Comprometimento e entrincheiramento de trabalhadores na gig economy: Interações entre focos de vida e trabalho

Commitment and entrenchment among gig economy workers: interactions between work and life foci

Compromiso y atrincheramiento de trabajadores en la gig economy: Interacciones entre objetivos de vida y trabajo

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Abstract

This article aims to examine how multiple foci of commitment and entrenchment are configured and interact within the context of the gig economy. A qualitative, exploratory study was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 30 app-based drivers in Brazil. The findings indicate that workers replace the traditional organizational focus with a set of commitment and entrenchment foci related to work, family, friends, and other life domains. Interactions marked by both synergy and conflict among commitments were identified, revealing three distinct profiles of commitment systems, differentiated by the presence or absence of work–life conflict. With regard to entrenchment, hierarchical arrangements and synergistic relationships were also observed. As a contribution, this study advances the methodological operationalization for analyzing commitment systems, a relatively recent theoretical perspective that still requires further methodological development for empirical measurement.

Keywords: commitment, entrenchment, gig economy.

Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é compreender como os múltiplos focos de comprometimento e entrincheiramento se configuram e interagem entre si no contexto da Gig Economy. Foi conduzida uma pesquisa qualitativa e exploratória, por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas

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com 30 motoristas de aplicativos no Brasil. Os achados indicaram que os trabalhadores substituem a organização tradicional por um conjunto de focos de comprometimento e entrincheiramento com o trabalho, família, amigos, e outros. Há interações de sinergia e conflitos de comprometimento, evidenciando três perfis de sistemas de comprometimento, que se dividiram pela existência/ ausência do conflito trabalho-vida. No caso do entrincheiramento, também foram encontradas hierarquizações e sinergias. Como contribuição, a pesquisa apresenta a operacionalização metodológica para análise de sistemas de comprometimento, teoria ainda recente e que demanda construção metodológica para mensuração.

Palavras-chave: *comprometimento, entrincheiramento, gig economy.*

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es comprender cómo los múltiples objetivos de compromiso y atrincheramiento se configuran e interactúan entre ellos en el contexto de la Gig Economy. Fue conducida una investigación cualitativa y exploratoria, por médio de entrevistas semiestructuradas con 30 conductores de aplicaciones en Brasil. Los hallazgos indicaron que los trabajadores sustituyen la organización tradicional por un conjunto de objetivos de compromiso y atrincheramiento con el trabajo, familia, amigos, y otros. Hay interacciones de sinergia y conflictos de compromiso, evidenciando tres perfiles de sistemas de compromiso, que se dividieron por la existencia/ ausencia del conflicto trabajo-vida. En el caso del atrincheramiento, también fueron encontradas jerarquizaciones y sinergias. Como contribución, la investigación presenta la operacionalización metodológica para análisis de sistemas de comprometimiento, teoría aún reciente y que demanda construcción metodológica para mensuración.

Palabras clave: *comprometimiento, atrincheramiento, gig economy.*

Gig economy (GE) represents a significant and rapidly expanding form of labor informality. In this model, intermediary companies operating through digital platforms connect consumers with on-demand workers across a wide range of activities (Meijerink & Keegan, 2019). In Brazil, these service arrangements largely operate outside the scope of labor legislation, granting companies substantial flexibility in hiring while exempting them from establishing formal employment relationships (Vaclavik et al., 2022).

This trend toward informality enables workers to move across multiple jobs and/or platform-based companies. As a result, workers tend to establish multiple concurrent ties, which calls for a renewed understanding of commitment and entrenchment across a diverse set of foci. Commitment refers to a psychological bond that reflects an individual's dedication and sense of responsibility toward an organization, a group, a goal, another person, or other entities (Klein et al., 2012). Entrenchment, in turn, denotes a worker's tendency to remain in an organization, job, or career based on assessments of employability, perceived external alternatives, and the costs associated with leaving the current arrangement (Rodrigues et al., 2019).

Although commitment has been extensively examined in prior research, there is a growing need to conceptually "update" this construct in light of new approaches and developments in contemporary work environments (Van Rossenberg et al., 2018). It is well established that employees may be psychologically attached to multiple targets in the workplace (Becker, 2016), and prior research has explored commitment to different foci, such as career (Carson, et al., 1995), profession (Meyer & Espinoza, 2016), and goals (Klein et al., 2020). In nonstandard work contexts (Cappelli & Keller, 2013), such as the GE, organizational commitment tends to lose prominence (Meyer, 2009) and be replaced by alternative foci that enable the development of elements such as social acceptance, status, and security (Van Rossenberg et al., 2018).

