

Digital gig workers vs. artificial intelligence – a battle of the wits

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Abstract

Purpose – This article investigates in depth Sri Lankan gig workers' varying attitudes towards AI amid a hyper-digital world and its role of reshaping work patterns in developing economies. By exploring platform work transformations, it provides critical insights to guide equitable social policy and labour protections.

Design/methodology/approach – This article is a qualitative study which utilises a semi-structured interview series consisting of fourteen platform-based gig workers across diverse professions, employing purposive sampling method to collect data and NVivo to run the analysis. Institutional ethical approval was obtained and ensured participant informed consent, anonymity and voluntary withdrawal rights throughout the interviews.

Findings – This study assesses divergent AI attitudes among Sri Lankan gig workers: optimism towards efficiency gains, ambivalence regarding ethical trade-offs and pessimism concerning skill erosion. Segmentation occurs primarily by occupational specialisation, revealing patterning: IT gig workers embracing pragmatic efficiency while creatives defend identity-based skillsets. Given AI's structural impacts, proactive social policies leveraging gig worker insights are suggested to promote multiple sustainable development goals in emerging digital economies.

Originality/value – This exploratory study examines AI attitudes through the lenses of Sri Lanka gig workers, suggesting occupational divergence (IT pragmatism versus creative resistance) in the nation's digital gig economy. It offers contextual empirical insights from gig workers lived experiences in the Global South, extending global AI research beyond existing GenAI and algorithmic management studies, which predominantly focus on quantitative analysis or ride-hailing platforms.

Keywords AI, AI attitudes, Digital gig economy, Freelancers, Gig economy, Platform-based work, SDG, Social policy, Sri Lanka

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1. Introduction

Society faced a pivotal shift in the early 2020s when artificial intelligence (AI), particularly generative models, launched and became widely integrated into everyday use. ChatGPT (Chat Generative Pre-Trained Transformer) marked its 'Big Bang' moment, rapidly achieving 100 million users within two months (OpenAI, 2026). Initially, society reacted with scepticism, treating it merely as a sophisticated search tool akin to Google. As time progressed, society recognised that these AI platforms offered far more than simple "ask a question, receive an answer" functionality, enabling complex reasoning, code generation and creative content production.

Over time, AI technology unlocked a plethora of possibilities for society to conduct their day-to-day tasks. This innovative technology can be defined as "a system's ability to interpret external data correctly, to learn from such data, and to use those learnings to achieve specific goals and tasks through flexible adaptation" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2019). Introducing the emergence of the digital gig economy to the equation, this informal economy has become at odds with traditional employment norms. This labour market enables on-demand, flexible and self-employed opportunities (Meijerink and Keegan, 2019). Crowd work platforms such as Freelancer, Fiverr, and Upwork facilitate individuals to list their skillset and area of expertise, then aid in finding gigs that can be performed, ultimately bringing gig workers and clients together on a global scale. As per The World Bank, the digital gig economy workforce accounts from 4.4% to 12.5% of the global



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workforce ([Datta et al., 2023](#)), with the number of gig workers rising during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the course of time, the gig economy continued to expand and has become a major economic contributor to varied industries such as technology, creative, and consultancy ([Upwork, 2026](#); [Ludwig et al., 2022](#); [Bunders et al., 2022](#)). However, social practices and procedures surrounding the role of AI for digital gig workers remain underdeveloped.

In Sri Lanka, the economic crisis in 2022 caused high unemployment, which drove youth into gig work ([Gooneratne, 2025](#)), with workers freelancing for graphic designing, content writing, programming, and virtual assisting. Remarkably, despite Sri Lanka being a developing country, as per the Online Labour Observation (2025) it falls in the top 15 countries with the highest global market share in the Online Labour Index (OLI 2020), which evoked an interest to gain deeper insight into gig workers' views on AI. Compared to many nations, Sri Lanka is behind in AI adoption and development; it was determined that only 6.6% of the population used AI in 2025 ([Microsoft AI Economy Institution, 2026](#)). This raised profound sociological questions about local gig worker's attitude towards AI and their implications for social policy.

This subject area has led to researchers consistently growing the body of literature regarding how AI impacts the way of work and the labour market ([Li and Liu, 2025](#)). While ample research examines AI's structural impacts on online labour markets and algorithmic management effects in platform work (e.g. [Meijerink and Bondarouk, 2023](#); [Liu and Yin, 2024](#); [Kadolkar et al., 2024](#)), there remains a notable lack of studies specifically addressing AI's role in the digital gig economy. Often overlooking the qualitative differential attitudes of gig workers towards the usage of AI in their daily gigs in developing countries like Sri Lanka, which ranks among the top 15 countries in the OLI index, the significance of this context remains insufficiently examined. This gap underscores the need for further investigation, which this study aims to address.

