

Living one's calling independently: the role of online labor platforms for different dynamics of calling enactment

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigates the diverse career experiences of gig workers by looking at a sample of gig workers that are living a calling through online labor platforms (OLPs). Drawing from the systems informed positive psychology (SIPP) framework we examine the experiences and dynamics through which individuals can enact their calling through OLPs.

Design/methodology/approach – We conducted 34 semi-structured interviews with gig workers who are able to live their calling through OLPs. The interviews were analyzed by using a grounded theory approach.

Findings – Our findings reveal that gig workers sense of living a calling is rooted in the experience of being and feeling independent. Furthermore, we identify three dynamics of calling enactment through OLPs which are: (1) engaging in personal development, (2) constructing social fit and (3) stabilizing finances.

Originality/value – While many studies document the precarious nature of the gig economy, our paper offers rich insight into positive career experiences of gig workers. Through taking a systemic view on individuals' ability to live a calling, we illustrate how individuals interact with different features of OLPs to enact their calling. Finally, we suggest that besides direct dynamics of calling enactment there are also indirect dynamics of calling enactment that play an important role in individuals' ability to live a calling in the gig economy.

Keywords Calling, Gigwork, Online labor platforms, Career experiences,
Systems informed positive psychology

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The role of online labor platforms (OLPs) for gig workers' career experiences is an emerging and controversial topic within career research. Gig workers operate outside of traditional employment structures and are contracted and compensated on a short-term basis to organizations or individual clients on an external labor market (e.g. Corpanzano *et al.*, 2023; Wu and Huang, 2024). OLPs play an important role in that regard, as they act as digital intermediaries between gig workers and customers (Duggan *et al.*, 2020). Most research



highlights that working through OLPs is related to problematic experiences such as career-path uncertainty, anxiety, isolation and powerlessness of workers (Caza *et al.*, 2022; Glavin *et al.*, 2021; Berger *et al.*, 2019). In contrast, gig workers on OLPs have been found to report higher levels of life satisfaction compared to workers in traditional work arrangements (Berger *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, a recent review on gig work highlights that experiencing high levels of independence, autonomy and flexibility can contribute to gig workers psychological fulfillment, for example by allowing them to work from home and fit gig work around their schedule (for an overview see Wu and Huang, 2024). To appreciate the breath of gig workers career experiences, scholars have thus highlighted to also look at positive career experiences related to thriving and career success (Ashford *et al.*, 2018; Wu and Huang, 2024).

Concerning the positive career experiences, the concept of calling at work has become increasingly important. Calling is known in the career literature as an orientation towards work that encompasses (1) finding individual meaning and overall purpose in work, (2) helping others or contributing to the common good and (3) feeling a sense of being compelled (either internally or externally) towards that work (e.g. Duffy *et al.*, 2019). Studies have shown that calling at work relates to meaning and satisfaction both at work and in life in general (Dobrow *et al.*, 2023). Importantly, research has shown that the associated benefits of callings are only pronounced when individuals are able to live out their calling in their current work (Duffy *et al.*, 2012, 2013, 2022; Gazica and Spector, 2015). Being able to live a calling in one's work is therefore also viewed as one of the strongest forms of subjective career success which is an individual's evaluation and experience of achieving personally meaningful career outcomes (e.g. Hall and Chandler, 2005; Spurk *et al.*, 2019). While scholars have noted that the gig economy might hold opportunities for living a calling (Schabram *et al.*, 2023), it remains unclear how individuals can live their calling in the gig economy as existing research on calling so far has focused only on traditional workers.

In this inductive study we explore the experiences of 34 gig workers that live their calling through OLPs. When interviewing gig workers in the context of a large research project about risks and chances of working on OLPs, some gig workers referred to OLPs as an enabling context for them to live out their calling. This raised our interest to explore how OLPs can contribute to living a calling in the gig economy. As scholars have noted the importance of considering the interactions between individuals and contextual factors for understanding how contemporary careers unfold (Baruch and Sullivan, 2022), we were particularly interested in the interactions between individuals and OLPs which contribute to living a calling. To gain rich insights into these positive person-platform dynamics, we thus draw from a system informed positive psychology (SIPP) lens which emphasizes dynamics that emerge from interactions between individuals and their environment (Kern *et al.*, 2020). Methodically, we apply a grounded theory approach to explore the lived experiences of gig workers on OLPS (Cohen *et al.*, 2004). With our study we are aiming to answer the following research question:

RQ. Through which dynamics can OLPs enable gig workers to live their calling?

Through our research we contribute to the literature on gig workers' career experiences as well as to the calling literature. First, we contribute to the gig work literature by making visible a sample of gig workers that are living a calling through OLPs as a contrast to the existing research that largely emphasizes the precarious nature of the gig economy. We hereby follow the invitation of Richardson *et al.* (2022) by applying a qualitative research approach which allows us to uncover the subjective experiences of gig workers. Second, by drawing from SIPP we make visible the dynamics through which OLPs can contribute to gig workers ability to live their calling by outlining the interactions between individuals and different platform features. Lastly, we contribute to the calling literature by exploring calling in a novel context and introducing the idea of direct and indirect dynamics of calling enactment.