Research on commitment has evolved alongside contextual changes by advancing analyses of multiple commitments (Olsen et al., 2016; Reichers, 1985), including the presence of conflict and synergy among different foci (Johnson et al., 2009). A further step in this evolution involves the notion of commitment systems (CSs), defined as networks of interrelated commitments across a set of worker-relevant foci (Klein, et al., 2020). Similar theoretical advances are also needed for the concept of entrenchment. Emerging evidence, still insufficiently explored empirically, suggests that work-related ties may become more instrumental in informal contexts (Van Rossenberg et al., 2018), as insecurity can lead workers to prioritize immediate needs, such as income, over emotional or long-term bonds with work (Zeid et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the examination of these ties, originally developed within formal employment settings, remains limited in the context of informality and new work arrangements (Van Rossenberg et al., 2018). Research on entrenchment, in particular, has largely overlooked informal work, leaving a persistent research gap. Moreover, arrangements involving the individual, an organization, and one or more clients, as in the gig economy, may have important implications for the management of workers' commitments (Van Rossenberg et al., 2022).

Against this background, the present study aims to analyze how multiple foci of commitment and entrenchment are configured and interact within the context of gig economy. To achieve this objective, a qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with 30 app-based drivers in Brazil. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis,

revealing five themes related to commitment and four themes related to entrenchment. Together, these themes illustrate how such bonds are structured for gig workers both within the world of work and beyond it.

Context: The ge and Platform-Based Work

The GE has developed through intermediary platform-based companies that connect requesters, either organizations or individual consumers, with workers who perform on-demand tasks in activities such as transportation, cleaning, and even programming (Meijerink & Keegan, 2019). The triadic relationship among consumer, worker, and platform company constitutes one of the defining features of this economic model (Carneiro et al., 2023; Duggan et al., 2020). Although market intermediaries are not new, digital platforms in the GE enable access to an unlimited pool of workers by relying on informality, which is currently being reorganized and expanded (Abílio, 2020; Vaclavik et al., 2022).

The GE encompasses two main types of activities: crowdwork and app-based work (Carneiro et al., 2023; Duggan et al., 2020). In crowdwork, intermediary companies connect third-party demands, from individuals or organizations to a globally dispersed workforce. Work is contracted and performed online and typically involves predominantly cognitive tasks (Moreschi et al., 2020). In app-based work, although tasks are mediated by digital platforms, work execution is not fully digital, as it occurs locally, as in the case of ride-hailing drivers and delivery workers. This arrangement constitutes an indirect work relationship involving at least three of the following four actors: an online intermediary platform, the worker, a service provider, and a consumer (Duggan et al., 2020).

Among the defining characteristics of the GE are algorithmic decision-making, the gamification of work, and the intensification of perceived autonomy and independence, fostered by the idea that the "boss" is ostensibly a "system" or an "app," rather than a person (Möhlmann & Zalmanson, 2017). These characteristics shape how workers relate to their work (Wan et al., 2023). Gamification refers to the application of game-based mechanisms, such as competition, rewards, and behavioral quantification, in non-game contexts, creating a competitive environment that encourages workers to engage in successive tasks or "stages" (Möhlmann & Zalmanson, 2017). In addition, platform narratives emphasizing freedom, flexibility, and entrepreneurship are widely disseminated, yet remain highly contested (Wan et al., 2023).

The decentralized structure of platform systems, combined with the rhetorical emphasis on "platforms" and "algorithms," may give the impression that companies exert limited managerial control over workers' behaviors (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). In practice, however, this reality is marked by three forms of vulnerability: i) occupational vulnerabilities, ii) precarity, and iii) platform-based vulnerabilities (Bajwa et al., 2018). Occupational vulnerabilities stem from the nature of the work itself, particularly in the transportation of people and goods, where workers, especially in large cities, are exposed to significant risks. Precarity refers to the contingent and short-term nature of work, similar to that experienced by many other categories of informal workers. Platform-based vulnerabilities are specific to digital labor arrangements and are associated with information asymmetries and a pervasive culture of surveillance (Bajwa et al., 2018).

The GE operates within a logic in which workers are expected to bear the costs (and benefits) of their own investments. Highly individualized work practices foster a radical form of responsibilization that may lead to economic insecurity, low productivity, reduced autonomy, and concerning levels of personal debt (Fleming, 2017). Workers become subordinated self-managers, lacking guarantees regarding remuneration, limits on working time, or access to labor rights and social protection. They are permanently available for work, functioning as just-in-time workers (Abílio, 2020).

Because of the specificities of this work model, it is expected that its characteristics have important implications for the bonds workers establish with their work and related life domains. In this study, particular attention is devoted to commitment and entrenchment bonds, which are discussed in the following section.

Work-Related Bonds: Commitment and Entrenchment

Commitment has been conceptualized in multiple ways in research. In this study, commitment is defined as a psychological bond that reflects an individual's dedication and sense of responsibility toward an organization, a group, a goal, another person, or other entities, referred to as "commitment foci" (Klein et al., 2012). These foci may be related to the work context (Becker, 2016), including career (Carson, et al., 1995), profession (Meyer & Espinoza, 2016), and goals (Klein et al., 2020).

