers’ legitimate rights and interests into account. OCPs must establish an income distribution mechanism matching the workload to ensure that expected labor income meets the local minimum payment. In addition, gig workers’ social security insurance (e.g., pilot insurance for employee injury protection) is the responsibility of OCPs and third-party agents. Panel respondents provided the following commentary:

“Most of the food delivery work is outsourced to agents. When an accident happens, the online catering rider has to bear the work risk alone because the rider cannot register with the social security system, such as industrial injury insurance or medical insurance. Some agents have purchased commercial insurance for riders, who still find commercial claims difficult to fulfill to receive injury compensation.” (Informant #1)

“The Guides require the platforms and third-party agents to participate in social insurance for riders with established labor relationships. According to the Guides, stakeholders can participate in the pilot insurance program for flexible employment on OCPs. The Guides also encourage exploration and provision of various commercial insurance protection schemes to improve the multi-level protection of flexible employment. Thus, the Guides have raised OCPs’ operating costs directly.” (Informant #5)

4.1.2 Indirect Impacts

Indirect influences have shifted the business focus to humanitarian concerns instead of technological advances. Initially, OCPs collected big data to assess gig workers' performance through technical systems. However, the abuse of such data has led to strict algorithmic indices conveying gig workers' efficiency and output. Algorithmic management includes a rating system that automatically classifies workers upon service completion (Wood *et al.*, 2019), inviting consumers to rate delivery services. From the OCP perspective, this practice pays workers only for what they have done, ignoring how they feel about their jobs (Lin *et al.*, 2020). This monitoring purports to help gig workers avoid unfair management decisions informed by organizational politics (Karatepe, 2013); however, workers' mental health has gone mostly unnoticed. Further, an algorithmic rating system may enhance workers' job engagement by forcing them to compete with coworkers (Kuhn and Maleki, 2017, Shapiro, 2018). However, from the gig worker's point of view, this approach to employment can cause them to feel powerless over the many uncontrollable factors that influence the rating system beyond service quality (Cheng and Foley, 2019). More importantly, this algorithm-based approach could produce a Tayloristic workplace culture where workers become extrinsically motivated machines (Lepisto and Pratt, 2017). These stringent standards violate the principles of humanity. In the short term, rigorous indices could stimulate workers' performance and improve efficiency—but in the long run, they will only take away from OCPs' profits without brand value and social image.

The Guides require OCPs to refrain from using stark algorithmic indices, such as the number of deliveries, time limits, punctuality rate, and 5-star reviews, to assess gig workers' performance. Piecework pay should reasonably consider delivery cases. OCPs are responsible for improving the order-scheduling mechanism, optimizing distribution routes, and determining task saturation to reduce labor stress. In other words, OCPs' technological advantages have taken a backseat in favor of more humane labor.

4.1.3 Derived Impacts

The Guides also promote online catering labor unions, which could raise gig workers' bargaining power. These organizations can seek to negotiate labor rights and interests, improve job security, and craft in-depth initiatives to retain gig workers. Yet this requirement could blur OCPs' focus on profit as they negotiate with unions about workers' wishes and demands or devote time to resolving common labor disputes. For example, one labor union representative shared the following:

“The labor union is enthusiastic about helping OCPs' sustainable development with a good employer-employee relationship. The union could suggest creative service methods, service content, and business models different from conventional operations. However, the union might require an optimized working environment, such as constructing temporary residences, installing smart lunch boxes, and innovating smart

helmets and other wearable devices for gig worker welfare. The union can actively play a role in stabilizing and retaining employment.” (Informant #3)

The Guides will undoubtedly bring adverse short-term consequences to OCPs. However, demand for food delivery remains high enough to support OCPs’ long-term survival. Government governance could mainly take care of gig workers’ welfare with an acceptable rise in the future pricing of food delivery services.