Literature

Work as a calling

The concept of calling might be one of the oldest constructs within the domain of career research, with its roots dating back to the protestant reformation (Thompson and Bunderson, 2019). Nowadays callings can be understood as a self-set career goal (Praskova *et al.*, 2015) and do not necessarily have to be religious (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009; Duffy *et al.*, 2014). Various studies have shown that callings are related to positive outcomes ranging from job and life satisfaction and overall psychological well-being (Dobrow *et al.*, 2023). Individuals with a calling are interesting to study in the context of OLPs, because studies have reported that callings can be a source of job and life satisfaction in situations of hardships. For example, Zhang *et al.* (2015) have found that calling is related to life satisfaction and that this relationship is strengthened in situations where individuals face high levels of job insecurity. Similarly, Goštautaitė *et al.* (2020) have found that having a calling can strengthen individuals' perceived social worth and prevent them from burning out despite stressors in their environment.

One of the most important findings from the literature on work as a calling is that the associated benefits of callings are only pronounced when individuals are able to live out their calling in their current work (Duffy *et al.*, 2012, 2013, 2022; Gazica and Spector, 2015). Studies further suggest that individuals ability to live a calling is supported by work environments that support individuals to find a high person-environment fit (e.g. Duffy *et al.*, 2018). In line with this reasoning, Duffy *et al.* (2019) have found that organizational support moderates the relationship between perceiving a calling and person-environment fit. Similarly, Hirschi *et al.* (2018) have found that job resources such as task significance and autonomy mediate between perceiving a calling and living a calling.

Due to higher levels of independence and autonomy scholars have noted that OLPs might hold opportunities for living a calling (Schabram *et al.*, 2023). However, existing research on calling so far has focused on traditional work settings and has in many cases explicitly excluded gig workers. The reason for this exclusion was the assumption that gig workers cannot be compared to traditional workers, because they have more independence and autonomy for their career development (e.g. Hirschi *et al.*, 2018; Lysova *et al.*, 2018). One noteworthy exception is a study with entrepreneurs in the video game industry (Lysova and Khapova, 2019).

Living a calling through OLPs: a SIPP perspective

SIPP offers a fruitful theoretical framework to shed light on how individuals can live a calling through OLPs. Rooted in the research discipline of positive psychology, SIPP emphasizes the importance of studying positive subjective experiences, traits and institutions (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). From the perspective of SIPP human actions take place in complex systems in which specific patterns of behavior emerge because of the interaction of different parts of the system (Meadows, 2008). Another foundational assumption of the SIPP approach is that actions can best be understood from the perspective of dynamics, which emerge from the interaction of different parts of a system (Kern *et al.*, 2020). Individuals' experiences and actions are thus a product of interconnectedness and not solely dependent on the individual or the context. Therefore, they can best be understood by looking at the dynamics of interaction between individuals and contextual factors.

For gig workers OLPs constitute an important contextual factor (Kuhn and Maleki, 2017). Different from other intermediaries such as job boards, search firms or headhunters that mainly focus on recruitment and selection, OLPs use algorithms to take over further HRM functions such as for example rating systems for performance management and compensation (Duggan *et al.*, 2020; Meijerink and Keegan, 2019). Two forms of OLPs are

differentiated, namely those that provide location based on-demand work and those that provide location independent crowd work (Duggan *et al.*, 2020). While location based on-demand work is mediated through a platform or app but performed locally (e.g. Myhammer, Uber eats, Justeat), location independent crowd work is both mediated and delivered online (e.g. Fiverr, Upwork). Depending on the specific features of OLPs can include recruitment and selection, performance appraisal and compensation, and in some cases even training and development (Meijerink and Keegan, 2019).

Gig workers on OLPs pursue their work in close interaction with the various platform features. OLPs are often criticized for degrading gig workers to “humans as a service” (Irani, 2015) treating them as “cogs in the machine”. Studies have shown that gig workers on OLPs experience higher levels of powerlessness, isolation and anxiety compared to traditional workers (Caza *et al.*, 2022; Glavin *et al.*, 2021; Berger *et al.*, 2019). On the other hand, studies have shown that gig workers in many cases use the autonomy and flexibility on OLPs to be more independent and pursue work that is in line with their interests and values (Nemkova *et al.*, 2019; Wood *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, studies have found a positive link between proactive job crafting and meaningful work as well as career satisfaction in the context of OLPs (Mousa *et al.*, 2022; Mousa and Chaouali, 2023; Cameron, 2022). These findings underline the importance of exploring the person-platform interactions that are related to living a calling in the challenging context of the gig economy.

Methods

Procedure, data collection and sample

We applied a qualitative research approach to gain rich insights into the lived experiences of gig workers on OLPs (e.g. Richardson *et al.*, 2022). Our study design is based on the principles of grounded theory (e.g. Strauss and Corbin, 1997) and rooted in the epistemological and ontological understanding that social reality and knowledge are socially constructed (e.g. Cohen *et al.*, 2004). Following the recommendation of Richardson *et al.* (2022) we did not apply a single template but applied bricolage as a way of adopting, combining and integrating different tools of data collection and analysis to study a relevant phenomenon. In the following the different elements of our study design are outlined.