The objective of this research is to explore gig workers' perspectives on the role of AI, focusing on both its positives and negatives, and its impact on the emerging online labour market. Further, to gain a deeper understanding of the gig workers' subjective attitudes and extend the investigation to identify the key determinants behind observed attitudinal differences. Ultimately, this study includes actionable suggestions and social policy implications at micro (gig worker training), macro (national regulation) and international (sustainable development goals-aligned (SDG) and freelance platform) levels, addressing gaps in proactive AI governance.

The following section of the article provides an overview of the structure and scope of the study. Firstly, an understanding of foundational labour sociology, followed by AI's influence on this emerging economy, along with attitudinal distinctions faced by society in work-related environments, supported by existing research. Subsequently, to highlight and validate the gap in this area, a thorough literature-supported justification is provided. Secondly, the methodology section presents a clear, in-depth overview of the procedures underpinning the study. Thirdly, the findings provide a detailed thematic analysis, reinforced by interview quotations, outlining and explaining each sub-theme. Lastly, the discussion interprets the insights to assess the impact of AI on gig workers, identifies key challenges and offers provisional social policies to guide potential interventions.

2. Theoretical perspective

2.1 Platform labour foundations

Building from foundational platform labour scholarship, [Graham et al. \(2017\)](#) map digital labour's uneven geographies. While [Woodcock and Graham \(2019\)](#) critique gig platforms as intensified value extraction systems, as platforms gain less responsibility while workers bear the risks. Labour process theory (LPT) extends this through [Braverman's \(1974\)](#) deskilling of labour study, with [Gandini \(2018\)](#) and [Faraoun \(2024\)](#), highlighting the

restructuring gig work due to the pivotal shift in technology. Additionally, [Braverman's \(1974\)](#) deskilling thesis illustrates how technology erodes craft skills; while a segment of gig workers may benefit from upskilling, others may face classic deskilling threats to their talent, thereby revealing the “skill injustice” concept in LPT as historically continuous. [Anwar and Graham \(2019\)](#) document resistance strategies absent in the Global South that contrast with Northern narratives of flexibility, as economic precarity and infrastructural barriers intensify platform vulnerabilities. Despite gig workers engaging on the same platform, developing countries often face different realities. Such digital precarities magnify Sri Lankan gig workers’ AI attitudinal differences.

2.2 Role of AI in the digital gig economy

AI can be described as computer systems that use data-driven algorithms to learn, adapt and produce real-time decisions and over time continuously learn and offer refined responses ([Rodgers et al., 2023](#); [Kok et al., 2009](#)). It has the ability to produce texts, images, audio, and videos using data accessibility on the internet or internally shared datasets to help train the Generative AI (GenAI) such as ChatGPT, DALL-E 3, and Claude AI ([Li and Kollnig, 2024](#)). AI has evidently transformed the way of work; fully reshaping society’s every interaction with technology. In the context of the digital gig economy, it has changed various aspects of the work structures, job opportunities and earning dynamics amongst gig workers ([Babar et al., 2025](#)). [Khan and Khan \(2024\)](#) go as far as to contend ChatGPT as the gig economy’s “secret weapon”. There is a clear shift on these platforms once GenAI entered the equation, resulting in the automation of lower-level skilled gigs such as data entry and transcription ([Liu et al., 2023](#); [Hui et al., 2024](#)). Consequently, AI has expanded job opportunities in artistic, intricate and strategic gigs ([Babar et al., 2025](#); [Huang and Zhu, 2023](#)), fuelling scholarly exploration of its labour force impacts ([Berg et al., 2023](#)). Yet while qualitative studies examine the influence of digital skills ([Fiers, 2024](#)), they omit AI-specific influences. Additionally, [Table 1](#) offers a breakdown of recent studies that focus on the digital gig economy in AI context alongside its relevance to social policies. While these studies focus on different domains of AI, they overlook attitudinal responses and usage patterns in developing countries – the critical gap this study addresses.