The existence of multiple commitment foci gives rise to an interactional perspective. Commitments may relate to one another in compensatory, synergistic, or conflicting ways (Johnson et al., 2009), or be classified as synergistic, neutral, or conflicting (Klein et al., 2020). This study adopts the framework proposed by Klein et al. (2020), which advances a broader approach through the concept of commitment systems (CSs). CSs are networks of interrelated commitments across a set of relevant foci and are characterized by key parameters, including the number, strength, and coupling of their elements (Klein et al., 2020; Van Rossenberg et al., 2022).

Commitments are considered synergistic when they are positively coupled and produce multiplicative effects on work outcomes; neutral when one commitment does not occur at the expense of another; and conflicting when high levels of commitment undermine one another (Klein et al., 2020). Commitment conflicts may arise from incompatible

goals, from individuals' perceptions that they are unable to act in ways that simultaneously benefit two or more foci, or from value incompatibilities, when different foci are governed by opposing norms or ideals (Klein et al., 2020; Van Rossenberg et al., 2018).

CSs may comprise subsystems, which are organized according to typologies that group commitment foci around a shared thematic domain. In this article, such analyses contribute to understanding the CSs of gig economy workers, their diverse work-related commitment foci, and the ways these interact with broader life domains. This conceptualization of CSs represents an important advance in literature, prompting conceptual refinement and the reassessment of existing measurement approaches.

Another relevant line of inquiry in this field concerns commitment profiles, understood as combinations of different types of commitment (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). Prior studies have identified distinct commitment profiles among individuals (Meyer et al., 2012; Montenegro et al., 2022). However, research focusing specifically on profiles of CSs remains incipient. Van Rossenberg et al. (2022) have identified three profiles: i) a balanced system, characterized by synergistic relationships among commitment foci; ii) a conflicting system, characterized by high levels of conflict among commitment foci; and iii) an independent system, characterized by low levels of conflict among commitment foci.

Entrenchment, in turn, derives from the instrumental nature of bonds, first articulated in side-bet theory (Becker, 1960) and later disseminated through research on career entrenchment (Carson et al., 1995). In organizational contexts, entrenchment has been defined as a worker's tendency to remain in an organization based on assessments of employability, perceived external job alternatives, and the costs associated with leaving (Rodrigues et al., 2019). The consequences of entrenchment may be either positive or negative. Entrenched individuals may contribute to greater workforce stability and lower turnover; however, they may also experience dissatisfaction, demotivation, or limited interest in developing new skills or knowledge (Carson et al., 1995).

In Brazil, the entrenchment measure was validated by Rodrigues and Bastos (2012) and comprises three dimensions: social position adjustments (SPA), impersonal bureaucratic arrangements (IBA), and limitation of alternatives (LA). SPA refers to investments related to adaptation, time devoted to learning organizational processes and role requirements, relationships developed within the work group, and recognition within the organization. IBA encompasses financial stability and benefits that would be lost if the individual were to leave the organization. LA captures perceptions of labor market constraints and limited alternatives upon leaving, whether due to perceived deficits in professional qualifications or other factors that reduce employability (Rodrigues & Bastos, 2012).

Entrenchment conceptually and empirically overlaps with continuance or instrumental commitment (Rodrigues et al., 2021) and is also associated with the experience of being "locked in" to a workplace as a result of remaining in less preferred jobs (Feenstra-Verschure et al., 2023). Like commitment, entrenchment may extend beyond the work domain to other life spheres. An individual's bond with family, friends, life goals, and other domains may also have an instrumental basis, as investments are made and costs are perceived when distancing from or terminating such ties. This perspective aligns with Klein et al.'s (2012) target-free conceptualization of commitment, in which bonds may be directed toward any focus. However, this extension has not yet been explored in research and constitutes one of the key theoretical contributions advanced by the present study.

Methodological Procedures

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory design (Sampieri et al, 2013; Creswell, 2007). A qualitative approach was chosen due to the need for deeper exploration of work-related bonds in nontraditional employment contexts (Van Rossenberg et al., 2018). Such contexts require methodological procedures that foster closer interaction and dialogue between researchers and participants, enabling a more nuanced understanding of lived experiences and supporting theoretical and empirical advancements in future research.

Data collection: A total of 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with app-based drivers providing individual passenger transportation services. This group was selected because it represents the largest category of gig economy workers in Brazil. Eligibility criteria included i) having worked as an app-based driver for at least 3 months and ii) providing services mediated by at least one platform, given the absence of formal employment ties and the possibility of using multiple platforms simultaneously. Interviews were conducted between November 2019 and February 2020, with an average duration of 46 minutes. Participants were recruited in two Brazilian cities: São Paulo/SP (n = 18) and Fortaleza/CE (n = 12). City selection was based on researcher accessibility and field feasibility.