Our data collection took place in a large research project about OLPs in Switzerland. Based on Glaser and Strauss (1967) our data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously and informed each other. We started with a pilot phase guided by an open research question about chances and risks of OLPs. After conducting eight pilot interviews with Switzerland-based gig workers, the topic of living one’s calling through OLPs emerged in six interviews. This aroused our interest and made us want to learn more about this phenomenon. Our further data collection was therefore informed by the concept of living a calling as a sensitizing concept (Charmaz, 2003). To be able to achieve an in depth understanding of how OLPs contribute to living a calling, we needed to make sure to interview workers that were truly living their calling. We applied purposive (“theoretical”) sampling to specifically study workers that are living a calling (Langley and Abdallah, 2015; Patton, 2002). Therefore, we let gig workers fill in a screening survey before inviting them for an interview. The screening survey measured gig workers perceptions of perceiving a calling by using the brief calling scale (Dik *et al.*, 2012) and their perception of living a calling by using the living a calling scale (Duffy *et al.*, 2012). Similar procedures were applied in other qualitative research on calling to specifically be able to sample individuals with a calling (Ahn *et al.*, 2017; Bott *et al.*, 2017). We ended our data analysis at the point of theoretical saturation, where there was adequate data to support our aggregated dimensions and no new topics emerged from additional interviews (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007).

Our final sample consists of 34 Switzerland based gig workers which worked across nine OLPs. We followed the definitions of platforms provided by [Duggan et al. \(2020\)](#). Thus, our study focused on gig workers working on location dependent (on-demand or app-work) and location independent (crowd work) OLPs (e.g. [Duggan et al., 2020](#)). Sixty-eight percent of participants worked through location independent platforms, 26% through location dependent platforms and the remaining nine percent worked through hybrid platforms. Thirty-five percent of participants were female and 65% were male. The average age was 34 years. While 29 participants engaged in other type of work besides working on OLPs, five participants exclusively worked on OLPs. Sixty-five percent of those participants that pursued other work besides OLPs were self-employed, 18% were employed and three percent were employed as well as self-employed. On average participants worked 13 h per week on OLPs and earned an average monthly salary of 2019 Swiss Francs (approx. 2211 USD). To put that in context, it has to be noted that Switzerland has one of the highest wage levels in the world ([ILO, 2013](#)) and that the average monthly salary of a self-employed person in Switzerland is 4,392 Swiss Francs ([Federal Statistical Office Switzerland, 2023](#)).

The interviews lasted between 25–75 min. The participants received 30 Swiss Francs for their participation. We used an interview guide to focus on our central topic, while also providing interviewers flexibility for raising ad hoc questions to remain open to new emerging themes (e.g. [Strauss and Corbin, 1997](#)) Our first interview guide focused on the reasons to work on OLPs, chances and risks of using OLPs and how OLPs relate to gig workers' career. Our second interview guide, following the pilot phase, focused on perceiving a calling and living a calling through OLPs. It included questions regarding how gig workers can currently live out their calling and the role platforms play in this regard. One question for example was: "How do you currently view the role of the platform for living your calling?". For each interview the proof of consent was obtained before the interviews were recorded and later transcribed in verbatim. [Table 1](#) gives an overview over the sample of this study.

Data analysis

For the analysis of the interviews, we engaged in several rounds of coding following in large parts the recommendation of [Gioia et al. \(2013\)](#). We used the software MAXQDA to manually code our data. During this process we changed back and forth between data analysis and data collection. After the six pilot interviews, an initial round of first-order coding was conducted by the first author. The main concern in regard to first-order coding was to code in an informant centric way by using the language of the participants, adding as less interpretation and abstraction as possible ([Gioia et al., 2013](#)).

When discussing the first-order codes from the first eight pilot-interviews in our team of authors, we realized that the theme of living one's calling through OLPs was repeatedly mentioned by the participants. We therefore decided to apply purposive sampling as described above to explore this phenomenon. In the following, data collection and data analysis were performed parallelly. Based on the constant comparison approach ([Glaser and Strauss, 1967](#)) author one and two conducted several rounds of coding in which we changed back and forth between first-order and second-order coding as described by [Gioia et al. \(2013\)](#). Second-order coding included making sense and organizing the emerging themes to establish analytic distinctions ([Gioia et al., 2013](#)). While the first author focused equally on first-order and second-order coding, the second author mainly focused on second-order coding.

Furthermore, all authors reflected together on how to integrate the emerging second-order codes into meaningfully aggregated dimensions. Hereby, we followed the recommendations for selective coding by [Glaser and Strauss \(1967\)](#). This means that we repeatedly discussed our codes in the team of authors and consulted the literature on gig work and calling.