2.3 Gig worker attitude towards AI

As a psychology concept, attitude comprehends the mental and neural state of readiness, shaped through experience, that directs and influences a person’s responses to situations

Table 1. Review of AI-focused research on the digital gig economy and its relevance to social policy relevance

Author	AI focus area	Relevance to social policy
Li et al. (2025)	Explores GenAI’s art and non-copyrightability in gig platforms; highlighting risks to income security and labour value	Highlights the need for intellectual property reform and stronger protections for digital creative workers in AI-driven markets
Khan and Khan (2024)	Highlights gig worker’s innovative use of ChatGPT and how their attitude influences their performance	Emphasises policies ensuring fair AI use, protecting gig workers and supporting equitable AI-enhanced work
Teutloff et al. (2025)	Discusses GenAI’s impact on freelance platforms, reducing demand for AI-substitutable tasks while increasing demand for complementary skills	Highlights implications for wage inequality, reskilling and worker protection policies
Babar et al. (2025)	Growth of AI-related freelance services	Illuminates concern regarding unequal access to AI skills and global labour stratification

Source(s): Authors’ own work

and social contexts (Allport, 1935). Attitudes continue to constitute a core aspect within social psychology (Hogg and Smith, 2007). With the emergence of AI technology, the workforce has exhibited a varying level of responses ranging from scepticism and resistance to acceptance and enthusiasm (Park *et al.*, 2024). There is a growing body of research examining the attitudes of organisational workers towards AI (Zirar *et al.*, 2023; Park *et al.*, 2024; Jarka *et al.*, 2025), along with how employee attitudes play a significant role in either constraining or enabling the effective use of AI (Del Giudice *et al.*, 2023; Tambe *et al.*, 2019). Despite the clear importance of this topic, empirical research exploring the attitudinal dynamics within the digital gig economy's workers is still relatively underdeveloped. Gig workers need to adapt and learn how to utilise AI and apply them in their gigs, as most gigs integrate human skills with AI capabilities. While studies promote AI's active benefits and quantify performance impacts (e.g. Khan and Khan, 2024; Babar *et al.*, 2025), they overlook gig worker's qualitative perceptions and attitudes, which are essential for social policies, therefore revealing a critical gap. To address such concerns, this study aims to report differing gig worker's perspectives of AI and ultimately contribute to literature and social policies.

2.4 Gap justification, sociological perspectives and SDG alignment

The need for future researchers to incorporate qualitative data to explore different aspects of the gig economy (Fiers, 2024; Liang *et al.*, 2024) and examine the underlying factors that shape in terms of gig worker's attitudes and experiences has been raised (Khan and Khan, 2024; Dasgupta *et al.*, 2024). While a significant number of skilled gig workers indicate widespread optimistic about AI tools transforming work, these lack the peer-review depth and rationale behind the optimism and pessimism. Similarly, digitalisation intensifies the knowledge gaps and inequalities formed in gig labour market (Omar and Jamil, 2025), demanding geographically diverse AI ethics imperatives (Khan and Khan, 2024; Pilatti *et al.*, 2024) to advance equitable policies. This study responds to these intersection gaps by foregrounding the lived experiences of Sri Lankan gig workers, positioning them as a critical lens for advancing literature while strengthening social-policy relevance.

While existing attitudinal studies predominantly focus narrowly on a singular AI tool like ChatGPT, suggesting that alternative AI tools may offer different responses (Khan and Khan, 2024). This study explores diverse tools such as Adobe Firefly, ChatGPT and Codium within the Sri Lankan economy. Sociologically, AI disrupts cultural norms, intensifies precarity and work-life imbalances in informal economies (Oder and Béland, 2025). Drawing on Weber's (1905) Protestant Work Ethic, Sri Lankan gig workers' cultural views towards work may shape differing attitudes towards AI. Existing gig economy and AI literature links findings in alignments with SDGs (e.g. Babar *et al.* (2025) for sustainable economic growth and Graham *et al.* (2017) for reducing inequality and fair wage) often lack empirical voices from gig workers in low-regulation environments. Ultimately, these literature gaps highlight the need to offer a sociological lens to this area; this study aims to contribute to context-specific insights for vigilant AI governance.

3. Data and methodology

3.1 Research design

This qualitative study employs reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021a, b; Terry *et al.*, 2017), enabling the examination of perspectives of different participants (Braun and Clarke, 2006; King, 2004) within an interpretive paradigm to explore and understand the Sri Lankan digital gig worker's attitude towards AI. Themes emerged iteratively and inductively from gig worker's lived experiences on the platforms. Reflexivity was maintained through

systematic recording of interpretive decisions in a structured spreadsheet and reflective journal (Nowell *et al.*, 2017).