Three strategies were used to access participants: i) app-driver groups on social media, particularly Facebook; ii) drivers who were friends or neighbors of acquaintances of the researchers; and iii) snowball sampling, whereby interviewed drivers referred other potential participants. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in locations chosen for participants' convenience. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded after informed consent was obtained. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw or interrupt the interview at any time. No interviews were discontinued, and all were fully transcribed for analysis.

Instrument and procedure: A semi-structured interview guide was developed, covering topics related to daily work activities, relationships with platforms and passengers, and participants' perceptions of their CSs and entrenchment relationships. During the interviews, participants were asked to construct visual representations of their CSs and

entrenchment systems using stickers and A4 paper. They were instructed to distribute different bond foci; first those related to work and subsequently those related to other life domains. The interview guide was accompanied by a demographic information form, a set of figures representing possible commitment foci, and graphical templates for CSs and entrenchment, as illustrated in Figure 1. Participants were then asked to reflect on the systems they had constructed and to explain the motivations underlying those configurations.

Figure 1.

Graphical representation of bond systems.

The bond systems method is grounded in Klein et al.'s (2020) theory of CSs. However, the graphical representation used in this study was adapted, particularly with respect to the parameters of strength and coupling, to facilitate comprehension among app-based workers. In Klein et al.'s (2020) original model, the strength of each focus is represented by its size within the system, whereas coupling is indicated by the distance between foci. In the present study, the system was constructed around the individual, using a solar system metaphor in which the person represents the sun and bond foci are depicted as planets orbiting around it. The strength of each commitment was determined by the approximate level indicated by the participant: the closer a focus was positioned to the individual, the stronger that commitment. Coupling was operationalized as the distance between foci.

During the interviews, participants received extensive guidance to ensure comprehension of the adopted model. The core constructs (commitment and entrenchment) were explained verbally and visually using printed cards. Additionally, different colored sheets were used to distinguish systems: CSs were constructed on yellow sheets, whereas entrenchment systems were constructed on blue sheets. Participants were then invited to build their CSs and, subsequently, their entrenchment systems, positioning synergistic foci (i.e., convergent in goals) closer together and distancing foci perceived as conflicting or divergent.

The distribution of foci began with private life domains (family, friends, leisure), followed by work-related foci (platforms, other app-based drivers, WhatsApp driver groups, among others suggested by participants and added on blank sheets). This construction activity facilitated participants' reflection on the people, groups, organizations, and other entities with which they establish bonds of commitment and entrenchment.

Analytical procedures: Thematic analysis was employed to address the study's objectives. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis focused on the nature of bonds, commitment and entrenchment foci, and the interactions among them. Following transcription and repeated reading of the interviews, initial line-by-line coding was conducted, resulting in the identification of 118 commitment-related codes and 54 entrenchment-related codes. Data were then transferred to Excel spreadsheets to support code refinement and thematic grouping. The analytical process was iterative rather than linear, involving repeated cycles of grouping, ungrouping, and regrouping codes to identify similarities and distinctions among themes. The validity of thematic categorization was assessed by a second researcher. Themes defined a priori included multiple commitments, commitment conflict, commitment synergy, multiple entrenchments, and entrenchment synergy (Johnson et al., 2009; Klein et al., 2020; Van Rossenberg et al., 2022). Themes that emerged a posteriori were commitment hierarchy, entrenchment hierarchy, and absence of entrenchment. The final set of nine themes was grouped into two overarching categories: CSs and entrenchment.

Subsequently, profiles of bond systems, identified under the theme "CS," were analyzed based on three criteria: i) the number of foci in the system; ii) the strength of foci; and iii) the coupling among foci, considering their typological

relationships. The number of foci was calculated as the average number of foci across each individual's system. Average focus strength was determined by analyzing the prevalence of each focus across system levels. Coupling configuration was assessed by examining relationships among different types of foci, based on typifications such as "work-related foci" and "private life-related foci."

Presentation and Analysis of Results

Participants had a mean age of 43 years. Most were men (n = 22), identified as Black or Brown (n = 16), were married (n = 15), had completed high school (n = 14), and had children (n = 21). Among the 30 participants, 19 reported having no other source of income. Of the remaining participants, seven held formal employment under Brazilian labor law (CLT), one was retired, and three reported other informal jobs. In addition, 27 interviewees used their own vehicles for work and reported an average net weekly income of approximately BRL 550. The analytical categories, themes, and their definitions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Research categories and themes.