4.2 Discussion

A free-market or institutional-governance mechanism is presumed to be proper for all stakeholders in the sharing economy’s weak-tie relationship labor market. OCP employers have exploited gig workers for some time from a positivist perspective. Results show that conditional institutional governance is necessary to guide the labor market towards a holistic structure that benefits stakeholders. To foster labor welfare, a regulated job marketplace is crucial in every human resource market (Baum and Hai, 2020). The Guides give gig workers greater authority to obtain labor welfare conditions they previously could not broach with their employers (Ahsan, 2020, Sundararajan, 2017). Many food delivery gig workers have contributed to society to combat the pandemic. The Guides’ focus on labor welfare should maintain workers’ job-related intentions (Lopez, 2020). This governance has already elicited growing public concern for food delivery gig workers (Katta *et al.*, 2020), calling for exploration into how the Guides enhance or complement the gig economy’s widely criticized employment structure (Rubery *et al.*, 2016). Short-term impacts on OCPs’ operating costs will presumably affect the industry’s cost advantages; however, labor welfare based on social reciprocity and fairness can achieve long-term welfare economics.

The gig economy’s employment structure requires intervention from institutional governance to alter cost-profit-based cooperation. The Guides will generate additional expenses for OCPs’ operations. Climbing costs could result in fluctuating wages and product prices in the short run. Long-term equilibrium is probable given the anticipated post-pandemic resilience of the hospitality industry and sharing economy demands. State governance also offers a necessary feedback mechanism to gig workers, who have contributed to the gig economy amid the pandemic as noted. The strong obligation-based norms on OCPs have shifted from personal responsibility to business and society (Lin *et al.*, 2020). Gig economy employment is now seeming more impactful than before—today’s workers can attach environmental, social, entrepreneurial, and personal meaning to their jobs (Ahsan, 2020, Böcker and Meelen, 2017, De Stefano, 2015).

As discussed, the Guides have transformed the gig economy into a stakeholder governance mechanism (see Figure 1) that has prompted the formation of online catering labor unions for better bargaining power and social reciprocity (Fan *et al.*, 2019). These unions could help workers cultivate more productive relationships with coworkers, supervisors, and family, enhancing workers’ well-being. Before the Guides were implemented, food delivery workers’ associations tended to be brief compared with established personal relationships (Li *et al.*, 2020). These workers often interact daily with multiple supervisors (e.g., platform representatives), coworkers (e.g.,

restaurant representatives and other food delivery workers), and consumers. Yet these relationships feature weak ties without actual affiliation. Some gig workers even use other people's identities to communicate because newcomers are considered inferior to experienced workers who have devoted effort to "playing the game" regarding work flexibility and other advantages. Therefore, some newcomers may prefer to purchase another worker's job account to enjoy similar benefits. After implementing the Guides, unions could improve gig workers' identities in the community by providing more chances to develop social ties (Roccas and Brewer, 2002). Thus, stakeholder governance arises from corporate governance because of the Guides' state governance intervention, as pictured in Figure 1.

The Guides also bring organizational policies framing OCPs' employer-employee relations and role structures closer to those in the conventional hospitality industry (Furunes and Mkono, 2019, Susskind and Curry, 2016). Stakeholder governance means all parties in the sharing economy are equally positioned compared to before (Perren and Kozinets, 2018). Workers engage in rapid role shifting to manage tasks associated with service delivery, leading these individuals to feel less stressed during work (Madera *et al.*, 2013). Gig workers' duties can become more complicated, even if workers perceive themselves as independent contractors or employees because the Guides outline their work role structure (Furunes and Mkono, 2019). Fewer lawsuits around labor unrest in the gig economy are now likely to cite worker exploitation (Lamberton, 2018). Governments are implementing the Guides' governance power with deeper involvement in OCPs' structure to promote better-informed decisions. These new regulations clearly define gig workers' legal roles and welfare (Lamberton, 2018).