3.2 Sample selection

Recruitment was conducted through social networks, facilitating access to digital gig workers. To ensure sample appropriateness, a purposive sampling strategy was adopted, with the aim of seeking individuals who matched the listed characteristics: (1) currently engaging on online gig platforms such as Fiverr, Freelancer, or Upwork in Sri Lanka (2) a minimum of one year of experience in the digital gig economy. As a result of this approach, it ensured the findings gathered by the participants would offer a more comprehensive and reflective view. However, the process presented challenges, as several potential participants declined involvement due to reluctance to participate. A sum of 14 participants was interviewed; Table 2 displays an overview of the interviewee’s information and characteristics. The gender distribution imbalance reflects broader labour market patterns in Sri Lanka, where the male workforce significantly exceeds that of females (Department of Census and Statistics, 2024; Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2025). However, prior research indicates gender is not the primary factor in gig economy differences, which stems from experience, task preferences and work patterns rather than gender itself (Cook *et al.*, 2020; Boudreaux, 2025). In addition, the sample purposively represents the OLI’s highest-demand category, i.e. Software/IT and Creative and Multimedia, representing Sri Lanka’s contemporary viable digital gig market.

3.3 Data collection

To obtain data, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with open-ended questions to enable participants to freely express their thoughts and facilitated the interviewers to seek clarifications through follow-up questions. Area of discussion consisted of a brief introduction of themselves, the relevant industry, experience and AI’s role in the interviewee’s gigs. Interviews were conducted in English via Microsoft Teams, which were audio-recorded, then later transcribed using Adobe Suite and proofread manually. The average duration of an interview was 27.64 min. Data collection was guided by the principle of saturation, whereby interviews continued until responses became repetitive and no new themes emerged. To ensure thematic robustness and credibility of the findings, two additional interviews were conducted beyond this stage, confirming that no novel insights were generated and that saturation had

Table 2. Participant details and characteristics

Gigger	Age	Gender	Experience (Years)	Platform	Part/ Full-time	Industry
G1	24	Male	5	Fiverr	Part-Time	Creative
G2	23	Male	6	Fiverr	Part-Time	Creative
G3	24	Male	1	Fiverr	Part-Time	Creative
G4	23	Male	1	Fiverr	Full-Time	Creative
G5	21	Male	1	Fiverr and Upwork	Full-Time	Creative
G6	24	Male	2	Fiverr and Upwork	Part-Time	Creative
G7	23	Male	2	Fiverr and Upwork	Part-Time	IT
G8	24	Female	2	Fiverr and Upwork	Full-Time	Creative
G9	24	Male	2	Fiverr	Part-Time	Creative
G10	25	Male	3	Fiverr	Full-Time	IT and Creative
G11	25	Male	2.5	Upwork	Part-Time	IT
G12	24	Male	3	Fiverr	Part-Time	IT
G13	24	Male	2	Fiverr	Part-Time	Creative
G14	21	Male	2	Fiverr	Part-Time	IT

Source(s): Authors’ own work

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been sufficiently achieved as per [Guest et al. \(2020\)](#). Furthermore, saturation was confirmed through code stability ([Saunders et al., 2018](#)), which supports reflexive thematic analysis depth across occupational domains ([Braun and Clarke, 2021a, b](#)).

3.4 Data analysis

[Braun and Clarke’s \(2006\)](#) reflexive thematic approach was applied with the support of NVivo software to organise codes, locate patterns and further use the transcribed datasets to generate thematic analysis maps ([Allsop et al., 2022](#); [Limna, 2023](#)). The phases followed: (1) familiarisation via transcript readings generating descriptive codes, (2) line-by-line inductive coding producing 165 initial codes, (3) codes clustered hierarchically into 10 sub-themes, (4) dataset validation led to 3 final themes, (5) each theme was defined, (6) report production illustrated the attitudinal divergence. The thematic analysis maps served as a pivotal tool in bridging the empirical insights to problem identification and the discovery of pertinent social policies across multiple scales – micro, macro and international.

3.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the overseeing ethical committee. Furthermore, to ensure ethical practices, before recording, the interviewees were informed that the purpose of the data collection was solely for research purposes, consent was gained for taping the interview and confidentiality was guaranteed with the application of pseudonyms. Participants were made aware that they could withdraw at any stage of the interview.

4. Study’s insights

Critical analysis of the transcripts uncovered three dominant gig worker’s attitudes towards AI: optimism, ambivalence and pessimism. The themes emerged inductively with a segment of participants using AI and a segment resisting it. As with most phenomena, the issue cannot be viewed in strictly black and white, a grey area is always present with participants showcasing varied use cases towards AI. Accordingly, [Figure 1](#) illustrates the thematic analysis map developed to represent the study’s findings. The overlapping diamond captures attitudinal fluidity, reflecting gig worker’s multifaceted attitudes that defying clean categorisation; the repeated participant references exhibit this across different excerpts.