Category	Themes	Definition
CS	Multiple commitments	Refers to the various foci toward which individuals may establish a bond of dedication and responsibility.
	Commitment hierarchy	Refers to the establishment of priorities among multiple commitments.
	Commitment conflicts	Refers to incompatibilities of time, energy, or willingness among different commitment foci.
	Commitment synergy	Refers to compatibilities of time, energy, or willingness among different commitment foci.
	CS profile	Refers to structural patterns of the CS, based on the parameters of number of foci, strength of foci, and coupling.
Entrenchment	Multiple entrenchments	Refers to the various foci toward which individuals may establish a bond based on the need to remain in the relationship, perceived costs of leaving it, or investments made in it.
	Entrenchment hierarchy	Refers to the establishment of priorities among multiple entrenchments.
	Lack of entrenchment	Refers to the absence of perceived necessity of the relationship, lack of perceived costs associated with it, or lack of investments made.
	Entrenchment synergy	Refers to compatibilities of time, energy, or willingness among different entrenchment foci.

CS = commitment system.

CS

Multiple commitments: The commitment foci most frequently mentioned by participants were family, customers, emotional social support, WhatsApp driver groups, the work platform, and other app-based drivers. Some of these foci were suggested by the interview protocol, whereas others emerged spontaneously. All participants identified family as a central focus, often described as "the foundation of everything" (E16), with statements such as "if it weren't for family, we wouldn't be here, right?" (E5). Commitment to customers reflects their centrality in this economic model, as demand-based work ceases to exist without customers. Religious groups, therapeutic processes, and other nonwork sources of personal support were grouped under the focus of emotional social support, which was frequently mentioned.

Commitment to WhatsApp driver groups also emerged as a highly salient focus. These groups appear to provide support for learning about the work and for socialization, albeit virtual, functioning in ways similar to interactions among formally employed workers in traditional workplaces. Participants also reported commitment to platform companies, albeit with reservations: "I'm committed to Uber and 99 when I'm actually working. Outside of that, I'm not in love with it […] I'm here to provide a service. The day I feel it no longer works for me, I stop" (E16). Commitment to other app-based drivers was expressed through mutual assistance, particularly in helping newcomers enter the activity and understand how the work operates. Overall, workers both seek and provide peer support as a necessary resource in everyday gig work.

Commitment hierarchy: Participants reported a clear hierarchy among multiple commitment foci. In addition to being the most frequently cited focus, family most often occupied the highest commitment level, followed by friends, leisure, Uber, and customers. Interview excerpts illustrate this hierarchy: "I give priority to my family. I don't have much contact with friends. I don't really prioritize friends" (E15); "Uber is there because I feel it's the best app to work with" (E20).

Commitment conflicts: Conflicts were primarily characterized by behavioral and time incompatibilities. The most frequent conflicts occurred between app-based work and WhatsApp driver groups, friends, and other nonwork foci. These conflicts were attributed to the limited free time available to workers, as work consumed most of their daily schedules. Participant E3 articulated this clearly: "A friend of mine sent me a message the other day: 'Man, I miss you.' And I abandoned my friends, abandoned everything (…) because of Uber" (E3).

Commitment synergy: The most frequent synergies were observed between app-based work and WhatsApp driver groups, family, and customers, as well as between friends and leisure. Although some participants perceived tensions between work and WhatsApp groups, others emphasized that these groups provide valuable information for dealing with work-related challenges. Compatibility between work and family was achieved through adjustments in daily routines to meet family demands. Compatibility between app-based work and customers was described as self-evident by several drivers, who viewed customers as indispensable to their work.

CS profiles: Integrating findings across commitment-related themes enabled the construction of CS profiles, revealing structural patterns in workers' systems. Three CS profiles were identified (Figure 2), based on the parameters of number of foci, strength of foci, and coupling.

Figure 2.

Commitment system profiles.

Profile 1 – Integrated   Profile 2 – Conflicting   Profile 3 – Hierarchizing
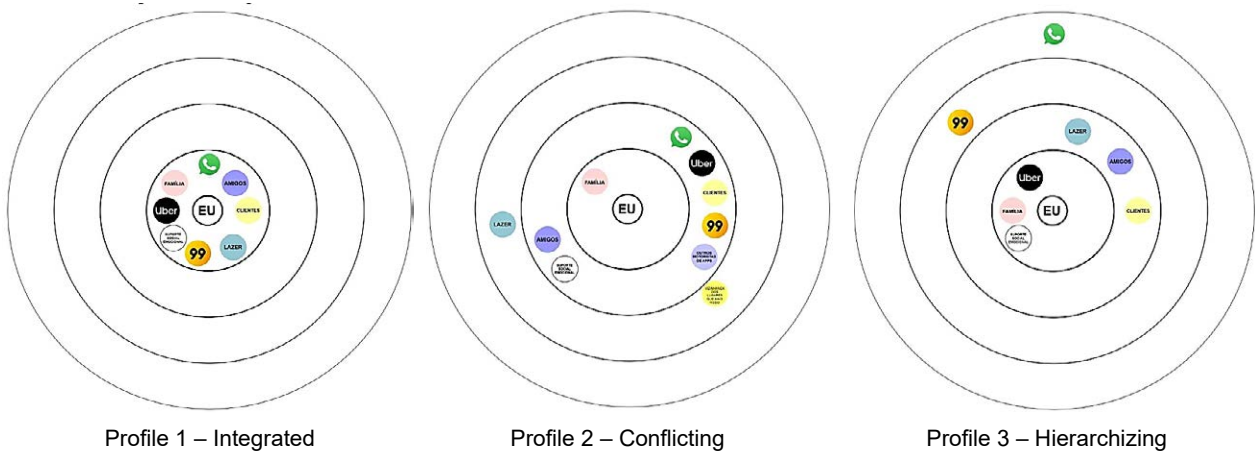
Profile 1 comprised 12 participants with an average of eight commitment foci, most of which were concentrated at the highest commitment level, indicating strong coupling. The profile was characterized by synergy between work-related foci and family and private-life foci. Participants perceived their most important foci as coexisting at the same level, with no perceived conflict between professional and private life.