5. Conclusions

5.1 Conclusion

Shifting market governance to stakeholder governance (via intervention by state governance) could help transform gig workers' labor structure in the gig economy. This study reveals that the gig economy's employment structure is of growing interest in market governance for human resources with limited welfare in the face of the pandemic. However, gig workers' welfare could be addressed through the mediation of state governance; then, a fair labor market could be transformed into stakeholder governance in the gig economy. Conventional hospitality workers are expected to be retrained for multiple tasks and even to take up informal work in addition to their primary roles (Hao *et al.*, 2020). More than 5 million formal job positions are projected to be replaced by either informal work or cyber-physical systems in the fourth industrial revolution (Armstron *et al.*, 2018). Coupled with accolades showered upon the OCP sector and informal employment in the gig economy (Leung and Low, 2020, Southey, 2020), the Guides have propelled the transformation from OCPs' corporate governance to stakeholder governance with gig workers' rights and welfare in the post-pandemic era. This study contextualizes Chinese gig workers' labor structure transformation by presenting the Guide's effects of gig work on various stakeholders. As on-demand workers are granted labor protections, a state governance mechanism

appears committed to maintaining high employment levels, ensuring economic growth, and protecting these workers' welfare. Gig workers' bargaining power has become potent with the transformation from market to stakeholder governance through state governance in China's gig economy.

This study has explored gig workers' welfare and human resource transformation in the sharing economy, which requires a state policy for guidance when the market-driven structure has failed. Stakeholder governance should be implemented through state governance intervention to close theoretical and practical gaps in corporate governance for labor market transformation in the hospitality gig economy.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

The constructed typology of governance theory, as shown in Figure 1, extends the theoretical literature and provides practical advice about the Guides. Many investigations on the gig economy assume a consumer perspective (Gleim *et al.*, 2019). This typology of governance theory advances a labor-oriented understanding of the gig economy from the relationship between gig workers and platform companies (Mody *et al.*, 2021). This angle is vital for two reasons: 1) the gig economy is driven by demand (i.e., consumers) and supply (i.e., gig workers and platform companies) (Lin *et al.*, 2020); and 2) the gig economy's employment structure has been largely criticized for possible worker exploitation (Lamberton, 2018, Ravenelle, 2019). Institutional governance is essential for facilitating the transformation of the shared labor market. Investigations into state and stakeholder governance mechanisms remain scarce in hospitality. This typology of governance theory offers a systematic view on integrating institutional governance from traditional to gig economy.

5.3 Practical Contributions

Taking the Guides as an example of a state governance mechanism to manage the gig economy, this study demonstrated how a shift from a market/corporate governance mechanism to a stakeholder governance mechanism with the intervention of state governance balances the benefits of gig workers and platform companies. Specifically, results revealed that gig workers found the Guides (i.e., a state governance mechanism) effective in promoting job welfare and security—topics that have been challenging to address with OCPs due to the shared attributes of this economy's labor structure. Moreover, platform companies should adhere to state governance and the Guides' instructions to devise innovative operation approaches and enhance their brand value and social image. The Guides' state governance shall trigger a wave of industry innovations to remedy gig workers' initial cost advantage. Many platform companies are defining themselves as technological innovators to generate profits through existing corporate or market governance mechanisms (Vallas and Schor, 2020). These firms need to follow state governance interventions from an industry and labor market transformation to a stakeholder governance structure.

5.4 Implications

An all-inclusive approach is encouraged when scrutinizing how a focus on governance, specifically the Guides, influences gig workers' job attributes. The Guides emerged in response to the hospitality industry's evolving employment structure. Myriad workers in China are engaged in on-demand work, and this proportion is rising. The Guides, which OCPs should implement, protect on-demand workers' legal status and boost gig workers' motivation to continue participating in the sharing economy.

In addition to the methodological limitations mentioned in Section 3.3, other limitations illuminate avenues for future work. This study referred to recommended guidance from a welfare economics perspective to explore the role of institutional governance in gig workers' welfare. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how industrial innovations more thoroughly should be developed to remedy the loss of cost advantage in the gig economy when state governance is imposed. Additionally, although we investigated how a protective regulatory framework can help prevent worker exploitation, precisely which, when, and how such policies are best suited to the gig economy should be identified to facilitate decision-making about the Guides implementation. The effects of related measures should also be monitored over the long term.

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