

## Social sustainability in the gig economy era: insights from the on-demand delivery sector

Minelle E. Silva <sup>1</sup>, Sara Nyobe <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Excelia Business School, [silvam@excelia-group.com](mailto:silvam@excelia-group.com), [nyobes@excelia-group.com](mailto:nyobes@excelia-group.com)

**Abstract :** The rise of the gig economy, also known as the platform economy, has compelled businesses to reconsider their relationships with their various stakeholders, including gig workers that are sometimes referred to as independent contractors. This has been especially noticeable in the on-demand delivery sector. This article examines how stakeholders in this sector are addressing social supply chain sustainability issues. We investigated measures taken by companies in the on-demand delivery sector between 2016 and 2020 using documentary research and content analysis. Based on stakeholder theory, we show that the perceived influence (or lack thereof) of gig workers is crucial in addressing social sustainability challenges. Our findings also indicate that delivery businesses are more concerned with working conditions than with equal rights issues, which we believe should be addressed equally. The paper sheds light on the management of social issues within the gig economy and opens a branch of opportunities for further studies on supply chain sustainability in the platform economy. Ultimately, this paper provides guidance to gig stakeholders on how to better contribute to social sustainability.

**Keywords:** Social supply chain sustainability; Downstream supply chain; Gig economy; Gig workers; Platform economy; On-demand delivery

## Durabilité sociale à l'ère de la « gig economy » : perspectives du secteur de la livraison à la demande

**Résumé :** L'essor de « l'économie des petits boulots » ou la « gig economy » a contraint les entreprises à repenser leurs relations avec leurs multiples parties prenantes, dont les « gig workers », souvent considérés comme des entrepreneurs indépendants. Ceci a particulièrement été observé dans le secteur de la livraison à la demande. Le présent article interroge la façon dont les parties prenantes de ce secteur traitent les questions de durabilité de la supply chain sociale. Sur la base d'une recherche documentaire approfondie et d'une analyse de contenu, nous avons examiné des actions mises en place entre 2016 et 2020 par des entreprises du secteur de la livraison à la demande. Nous révélons, en nous appuyant sur la théorie des parties prenantes, que l'influence (ou l'absence d'influence) perçue des « gig workers » est déterminante dans la façon dont sont traitées les questions de durabilité sociale. Nos résultats indiquent par ailleurs que les entreprises de livraison sont davantage préoccupées par les conditions de travail que par les questions d'égalité des droits, lesquelles méritent, à notre sens, autant d'attention de leur part. Cet article apporte un éclairage sur la gestion des questions sociales au sein de la « gig economy » et ouvre un champ de possibilités pour des études ultérieures sur la durabilité de la supply chain dans l'économie des plateformes. Enfin, l'article propose aux parties prenantes de la « gig economy », des recommandations pour mieux contribuer à la durabilité sociale.

**Mots clés :** Durabilité de la supply chain sociale ; Gig economy ; Economie des plateformes ; Livraison à la demande

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The platform economy, also referred to as the 'gig economy', emerged in the early 2000s and has since gained popularity in the market (ILO, 2018). The gig economy consists of a new kind of work transacted through company platforms before items or services are physically or remotely delivered to a particular area (Huws et al., 2016). Gig workers perform multiple activities, including delivery services for on-demand companies, that usually involve last-miles logistics. Among the many sectors involved, on-demand companies providing food delivery services (e.g., Deliveroo, GrabFood and Uber Eats) have had a huge socioeconomic impact globally. For example, in 2020 the number of users and the revenue in the sector increased by 25% worldwide (Statista, 2020); this increase was intensified by the COVID-19 outbreak and related phenomena, such as government-imposed stay-at-home orders and limits on restaurants' dine-in services. Considering that this change has informed gig company stakeholders' (including gig workers') understanding of social supply chain sustainability (SSCS) issues, we believe it is necessary to take a closer look at these stakeholders' efforts to manage such issues.

Social matters in the logistics and supply chain management (SCM) fields remain unmanaged (Carter et al., 2019; Mani & Gunasekaran, 2018; Yawar & Seuring, 2017), mainly because of the difficulty in understanding both the human dimension in SCM and how to accommodate it (Sweeney, 2013). In recent years, various events worldwide have triggered discussions on social sustainability (e.g., Huq & Stevenson, 2018), creating challenges for gig companies and their supply chains. For instance, gig companies have to rethink the way they manage their supply chain configuration (Awaysheh & Klassen, 2010), since their suppliers are now individuals (i.e., gig workers), and not companies. Although studies have examined the social impact of the platform economy (e.g., Schor et al., 2020), little is known about the way gig company stakeholders handle social issues for sustainability.

Studies on the platform economy focusing on environmental issues for supply chain sustainability (e.g., Ciulli et al., 2019) are on the rise. For instance, Eliyan et al. (2021) identified challenges of last-mile delivery related to carbon emissions. However, research on social supply chain issues remains scarce. Moreover, downstream SSCS subjects have been underexplored in the literature (Bubicz et al., 2019) and, thus, deserve further scholarly attention. This gap may be due to current discussions focusing more on retaining human resources through social issues (e.g., Mani et al., 2016), a concern not relevant to the gig economy business model. To address this research gap, we concentrated our investigation on the efforts of on-demand delivery gig company stakeholders to address SSCS, raising the following research question: What are the social supply chain sustainability issues that on-demand delivery gig economy stakeholders need to address?