Profile 2 included 10 participants with an average of 10 commitment foci, primarily concentrated at the second commitment level, indicating strong coupling. The system was divided into two subsystems, reflecting a clear conflict between work-related and family and private-life foci. Regardless of the hierarchy assigned to specific foci, participants recognized incompatibilities of time and energy between work-related foci (platforms, customers, other app-based drivers, WhatsApp groups) and private-life foci (family, friends, leisure).

Profile 3 consisted of eight drivers with an average of seven commitment foci, with a slight concentration at the second commitment level, indicating weaker coupling than observed in the other profiles. In this profile, coupling was characterized by synergy between work-related and private-life foci, although these foci were distributed across different commitment levels. Most participants ranked family and the most influential platform at the top of their commitment hierarchy.

Entrenchment

Multiple entrenchments: The most frequent entrenchment foci reported by participants were platforms, customers, and family. Workers described a relationship of necessity with platforms, as these provide access to a customer network that does not exist outside them. Drivers perceived few alternative job opportunities and reported making investments to operate through platforms, such as vehicle financing and expenditures related to maintenance and cleaning. Entrenchment with customers was closely linked to entrenchment with platforms, given that customers constitute a core element of GE triad. Both work volume and income depend directly on the number of rides requested by customers. Outside the work domain, family also emerged as a focus with which a relationship of financial dependence or emotional cost may be established. Participants described this bond as a central necessity in their lives.

Entrenchment hierarch: When distributing different foci within their systems, participants indicated greater dependence on some foci than on others. The most salient entrenchment foci were Uber, family, and customers, ranked ahead of friends, leisure, and WhatsApp driver groups. Participant E29 illustrated this hierarchy: "Because these here [Uber, customers, family] really can't be given up. The others [friends, leisure, WhatsApp driver groups] don't have to be top priority. They can come second" (E29).

Lack of entrenchment: Some participants reported not depending on app-based work, WhatsApp driver groups, friends, or leisure activities. As one interviewee stated, "This other app here [99] wouldn't be costly for me to lose. It helps me sometimes when Uber is slow" (E25). Another noted, "As for WhatsApp driver groups and other app-based drivers, it doesn't really matter to me" (E28).

Entrenchment synergy: Synergy was most frequently identified between platforms. One participant explained this perception by stating, "I don't think Uber conflicts with 99 because they serve the same function, so I can place them together" (E12).

No entrenchment conflicts were identified in this study. When asked about conflicts, participants referred instead to situations reflecting work–life conflict rather than conflicts among entrenchment foci (Warren, 2021). Work–life conflict may be mediated by either commitment or entrenchment ties to work. Participant E26 illustrated this dynamic: "My family has already paid my Uber daily fee so I could stay with them […] I worked on Christmas and New Year's. So this year my family paid my daily fee on Christmas so I could be with them" (E26).

Discussões

The findings indicate that work in the gig economy enables the formation of multiple bond foci. In this study, participants identified a wide range of instances, including people and groups, as well as platforms and social networks. These results reinforce the need for a typology capable of distinguishing among different possible bond foci (Van Rossenberg, et al., 2022). In this sense, the findings of the present study offer five main theoretical contributions to the literature on work-related bonds.

The first contribution concerns the observation that the multiple commitments developed by gig economy workers, as in formal employment, emerge from needs for affiliation, belonging, uncertainty reduction, and personal meaning at work (Van Rossenberg et al., 2018). However, the absence of a conventional employment relationship leads to a weakening of commitment to the organization, here represented by platform companies. The effective "absence" of an organization prompts individuals to construct their own networks of commitment foci to replace it, not as a single central focus but as a set of interconnected foci (Van Rossenberg et al., 2018). Although organizational commitment does not disappear entirely, it tends to lose relative importance compared with other foci (Meyer, 2009). The shift from the organization as the primary focus to a pool of foci, such as platforms or other occasional jobs, suggests a growing tendency for workers to become more committed to their work or activities than to organizations per se.