Id	Age	Gender	Calling domain	LC	H/ Week	GWP type	Work besides GWPs
<i>Pilot phase</i>							
I1	54	M	Coaching	6.0	2	H	Gig work
I2	34	F	Handyman	7.0	20	LD	Gig work
I3	27	M	Handyman	–	16	LD	Gig work
I4	34	F	Web design	–	45	LI	Gig work
I5	41	F	Text writing	5.0	25	LI	Gig work
I6	27	M	Text writing	6.0	30	LI	Gig work
<i>Screened sample</i>							
I7	41	M	Crypto currency consulting	4.2	15	LD	Gig work
I8	40	M	Funeral services	6.5	20	LD	Gig work
I9	34	M	Dog training	5.3	20	LD	Gig work
I10	27	M	IT consultancy	4.2	15	LD	Gig work
I11	33	F	Cooking	5.8	25	LD	Employed
I12	54	M	Handyman	4.7	3	LD	Gig work
I13	34	M	Engineering	4.2	15	LD	OLP only
I14	50	F	Health therapy	5.8	15	H	Gig work
I15	21	M	Proofreading	3.0	20	LI	Employed
I16	31	M	DJing, music production	4.5	15	LI	Gig work
I17	44	M	Marketing communication	6.2	8	LI	Gig work
I18	30	M	Customer administration	4.8	1	LI	OLP only
I19	23	M	Video creation	4.3	0.5	LI	Gig work
I20	31	M	Web developer	5.3	1	LI	Gig work
I21	33	M	Voice artist	5.3	6	LI	Employed
I22	33	M	Business development	5.3	7.5	LI	Gig work
I23	37	M	Data science	4.7	2	LI	Gig work
I24	43	M	Legal consultancy	5.3	2	LI	Employed and gig work
I25	28	M	Graphic design	5.2	14	LI	Gig work
I26	29	F	Content creation	4.5	10	LI	Employed
I27	18	M	Online marketing	4.3	10	LI	Employed
I28	37	F	Cooking	4.8	30	LI	OLP only
I29	23	F	Content creation	6.2	3	LI	OLP only
I30	48	F	Content creation	5.3	15	LI	Gig work
I31	35	F	Tutoring	4.3	10	LI	OLP only
I32	28	F	Visual design	4.7	1	LI	Employed
I33	31	F	Video creation	4.0	15	LI	Gig work
I34	30	M	Financial consulting	6.2	4	LI	Gig work

Note(s): LC = score of the living a calling scale; h = hybrid (location dependent and independent); LD = location dependent; LI = location independent; the six participants of the pilot study received the screening survey a few weeks after the interview and four out of the six participants responded; only participants with a score above 4 on the living a calling scale were included in the sample; one participant was included despite scoring lower than four on the living a calling scale, as he made explicit statements about being able to live a calling

Source(s): Authors' work

Table 1.
List of participants

For example, we summarize the various experiences of living a calling under the second-order codes “self-authority” and “prosocial self-determination”. Subsequently, we aggregated these two second-order codes in the common dimension “Living a calling and being independent”, as both contained experiences of living a calling which were related to being independent. [Figure 1](#) gives an overview over the resulting data structure.

The coding process was accompanied by memo writing to become aware of the emerging themes as well as to actively reflect the role of us as researchers in the process ([Charmaz, 2006](#)).