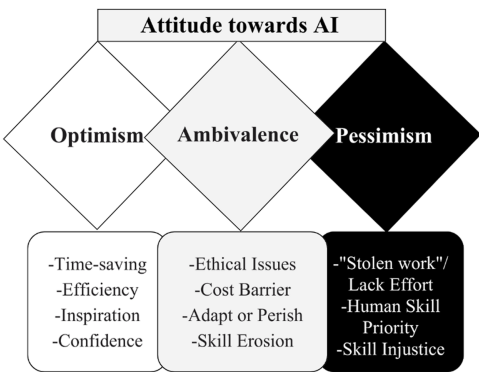


Figure 1. Thematic analysis map. Source: Authors’ own work

4.1 Optimism (white area)

The white area consists of gig workers who showcased a positive attitude and openly acknowledged the usage and usefulness of AI in different aspects of their day-to-day tasks. They highlighted tangible efficiency benefits and motivational gains experienced from AI.

A reoccurring sub-theme revealed AI's role as a temporal accelerator, fundamentally reconfiguring work patterns across occupations. Gigger 11 stated, "It would be really difficult to manually type the error and check the solution for the error. Right. So, after ChatGPT we can put a screenshot to the ChatGPT, and we can get solution for our error". This demonstrates how AI slashes error-checking time, thus boosting productivity.

Likewise, Gigger 12 reflects this efficiency paradigm, "So sometimes if I take about one hour to fix it, through ChatGPT I could get it fixed within 15 min. That's how helpful it is." This time compression extended beyond tech domains, creative workers strategically delegated research tasks to AI. Gigger 13 expressed, "I try to do get ChatGPT to do most of my research for me, especially because I can ask more direct questions and more direct links to what I really want . . . there's been an immense increase in like efficiency just in like in terms of time." This frames AI functions as a cognitive aid, enabling gig workers to take on more platform opportunities through faster task completion.

A different view gig workers positioned AI as a creative catalyst, stimulating inspiration and streamlining ideation processes. Gigger 3 remarked, "I just brainstorm through AI like just to see what it would generate to just give me some kind of inspiration," exemplifying technology's role as an indispensable spark for idea generation. Gigger 2 emphatically stated, "I literally can't live without AI at this point". This underscores the significant impact AI has brought onto gig worker's workflow. This optimism frames AI as a time saver and cognitive accelerator, enabling workers to "cut out brainstorming time" and redirect energy towards execution.

Subsequently, another repetitive sub-theme detected was gig workers consistently viewed AI as a confidence booster, reinforcing professional confidence and enabling task scalability. In cases of uncertainty or difficulty, participants relied on AI as a supporting resource, Gigger 10 captured this dynamic, "I am confident because it acts as an assistant. So, it's like dividing our work so it motivates us to go for more tasks," portraying AI as a collaborative partner that reallocates cognitive labour between human creativity and machine efficiency. Gigger 7 further reinforces this, who noted, "It helps me better time management . . . I think I would feel like taking more." The gig worker feels empowered and confident as AI takes over the repetitive elements, thus freeing up cognitive bandwidth for more effort-inducing tasks. Further, gig workers leverage AI to expand gig portfolios beyond traditional scope, enabling new opportunities and income diversification. This indicates AI as a motivator of scalability and confidence among the gig workers. Overall, this embodies an optimistic view of AI usage enhancing agency rather than a replacement in the digital gig economy.

4.2 Ambivalence (grey area)

Some participants were initially hesitant to disclose the utilisation of AI tools in their gigs, but later acknowledged instances of use, such as idea generation, image generation and code error identification. Participants exhibited mixed feelings that intersects with both optimistic and pessimistic orientations. The majority recognised the benefits and use cases of AI; however, they also expressed concerns regarding its potential adverse effects. These individuals' insights have been compartmentalised as the grey area.

Gigger 3 expresses this tension, "I try to avoid using it (AI). Because I really don't like to use AI a lot when it comes to my work. But if it's necessary, and if the client requires, then I would try to use a tiny bit of AI mainly also because it makes it easier". This excerpt showcases how client demands override personal dislike, using AI to the minimum level to meet gig requirements while maintain personal authenticity; despite it acting as a supporting role in the context of effort and time.

While Gigger 5 embodies ethical resistance, rejecting AI on moral ground and reporting no integration of AI, stating that, “It does not feel genuine”. This stance can be interpreted as reflecting a perceived ethical tension between effort and compensation, where use of AI introduces concerns around authenticity and ownership. Similarly, Gigger 1’s categorisation of AI use as “stolen work,” further illustrates underlying moral controversies surrounding AI adoption. These perspectives indicate a value orientation in which gig workers prioritise integrity over efficiency.