The second contribution relates to interactions among bond foci, particularly conflicts and synergies. The findings align with Van Rossenberg et al.'s (2018) call for commitment research to incorporate personal-life foci in addition to work-related ones. Since commitment conflicts may arise from incompatible values or behaviors (Klein et al., 2020), among the drivers in this study, incompatibilities of time and interests were predominant. Limited time for engaging with multiple foci and frequently antagonistic interests led workers to perceive themselves as unable to act in ways that simultaneously benefit two or more foci (Van Rossenberg et al., 2018).

The results also corroborate findings by Olsen et al. (2016), which associate low-quality organizational relationships, autonomy, and skill transfer with stronger commitment to customers and the profession. In this context, commitment to work appeared to be weakly influenced by relationships with supervisors or other drivers. This is explained by the absence of a direct supervisor in gig work, replaced instead by algorithmic control. Such control resembles that of a highly autocratic leader, allowing little room for discretion or flexibility.

The third contribution concerns entrenchment, which is traditionally conceptualized through three dimensions: SPA, IBA, and LA (Rodrigues & Bastos, 2012). In the gig economy, however, these dimensions were not fully reflected. SPA was largely absent, as few investments are required to adapt to the work itself, drivers need little time to learn the task, and social relationships with peers are primarily virtual, when they exist at all.

IBA was only partially reflected. Because of the lack of financial stability, workers' exit from gig work may occur either by individual choice, since entry and exit are flexible, or through platform-initiated exclusion, typically following low ratings or repeated cancellations. In both cases, the risks associated with exit are limited to losses directly linked to ride-based income, as the gig economy offers no additional benefits or financial advantages to forgo.

The third dimension of entrenchment, LA, relates to app-based work in light of perceived lack of alternatives in the labor market. As previous studies suggest, it is precisely this perception of low employability or limited job alternatives that often leads workers to platforms in the first place (Anwar & Graham, 2021). The same factors, such as unemployment rates, limited education, age, and other constraints, may also contribute to keeping workers in these arrangements. From this perspective, LA appears to function as a precondition for entrenchment rather than as one of its outcomes.

Accordingly, an important advance of this study lies in demonstrating that, in precarious and temporary forms of work such as the gig economy, existing conceptual dimensions of entrenchment may be insufficient to capture contextual complexity. The findings suggest that gig workers exhibit a more transactional than relational contractual orientation (Millward & Hopkins, 1998). In line with Van Rossenberg et al. (2018), the absence of an organization offering a sustainable employment relationship, characterized by job security, career development, and positive attitudes, accentuates transactional obligations over relational bonds grounded in reciprocity, mutual trust, and organizational commitment.

The fourth contribution concerns the inclusion of multiple foci in the analysis of entrenchment. By examining entrenchment beyond the work domain, the study raises questions about whether this bond indeed reflects remaining in a relationship due to perceived lack of alternatives and exit costs. Participants' accounts revealed distress associated with giving up pleasurable activities because of work demands. These experiences did not reflect conflicts between entrenchment foci (e.g., work versus friends or leisure), but rather work–life conflict (Warren, 2021). In this sense, entrenchment with platforms mediates work–life conflict, a dynamic further intensified by platform gamification strategies, as summarized in Figure 3.

Finally, as a fifth contribution, this study proposes an initial approach to understanding how CSs are structured among app-based workers. This approach is illustrated in the model presented in Figure 3. CSs were found to comprise multiple foci, with greater strength concentrated at higher commitment levels. Coupling among foci occurred through both synergies and conflicts, resulting in diverse configurations. The adapted application of Klein et al.'s (2020) systems theory enabled the identification of synergistic and conflicting foci within these systems.

Figure 3.