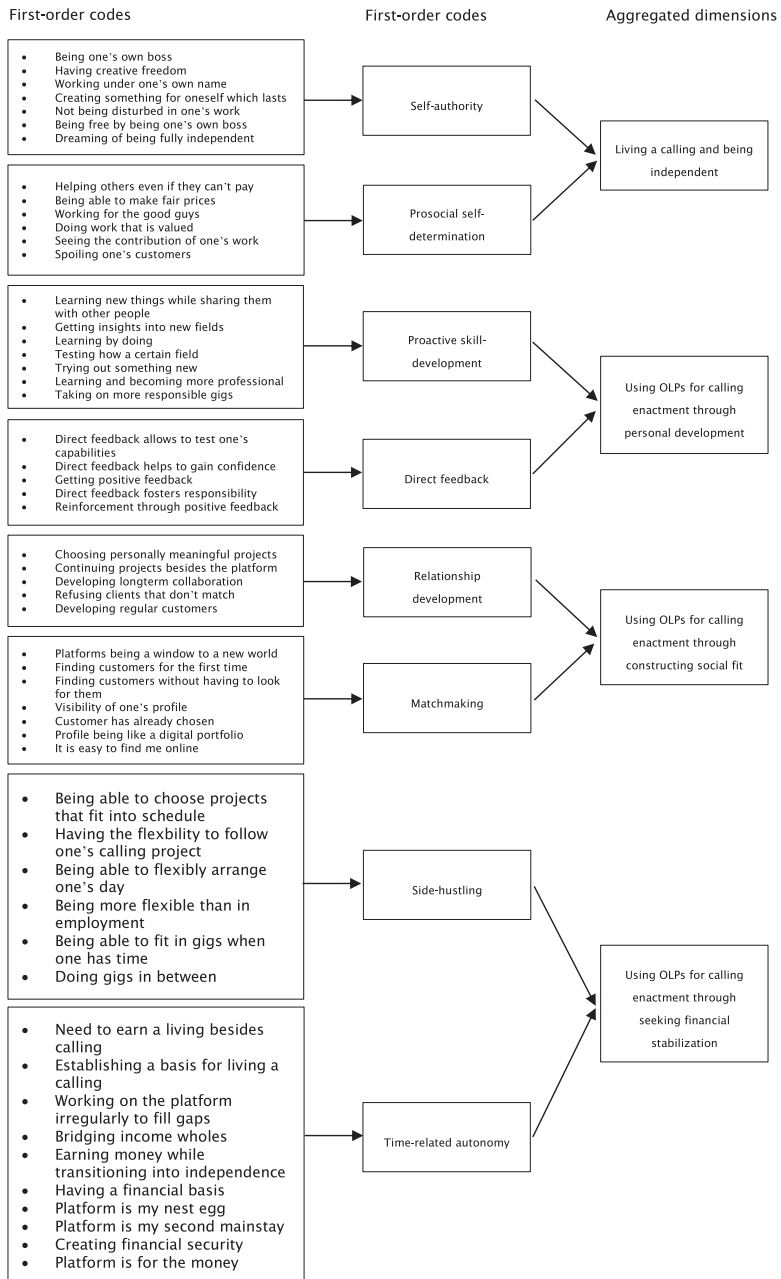


Figure 1.
Data structure

Source(s): Authors' work

At different points in the process, we discussed the codes with peers outside of the research team and reflected on various ways of interpretations and understandings. Furthermore, we conducted member-checking by discussing the emerging themes with participants and discussed (Levitt *et al.*, 2018).

The full table of codes is available upon request from the first author.

Results

In the following we present our findings on how OLPs enable gig workers to enact and live their calling. First, we show how gig workers sense of living a calling is rooted in being and feeling independent. Second, we describe three dynamics by which gig workers enact their calling through working on OLPs, which are: (1) engaging in personal development, (2) constructing social fit and (3) seeking financial stabilization. Each dynamic emerges from the interaction between a distinct platform feature and the way gig workers use it for their calling enactment.

Living a calling and being independent

Our data suggests that being independent in their work signifies a feeling of empowerment and liberation for our gig workers, and that this is closely linked to their sense of living a calling. For our gig workers, being independent was more of a subjective experience than a legal work status (i.e. self-employment). This was made clear when individuals contrasted their experiences in traditional employment with gig work. Traditional employment for them was related to having to do “senseless tasks” (I13, Q4) or “what was put on the table” (I4, Q5) and held them back to live their calling. Some workers talked about how in traditional employment they were “lacking self-determination” (I10, Q6) and “feeling unfulfilled” (I13, Q7). Similarly, one participant who is a therapist and uses an OLP for her online appearance said: “Well, my calling for me really is to have this independence. To be able to get up every morning and look forward to my work and to get home satisfied . . .” (I14, Q1).

Two themes emerged that evocate gig workers` feeling of being independent in the context of OLPs which are “self-authority” and “prosocial self-determination”.

Self-authority: Self-authority is related to being fully in charge of what one does in one’s work and being one’s own boss, without having a supervisor or an organizational structure that implies authority upon the self. One worker for example stated that being his own boss gives him the personal freedom to work according to oneself:

Hmm, it’s the personal freedom. It might sound stupid. But I do not enjoy working for others. [. . .] I want to be my own boss. I don’t want to be obliged to say to someone: hey I am there doing this and doing that . . . I did that for years . . . more than 12 years (I3, Q11).

Similarly, one worker said that even though she earns less in gig work, the feeling of having the creative freedom is what makes the difference for her (I16, Q12). Other workers talked about how their perceived self-authority enables them to “do what one really enjoys” (I3, Q25), “do something that aligns with one’s interests” (I10, Q26) or “be able to use one’s strengths” (I15, Q27).

Prosocial self-determination: The gig workers further mentioned how being independent gives them more possibilities to find work in which they effectively can help others compared to when they were employed. Beyond that gig workers mentioned that thanks to being able to set their own prices for their services, they can help, even if some clients couldn’t afford it: “Often there are people from countries that do not have that much money. And then I really appreciate that I can help them anyways [despite not earning the usual amount]” (I20, Q19).

According to the gig workers, economic pressure and rigid requirements often limit prosocial self-determination in traditional employment. For example, one worker said that he

thinks that companies often charge too high prices and that through his independence he can adjust his prices to be able to help those in need:

My calling, as I see it, is to help others. [...] that is why I started to work independently as a handyman. [...] What I can't stand is when companies charge 200 Francs just to connect the modem. [...] One day I helped an older lady to install her phone. I certainly will not charge 200.- Francs for that. [...] for me it is not only about being lucrative but actually helping, right (I3, Q20)?

Using OLPs for calling enactment through personal development

Our findings reveal that gig workers enact their calling on OLPs through the dynamic of personal development in which they continuously build “self-confidence” and “trust” in their abilities (I6, Q30, Q31). OLPs facilitate the personal development of gig workers by providing gig workers the opportunity to experiment with different kind of gigs and to “get insight into new fields” (I23, Q34) related to their calling. Receiving direct feedback from customers constitutes an important platform feature in that regard as it facilitated the process of personal development. Many of the gig workers in our sample are self-taught and did not have any formal training in the domain of their calling before working on OLPs. Others were able to expand their already existing skills in their calling domain thanks to OLPs. Gig workers described OLPs as learning environments in which they can pro-actively experiment with and implement new skills while receiving direct customer feedback.