Next, Gigger 4 advocates for the use of AI as a supportive tool, highlighting its role in tasks such as upscaling images and prompt-based generation, substituting costly equipment. However, cost barriers emerged as a limiting factor and acting as attitude inhibitors, “But the only downside is that I have to pay for all of this. If I go to get, the subscription versions of all of this”. This suggests that, despite the accessibility of AI economic barriers may shape attitudes, positioning cost precarity as a key influencer of adoption.

Another dimension of ambivalence is reflected in Gigger 11, who articulates AI adoption as inevitable, stating, “So the technology is changing day by day. We can’t stop it. So what we can do is we have to adapt to that technology”. Similarly, Gigger 3 emphasises the need for balanced integration rather than resistance, noting, “We can’t be stuck in the past of about like how we use things, especially with the AI growing very fast. We have to adapt to it and you try to incorporate it in a more healthier way”. These perspectives suggest a pragmatic orientation towards AI, where adaptation is positioned as essential for continued relevance. Consequently, the conception of “Adapt or Perish” is interpreted as an emerging sub-theme, indicating that resistance may widened the gap between AI users and legacy gig workers.

Gig workers expressed profound ambivalence towards AI, simultaneously experiencing enhanced self-efficacy alongside skill erosion fears. Gigger 14 captured this tension, “Sometimes it makes me more confident. But sometimes I feel like I’m always getting help from ChatGPT. And I’m losing my skills”. This excerpt showcases the duality of AI as both a confidence booster and skill threat, reflecting classic technological ambivalence documented in LPT, where workers welcome productivity tools while fearing dependency and deskilling (Braverman, 1974). Despite operating within the IT domain, the gig worker displays a combination of attitudes in response to AI. Supporting this, Gigger 2 stated, “It definitely not improve my skills”, while acknowledging its efficiency benefits. This reflects a tension between efficiency gains and perceived skill implications. Such contradictions intensified among creative gig workers, who tended to perceive AI as eroding their professional identity, whereas IT gig workers generally interpreted AI as complementary augmentation.

4.3 Pessimism (black area)

The black area reflects a pessimistic orientation, comprising gig workers who refuse to use AI and demonstrated notable defensiveness towards its adoption. These participants strongly expressed opposition to AI, emphasising its perceived role in devaluing their skills.

Gigger 1 articulates a strong moral rejection of AI, stating, “I don’t really use AI; I am pretty against it. If I had to say, because it’s not really there’s not really any effort put in by a person there. It’s just like a collection of stolen work put together. I’m not really going to use things like that for my work”. This position reflects a perception that AI undermines authenticity and ownership of work. It also contributes to concerns around skill devaluation and introduces the notion of “skill injustice” reiterating the analysis in “Ambivalence”. More widely, AI use is interpreted as challenging established norms of professionalism and integrity, particularly where reduced human effort incorporated in gigs is seen to diminish the value of output.

Moreover, Gigger 1 also expressed, “I would rather prefer using my own skills to complete the gigs”. This embodies a form of resistance to AI adoption, as it prioritises human skills over technological assistance. This stance can be interpreted as concerns around authenticity and perceived loss of personal value in AI-assisted work. It further suggests that human skills are viewed as qualitatively distinct from AI-generated outputs rather than directly comparable.

Similarly, other gig workers' views echoed similar reasoning, Gigger 5 stated, "I'm kind of like against that kind of stuff (AI). Like, okay, so I have my own thought process, I use Pinterest ... I'm pretty good at coming up with ideas in that sense". This signals an emphasis on individual creativity as a contributor to legitimate work and enables successful gig completion, without being AI-dependent. Such narratives reflect a broader perception that AI reliance may diminish rather than enhance competence, aligning with the notion of "skill injustice".

Subsequently, when discussing moments of creative block, the gig worker indicates a preference for non-AI sources of inspiration. Gigger 6 expressed, "Most of the ideas come in when I just listen to, like, the client feedback. And then when I'm taking the train or bus and like, sometimes an idea will just pop into my head and I think, okay, maybe I could do this". This suggests deliberately favouring organic, human-centred processes for creative ideation over AI tools. Through the lenses of creative gig workers, the implication is evident that creativity is constructed as an inherently human and situated process that cannot be easily replicated by AI. This underpins a broader outlook that AI-assisted creative work may be seen as less authentic, reinforcing concerns around the devaluation of AI-dependent work.

5. Discussion of insights

5.1 Impact of AI on the digital gig economy

Through the thematic analysis, it was identified that such acceptance or rejection responses of the gig worker's attitude towards AI differentiated based on their designation. Gig workers from the IT background directly expressed being AI-dependent – showing optimistic attitudes, while gig workers from the creative industry displayed resistance – presenting pessimistic attitudes. Although there was a segment from the creative field that fell in between articulating the benefits and concerns of AI usage – exhibiting ambivalent attitudes. The insights indicate that attitudes are context-dependent rather than reflective of fixed worker typologies. Most gig workers exhibit primary attitudes shaped by their occupational domains.