Groups of bond system profiles among gig workers.
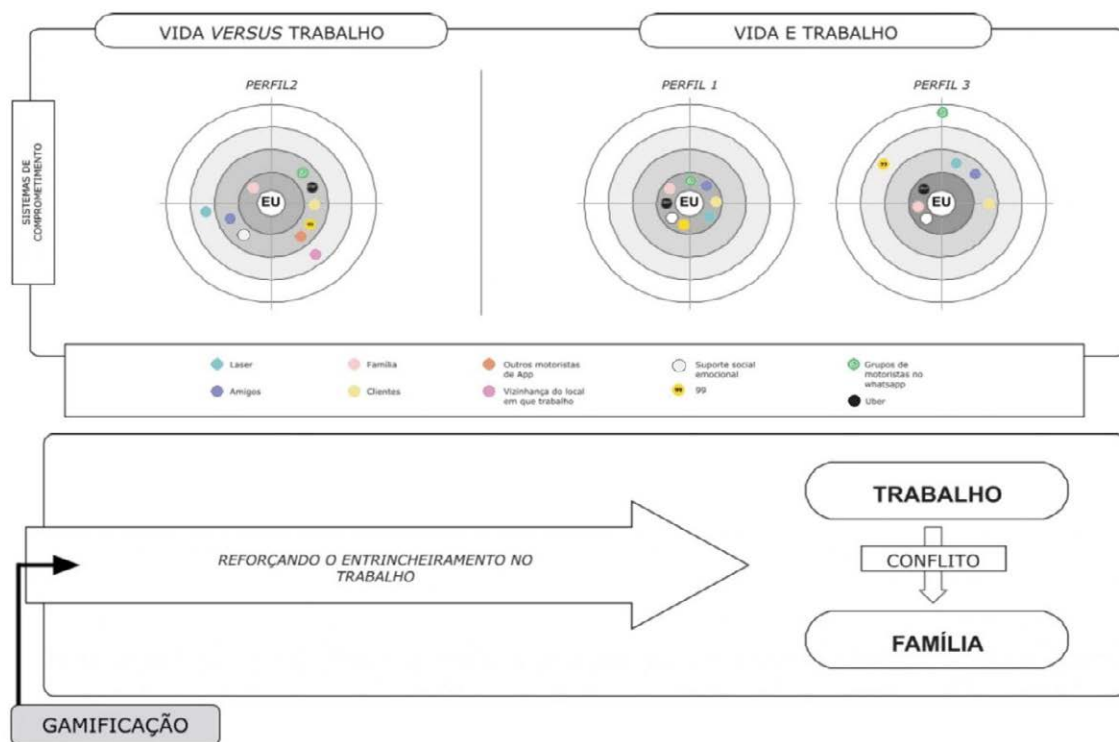
The collective analysis of systems allowed for the identification of three bond profiles. Although systems are inherently individual, similarities emerged in the number of foci, the strength attributed to them, and, most notably, in how workers couple and decouple bond foci, consistent with Van Rossenberg et al. (2022). Coupling reflects the interrelationships among foci (Klein et al., 2020). Profiles identified indicate that some workers hierarchize their bond foci, whereas others assign similar levels of importance to all foci. The findings also reveal that some workers experience a clear work–life dichotomy, while others do not perceive such distinctions. These results reinforce the role of context as a critical factor shaping how foci are coupled (Klein et al., 2020). While some workers emphasized that schedule flexibility enables coupling between work and private-life foci, others reported that exhausting work routines generate commitment conflicts, particularly between work and family.

Final Considerations

This article aimed to analyze how multiple foci of commitment and entrenchment are configured and interact within the context of the gig economy. The findings reveal a complex network of commitments and entrenchments among app-based drivers, illustrating how their lives are shaped by multiple bonds that challenge traditional notions of organizational loyalty. The participants, predominantly men with a mean age of 43 years, demonstrated that their priorities revolve mainly around family, customers, and support groups, while social interaction and leisure are frequently sacrificed due to work demands. The hierarchical organization of commitments reflects a persistent tension between professional and personal demands, revealing time-related conflicts that generate emotional strain. The analysis of commitment profiles further indicates that, despite the flexibility associated with app-based work, many drivers experience entrenchment within a system that constrains their options and increases dependence on digital platforms. These findings underscore the precarious nature of the gig economy and highlight the need for a deeper understanding of the social and emotional bonds that permeate the lives of these workers.

This study offers theoretical, methodological, and social contributions. From a theoretical perspective, the findings extend the analysis of commitment and entrenchment beyond formal employment, incorporating a multiplicity of foci and examining their interactions, thereby enriching the literature on work-related bonds. Methodologically, the study contributes by operationalizing a tool for analyzing CSs, a relatively recent theoretical framework that is still under development and requires alternative methodological approaches for empirical measurement. From a social standpoint, the study provides a tool that enables individuals to reflect on their commitment foci and on the hierarchies, conflicts, and synergies underlying both commitment and entrenchment, potentially supporting more informed personal and professional decision-making.

The study also presents limitations. Data collection was restricted to 2 Brazilian cities, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Another limitation concerns the conceptual boundaries of entrenchment in informal work contexts, which required adaptation to be meaningfully presented to participants. CS theory remains in an early stage of development and that the methodological strategies required to assess systems and their interrelations are complex and still being tested. A further limitation, likely related to these challenges, was the absence of variables capable of explaining the configurations of bond system profiles. Future research should seek to validate measures of entrenchment across multiple foci and to further operationalize CS and entrenchment tools among workers from diverse occupational categories, including both formal and other informal employment contexts.

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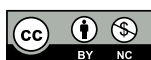
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