Proactive skill development: Gig workers reported that they use OLPs to pro-actively choose gigs that help them develop their skills in the domain of their calling. For example, one worker told us that she takes gigs even though she only has limited experience. By doing so, she can collect more experiences and hereby develop more skills in her calling domain: “Personally, I like to be creative, I have this enthusiasm for pictures and videos [...] the platform gives me the opportunity to get more into that [...] I teach everything to myself [...] And share it with others through the platform [...]” (I29, Q33).

One worker described the process of learning by doing as the most satisfying feeling he could think of:

For example, I just learned final cut, I had no idea how it works. I gave myself a few months. When I have learned it, I offered it to customers that needed it and they were very happy with it. There really isn't something better (I19, Q35).

Direct Feedback: Through automated performance appraisals derived from direct feedback from customers, OLPs accelerate and facilitate the dynamic of personal development. Depending on the OLP direct customer feedback takes the form of ratings and/or reviews and gives the gig workers an instant insight into how their work was perceived. Whereas positive feedback allows workers to gain more self-confidence in their skills. negative feedback helps them to reflect and improve themselves. One worker said: “because you can test your skills much faster. You get feedback and you can learn and grow from it. This feedback loop can be really empowering if you have the will to learn and the talent” (I6, Q42). Hereby, feedback is also perceived as encouraging and helpful for gaining more confidence in their skills: “It gives me the feeling that. I think I got it. I got the right style. It's triggered by the feedback I get” (I5, Q43). One worker said that when he was employed, he never got constructive feedback (I10, Q44). Besides that, also negative feedback can be perceived as instrumental for learning and improving one's skills. One worker described that he appreciates to get direct feedback when a customer was not satisfied: “Either I get the praise or I get told that the work was bad. I know how my work was perceived. I am responsible for that” (I3, Q45).

Using OLPs for calling enacting through constructing social fit

Our findings further show that gig workers enact their calling through a dynamic of creating social fit between themselves and customers. This is accomplished by means of “matchmaking” and “relationship development” with clients in need of the services associated with their calling. OLPs enable this dynamic by matching workers talents and strengths to customers. The gig workers frequently informed us that they would be unable to connect with costumers in need for their calling in the absence of OLPs. Above that, gig workers mentioned to use the OLPs to develop long-lasting sustainable relationships with customers.

Matchmaking: The gig workers frequently mentioned that thanks to the OLPs they were able to identify a need for their calling in society that they did not know of before. For example, one worker described the OLP as a “window into a new world” (I15, Q47) that for the first time allowed him to work with people that needed his calling and appreciated it: “there are so many people that need exactly what I have to offer. I was completely unaware of that” (I15, Q47). In some cases, the gig workers mentioned that they would have a hard time to find people in need of their calling without the OLP as their calling is rather uncommon (I13), or socially taboo (I26, I29, I30).

Additionally, some gig workers described how their OLP profile helps them to find customers without having to market their skills actively. One worker described how on the OLPs he is connected to customers without him having to search for them: “Yeah, the good thing is, that you really don’t have to look for customers. [. . .] The customers contact me on their own (over the OLPs)” (I15, Q48).

Additionally, the gig workers have noted that their OLP profile facilitates a demand for their services beyond the OLP ecosystem, as prospective clients discover it through a Google search (I33, Q49).

Relationship development: The gig workers stated that they use the OLPs to gradually establish social fit by fostering and sustaining lasting relationships with customers beyond the platform. This starts already at an early stage when gig workers choose which work relationship, they want to engage in. To initiate relationships that have the potential for a social fit, gig workers assess each gig as described by one worker: “That you can chose yourself, for which gig you apply. Like: this Gig I find interesting and this other Gig I can’t identify with at all. [. . .] You can choose what you want” (I4, Q53).

In a later stage the gig workers are developing the relationship further to expand the collaboration outside of the OLP:

The most interesting about that platform is, that many projects can be developed further. Often only a first small gig is performed over the platform and then the collaboration continues beyond the platform. [. . .] Generally, the collaboration starts on the platform and afterwards it often becomes a direct relationship (I22, Q54).

Using OLPs for calling enactment by seeking financial stabilization

Finally, our findings shed light on a third and rather unconventional dynamic of calling enactment through OLPs, which is about stabilizing finances. We observed that some gig workers do not earn enough income with their calling and are therefore engaging in side-hustling on OLPs to find additional jobs. While side-hustling is not directly linked with an engagement in one’s calling domain, it provides financial resources that enable individuals to live their calling in the gig economy.

Side-hustling: Gig workers reported that they use OLPs to earn additional income when their calling does not bring in enough money to earn a living. Hereby, we found that especially gig workers which have recently left their job in traditional employment use work

on OLPs to finance their work in their calling domain: “At the moment I follow my own project [...] of course it does not yet bring in any money [...] therefore I am reliant to earn my living somehow” (I13, Q58). Similarly, another worker thought back to his first steps in his independence:

If I would have not had the possibility to earn money on such a platform [...] I have to say [...] it gave me an opportunity to build up a basic income, based on which I could follow my calling (I10, Q59).