The insights suggest AI's dual transformative impact on the digital gig economy, extending observed patterns from global occupational studies to platform-specific labour dynamics. Positively, it enhances gig worker's efficiency, productivity and augments human creativity (Lee and Chung, 2024; Noy and Zhang, 2023; Dell'Acqua *et al.*, 2026), enabling gig workers to take up more gigs and remain sustained in this labour workforce. Negatively, AI adoption contributes to skill injustice and erosion fears, aligning with Oder and Béland (2025) discourse of AI intensifying emotional labour while devaluing human creativity among low-skilled workers. Additionally, gig workers in the creative industry showcased negative views towards AI due to the diminished sense of authorship and genuineness, supporting prior evidence from Lee *et al.* (2024), Lovato *et al.* (2025) and Draxler *et al.* (2023) in different contextual settings.

This draws attention to the extent of boundaries observed by gig workers. Prompting the examination of whether the gig workers can identify themselves with all three categories across different contexts. This study experienced mutually exclusivity for optimism and pessimism, with an overlap in ambivalence. The gig workers who explicitly rejected AI might be unknowingly benefiting from AI, which is embedded across their workflow tools, therefore amplifying optimism indirectly. This "hidden AI adoption" may create cognitive dissonance among pessimistic workers who critiques AI ideology while being structurally dependent on algorithmically mediated environments without full awareness or control that shapes their workflow invisibly (Kadolkar *et al.*, 2024). Sociologically, this highlights how resistance may coexist with unintentional integration, reinforcing precarity even among AI sceptics (Kadolkar *et al.*, 2024).

Another theoretical viewpoint is the perception of AI usage labelled as "not genuine" by creative gig workers, who personify the culturally rooted values, prioritising effort as the characteristic of authentic labour. This aligns with Protestant Work Ethic (PWE) theory, which suggests that the moral value of work stems from human effort rather than automated efficiency (Weber, 1905; Steenkamp, 2013). The gig worker's attitudes reinforce this belief by

framing human effort as a reflection of character, whereas AI outputs are viewed as ethically questionable.

5.2 Problem identified and provisional implications

This section highlights key problems recognised through the attitudinal insights, offering tentative considerations for policy development and practical initiatives aimed to supporting digital gig workers.

Firstly, AI creates tension between efficiency and skill erosion. Despite its capacity to streamline tasks, findings suggest some evidence of cognitive offloading among gig workers, contributing to the potential declination of authentic skills. This may limit skill development and deeper task engagement, possibly influencing client trust and gig worker's ratings.

To address this, policymakers can consider implementing training sessions to educate gig workers on utilising AI tools in an appropriate and effective manner and limit overreliance on the technology. It would provide guidance on how to capitalise on their human creativity as well as AI literacy, while preventing excessive dependence on these tools – supporting SDG 8 by promoting inclusive, productive and decent work in the digital gig economy. This approach could foster a sense of moral responsibility among the gig workers on a micro level, while adding a level of credibility to their work. Ultimately, clients would benefit from this AI transparency limit policy as they gain reliable work (to an extent) and can rate gig workers accordingly. These findings have further implications for digital skills education. IT programmes should emphasise AI-driven efficiency applications, while creative courses should support hybrid workflows that allow society to preserve professional identity alongside technological adoption.

Secondly, ethical dilemmas were identified through the lens of the creative gig workers. The perception of “not genuine” and “stolen work” challenged the morals of the gig workers. An unfair power divide is derived between those who utilise and resist AI.

To mitigate this, a macro-level solution could be implemented in which an AI ethics code is implemented that labels AI-generated content in order to enhance transparency between the gig worker and client. Further, policymakers could explore proper legislation to protect the intellectual properties of the content (ideas, graphics) created by gig workers without the use of AI. Conversely, the issue raises for IT gig workers, who demonstrated opposite views. The findings suggest a clear divide: human creativity and authenticity are superior to AI, while AI is recognised as outperforming humans in terms of speed and accuracy in IT-related tasks, which humans cannot match.

Thirdly, the accessibility barriers due to AI subscription costs deter low-income gig workers from utilising AI and develop a mixed attitude, leading to widening the inequity gap.