Other gig workers have already established themselves in their calling domain but use work on the OLP as a kind of financial assurance to round up one’s income over the seasons: “. . . maximally one day a week, but it varies a lot depending on the time of the year” (I1, Q60). Similarly, one worker said that he uses work on OLPs to bridge the time between bigger projects: “there are income wholes sometimes, and I thought that I can fill it up with these platforms” (I17, Q61).

Time related autonomy: Time related autonomy provided by OLPs has been reported by gig workers as an important platform feature for enacting their calling: “if you have time, you can enter the platform and chose the projects that fit into your schedule” (I25, Q68). The gig workers felt that OLPs enable living a calling “because it makes it easier to earn a living and still have time [to pursue one’s calling]” (I13, Q69). One worker who has a calling for being a dog trainer and works as a handyman on a OLP describes time autonomy as follows:

. . . with the dogs, I can schedule my work on my own [...] that would be more difficult if I worked as an electrician or a full-time construction worker. That is why I wanted to be flexible . . . I arrange my appointments in a way that . . . For example, I have an appointment at 9:00 and then I can go out an hour with the dogs. Then I do the next gig when I return home. My day is very flexible (I9, Q70).

Discussion

Drawing from the qualitative data gathered in 34 interviews with gig workers that are living a calling through OLPs we provide insight into the dynamics which enable gig workers to enact and live their calling. Our study reveals that gig workers sense of living a calling is rooted in being and feeling independent which manifests in the experiences of self-authority and prosocial self-determination. While being independent played a big role for the gig workers in our sample, it is also related to high levels of financial uncertainty, which constitutes a boundary for living a calling outside of traditional employment. We identify three dynamics of calling enactment on OLPs which are: (1) engaging in personal development, (2) constructing social fit and (3) stabilizing finances. The first two dynamics signify direct dynamics of calling enactment, as they directly enable living a calling through engagement in one’s calling domain. Stabilizing finances on the other hand signifies an indirect dynamic of calling enactment as seek to stabilize their finances through side-hustling on OLP. Our discussion focuses on the theoretical implications of our findings for the literature on gig work and calling. Besides that, we discuss the practical implications for career counselors and platform providers as well as the limitations of our study and suggestions for future research.

Theoretical implications for the gig work literature

While the current scholarly debate largely revolves around precarity and negative experiences of gig workers such as career-path uncertainty, anxiety, isolation and powerlessness (Caza *et al.*, 2022; Glavin *et al.*, 2021; Berger *et al.*, 2019), our study makes visible a sample of gig workers who are able to pursue their calling. Our findings are in line with the findings of other studies that suggest that in the face of hardships and precarity the

personalization of one's work can play a crucial role to make precariousness generative and find meaning and engagement (Cameron, 2022; Petriglieri *et al.*, 2019). Above that, our study underscores the importance of considering different career goals and motivations of gig workers to fully understand their experiences in the gig economy. Our study shows that gig work experiences are intertwined with specific career goals of individuals. This is closely related to the findings of Kost *et al.* (2018) who find that gig workers identity work can reconcile experiences of alienation and positively platform commitment.

Furthermore, our findings contribute to the understanding of the role of OLPs for specific career experiences such as living a calling. Scholars have mainly underlined the problematic impact OLPs can have on gig workers (Bajwa *et al.*, 2018). Our results emphasize that in order to understand the impact of OLPs on gig workers careers we need to understand the dynamics which emerge from the interaction between platform features and specific sub groups of gig workers. For example, studies have suggested that rating and feedback have a negative impact on gig workers due to stress and emotional exhaustion (Bajwa *et al.*, 2018). However, we find that certain gig workers use the feedback and rating function of platforms to develop their skills further to enact their calling. Similarly, financial uncertainty is often described as one of the downsides of working on OLPs (Apouey *et al.*, 2020). However, the gig workers in our sample use OLPs to stabilize their finances so they can pursue their calling.

Overall, our findings do not seek to neglect the challenges of the gig economy as well as the problematic influence OLPs can have on individuals and their careers. On the contrary, we perceive our findings as a contribution towards enhancing comprehension of the subjective realities faced by gig workers and to ascertain the means by which they manage to endure the hardships of the gig economy. Due to the constructivist epistemological foundation of this study, we do not see our findings as an objective description of the gig economy, but rather as insights into the lived and constructed reality of a specific group of gig workers. There is a stark contrast between the narrative of gig workers as "cogs in the machine" and our gig workers' perception of feeling empowered and liberated through OLPs. Especially gig workers reliance on platforms to stabilize their finances shows how being and feeling independent can become a double-edged sword. On the one hand it can contribute to a feeling of empowerment but on the other hand it could blindfold gig workers from the actual harsh reality and lead to an unpleasant awakening after a certain time. Cultivating awareness for such discrepancies by also studying the subjective experiences of gig workers thriving and career success, plays a crucial role for making the gig economy more sustainable.

Theoretical implications for the calling literature

Our findings contribute to the work as calling theory (WCT) (Duffy *et al.*, 2018) suggesting that the perceived work status (being and feeling independent) plays an important role to understand living a calling. While research has focused on occupational identification (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009), in relation to callings, our results show that identification with one's work status could play an important role in the context of new work arrangements. Especially, in a work context such as on OLPs where occupational identities are less stable (Caza *et al.*, 2022), being independent could become an important identity anchor for a sense of living a calling. This is in line with the finding of Lysova and Khapova (2019) who found that outside of established career structures individuals enact their calling through emergent entrepreneurship and developing an idealized identity as having personal freedom and being market independent.

Furthermore, our findings contribute to the literature on calling enactment by highlighting three dynamics of calling enactment through OLPs. Prior research has found that an action-oriented path is best suited to attain successful calling enactment (Schabram

and Maitilis, 2017). We specify these findings by taking the perspective of SIPP to describe three specific dynamics that all highlight novel aspects of calling enactment. The dynamic of stabilizing one's finances shows that there are also dynamics of calling enactment that indirectly contribute to living a calling. While this dynamic does not directly contribute to a sense of living a calling it provides the basis on which one can engage in his or her calling domain in cases where one does not earn enough with one's calling. Other studies have already shown that individuals sometimes enact their calling besides work that they perform primarily to earn a living (Berg *et al.*, 2010; Cinque *et al.*, 2021). However, so far research has focused on direct pathways and mechanisms of calling enactment. We highlight that to understand how individuals can live out their calling also indirect dynamics of calling play a crucial role. We assume that the role of indirect dynamics of calling enactment could become more important in the context of new work arrangements that are highly flexible and fluid (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2017).

Practical implications

Our insights into the lived experiences of gig workers have important implications for career counselors and platform providers. First our study contributes to career counselors' ability to coach and consult individuals that work outside of traditional work arrangements. Despite having the knowledge and training to advise and consult individuals within the confines of the traditional labor market, career counselors in Switzerland remain largely uninformed of the gig economy, its operations and OLPs. Our study lays out three dynamics through which OLPs can be used for enacting a calling outside of the traditional labor market. Career counselors can for example support individuals by helping them identify platforms that allow them to develop important skills for their career development. On the other hand, career counselors need to be informed about the hardships of the gig economy to give individuals a realistic outlook on what they can expect. For example, our study shows that living out a calling in the gig economy in most cases requires the willingness to engage in side hustling to stabilize one's finances.

Second platform providers can learn from our findings that in order to retain gig workers on their platform they have to consider their individual career goals (Deng and Joshi, 2016). For example, platform providers could ask participants when enrolling on the platform what career goals they want to achieve through their engagement on the platform. They could then inform them about related fields of work that offer opportunities to develop one's career further. In the example of individuals with a calling the platform could show individuals how different kind of tasks relate to their calling and what new skills individuals can learn to enact novel routes of living a calling. Additionally, platforms should provide trainings about how to use platform features such as rating systems for one's own career goals. They should, ideally, enhance their rating systems by incorporating comprehensive feedback, thereby enabling them to function as a valuable tool for development and learning.

Limitations and future research

Despite making several theoretical and practical contribution to the literature on gig work and callings, this study has a few limitations that need to be mentioned. First, the goal of this study was to identify dynamics on OLPs through which gig workers can live their calling. Thanks to our inductive study design the phenomenon of living a calling through OLPs emerged and we decided to investigate this specific phenomenon as a contrast to most other studies which focus more on the negative experiences of gig workers (Caza *et al.*, 2022; Glavin *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, we sampled individuals that are able to live their calling as we especially wanted to understand their experiences with OLPs. Future studies should also investigate the boundary conditions of living calling by looking at gig workers

that have a calling but are not able to live it. This however was outside of the scope of our inductive qualitative study that seeks to first understand the dynamics that enable living a calling.

Second, our sample consisted of gig workers based in Switzerland, which is one of the wealthiest countries of the world. All our participants have secondary education and therefore have an above average education level compared to the global gig economy. The gig workers described themselves as working on OLPs by choice, rather than being pushed into it. Future research should explore calling enactment through OLPs for gig workers with less favorable socio-economic backgrounds.

Third, due to our methodological approach we were able to identify three dynamics of calling enactment which play an important role in the subjective experience of gig workers. However, we cannot determine whether these three dynamics really predict living a calling. Besides this, another important aspect in that regard is the time perspective. Our data provides insight into the subjective experiences of gig workers at a given time point. It is unclear whether these individuals still see the contribution of the platforms the same way over time. Further investigation is warranted that operationalizes and validates our study findings through the implementation of a quantitative and longitudinal research methodology.

Conclusion

Considering the challenging and often precarious context of the gig economy, our study sheds light on the career experiences of individuals that are living a calling through OLPs. By drawing from SIPP framework, we outline three different dynamics of calling enactment on OLPs. We thus make visible the complex person-platform dynamics that can allow individuals to live a calling in the context of the gig economy.

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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