As a solution, platforms like Fiverr, Freelancer and Upwork can enforce a voluntary pay-per-use AI tiers at a lower rate targeting developing country gig workers. This would charge only upon satisfactory output (video/image generated content), eliminating multiple subscription costs, facilitate the use of various tools and maximise opportunities in the digital gig economy. This market-based approach leverages platforms' existing tiered pricing models that adapt to regional purchasing power differences, align incentives where higher tool usage drives gig completion rates and platform take rates. Implementation uses Board of Investment (BOI) tax credits for platforms piloting local AI access, building on Sri Lanka's Digital Economy Blueprint 2026; [ICTA, 2025](#)). Similarly, other developing countries may have similar frameworks, such policy implications could support policymakers. Overall, this pragmatic intervention reduces cost barriers (SDG 10), boosts innovation capacity (SDG 9), and formalises Sri Lanka's gig export market with minimal geopolitical hurdles. This is feasible as it creates a triple win for key actors: gig workers gain access to AI tools (micro), BOI attracts foreign direct investment (macro) and platforms gain revenue (international).

6. Conclusion, limitations and future research

The study covers Sri Lankan digital gig worker's complex attitudes towards AI changing work patterns, which shape the digital gig economy. This hyper-digital world has resulted in a multitude of views – predominately optimistic efficiency gains, ambivalence towards ethical trade-offs and pessimism over skill injustice. While these attitudes mirror the global context, the core contribution is the observed occupational divergence. Accordingly, the thematic analysis contributed to a deeper sociological understanding of the AI era. The findings resulted in problem discovery and enabled provisional implications of multi-level social policies for AI usage ethics, which can be applied in developing countries. Proactive interventions such as training sessions for ethical AI usage, transparency labelling and platform-led pay-per-use AI tiers can promote economic growth (SDG 8) while reducing inequalities (SDG 10). Such observations highlighted the necessity of protection of intellectual property and transparency in gigs to overcome uncertainties experienced by gig workers.

The angle of this article looks from the lenses of gig workers, thus offering a voice to the unheard uncertainties faced. It provides empirical, context-specific inputs based on gig worker's societal shifts; endorsing policymakers to facilitate fair AI adoption, ensuring precarious gig workers benefit from the digital dividend, not solely the gig platforms. Although, despite the study exploring a range of gig workers, attitudes are inherently subjective; therefore, the policies could induce different responses from different stakeholders. Overall, instead of a zero-sum scenario, the research uncovers a relationship where gig worker expertise complements, rather than competes with AI or substitute human agency. Sri Lankan gig workers optimistically make use of efficiency while reinforcing society's cultural belief in the ethical value of effort. Proper AI governance determines the outcome of equitable policies empowering gig workers, whereas unregulated AI claims supremacy. It is essential for sociology to intervene as policy shapes AI's equitable future.

While this study offers significant insights, it is important to acknowledge the limitations. This article is based in a Sri Lankan context only, offering a view into the attitudes of national gig workers. While the findings may offer insights to policymakers in other developing countries, it is important to highlight that different cultures could experience varying attitudes and perspectives. Additionally, the sample is narrow in age and gender terms, this limits generalisability, future research can address with more diverse demographics. Further, it was conducted in a cross-sectional manner, therefore limiting potential longitudinal insights. An interesting avenue for future researchers is to investigate "hidden AI adoption" embedded algorithmic tools gig workers use unknowingly and the ethical dilemmas arising from involuntary AI integration in platform labour. In addition, scholars can explore a more in-depth understanding from the client's perspective and suggest social policies in order to fulfil policy completeness. Lastly, a mixed-method approach analysing the behavioural data and attitudinal data to amplify the gig worker's voice to shape ethical AI governance is highly encouraged.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

We confirm that the manuscript has been read and approved by all named authors and that there are no other persons who satisfied the criteria for authorship but are not listed. We further confirm that the order of authors listed in the manuscript has been approved by all of us. We further confirm that any aspect of the work covered in this manuscript that has involved human responses has been conducted with the ethical approval of all relevant bodies and that such approvals are acknowledged within the manuscript.

Ethical approval

This study was approved by the Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology (SLIIT), Sri Lanka, under Ethics Review Committee approval reference number SLIIT/ERC/SBS/2025/20.

Data availability

All data generated or analysed during this study will be provided upon request by the relevant authority. We hereby declare that.

- (1) The submitted manuscript is intending for publication in the mentioned journal and has not been submitted or published in any other journal article/magazine/conference.
- (2) We hereby grant out consent for publishing in the above journal in any form of media (print/electronic/etc.) and we grant copyright to the journal in case of any kind of publication.
- (3) We confirm that manuscript does not violate any kind of third-party intellectual property rights
- (4) We confirm that apart from the conflict of interest declared, we have no any kind of financial or conflicts of interest.
- (5) The manuscript in our own work and our individual contributions align with the criteria for authorships.
- (6) We also agree to the authorship of the article as per the sequence provided on the title page

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