In an attempt to answer this question, we performed a qualitative desk research study analysing documents in order to identify actions taken by delivery company stakeholders to handle SCSS. To this end, we used the stakeholder theory due to its relevance to explain the dynamics among multiple stakeholders around a same subject, in our case, SSCS in the gig economy. Drawing on Mitchell et al.'s (1997) model that acknowledges stakeholders' influence on the handling of company matters based on three attributes (i.e., power, legitimacy, and urgency), we found that gig workers were not perceived as having as much influence as regular employees, which informed the handling of SSCS issues in the on-demand delivery sector. The paper's main contribution comes from the identification of the SSCS issues that are necessary to manage gig workers, new stakeholders in supply chains (Carmagnac, 2021). We reflect on what has been done by on-demand delivery stakeholders to determine how these elements may contribute to SSCS. In comparison to the traditional stakeholder management of social issues, we found some singular insights. For instance, we discovered that equality/equity issues have barely been addressed in the gig economy. This contribution answers to calls for more theory

in SSCS (e.g., Yawar & Seuring, 2017), since theory elaboration allows to reflect on social issues pertinent to the gig economy rather than just identifying them. In addition to bringing these issues to light, we offer insights into how best to handle them in order to engage both regular and gig workers. Our analysis not only highlights major SSCS issues but also addresses those that deserve further attention.

## 2. GIG ECONOMY: THE EMERGENCE OF NEW STAKEHOLDERS

Prior to identifying the issues faced by gig company stakeholders, we provide an overview of the gig economy and the challenges the industry has been experiencing.

The rise of new technologies, global competition and changes in customers' expectations have forced companies to reshape their business models to maintain their operations in today's highly competitive and rapidly changing environments. In this setting, business model innovations emerged to deliver diverse values to the market (Geissdoerfer et al., 2018; Schaltegger et al., 2012). This has given birth to what Donovan et al. (2016) considered an 'expansion of traditional freelance work': the gig economy. Also dubbed 'on-demand service', 'platform economy', 'bridge employment' or 'non-traditional work arrangement', the gig economy has introduced an unprecedented business model in the market, as delivery services are increasingly supplied by individuals rather than by companies.

According to the literature (e.g., Burtch et al., 2018; De Stefano, 2015; Donovan et al., 2016; Graham et al., 2019), the gig economy business model, which came to the fore in recent years, consists of matching providers – ordinarily referred to as 'gig workers' – to existing and potential consumers or users on a gig basis to support on-demand business. Gig workers then emerged as new stakeholders in the market. Freeman (1984) defines stakeholders as groups or individuals who have influences on and relations with organisations' objectives. The literature views stakeholders as part of a relationship network

(Roloff, 2008) that relies on dialogue and engagement relations (Gao & Zhang, 2006), both of which are effective in building transitional relationships and improving business-society ties (Silva & Campos, 2020). To achieve this, Silva and Campos (2020) invite new behaviours and a new understanding of stakeholder interactions, which now require using various methods and actions for (social) sustainability purposes.

Companies that rely on the gig economy model usually utilise application-based technological platforms or Smartphone applications to connect gig workers with users (Drahokoupil & Piasna, 2019). The gig economy makes up an important part of the literature in management sciences, economics and sociology (e.g., Friedman, 2014; Kässi & Lehdonvirta, 2019; Wood et al., 2019). Yet, data indicate the number of gig workers is noticeably low compared to the number of those employed through traditional work arrangements. Citing a study by the United States (US) Bureau of Labour Statistics, Maurer (2018, n.p.) contended that only "about one percent of workers in the US use apps and online platforms to find and perform gig work". Likewise in France, the estimated number of freelancers was 830,000 in 2016, which comprised only a minority of all (approximately 26.6 million) France-based workers (National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies, 2017). As observed, this is an emerging profile that deserves further attention by (gig) companies especially because stakeholders can change over time (Magness, 2008).

Due to its relative 'newness' and multiple types of work arrangements, gig work has yet to be nailed down clearly by economic actors, academics, and lawmakers. To date, no consensus exists on the definition of 'gig worker'. According to Maurer (2018), most definitions include self-employed workers, independent contractors and temporary workers. Contingent workers are also believed to fall into this category (Donovan et al., 2016). US federal courts determine whether a person is a gig worker depending on the reality of his/her working relationship. Central to their considerations are, amongst other criteria, the extent to which the individual is controlled by his/her alleged

employer, the individual's profit or loss, the material resources he/she invests to perform the job, the quality of skills required and the duration of the working relationship (Donovan et al., 2016).

In this paper, we define 'gig workers' as individuals who enter into a relationship (e.g., acting as a supplier) with an on-demand company to provide physical or remote services to interested end users in the aim of generating their main or additional income. This definition is aligned with that of Freeman (1984) and suggests that gig work can be a primary or side job for gig workers, who are usually independent contractors for the on-demand companies with which they maintain working relationships. The dialogue relationship between the gig worker and the company can be established through a platform or any other means of communication. Gig workers may be "care attendants, dog walkers, day labourers for landscapers, managers of IT installations, accountants, editors, lawyers, and business consultants" (Friedman, 2014, p. 172). According to Donovan et al. (2016), business models vary across firms. Some tend to tightly control their platforms, while others allow gig workers to select their jobs and/or set their prices; some serve a global market, while others operate locally.

The literature (e.g., Burtch et al., 2018; Drahokoupil & Piasna, 2019) has explored the reasons workers choose gig work over a traditional work arrangement. Among the top reasons are entry costs: gig work is believed to be affordable, as workers do not have to invest considerable financial resources to secure their employment. Gig work does not require workers to invest in costly marketing tools to attract or retain clients and can free workers from administrative tasks, such as managing taxes, since on-demand companies generally assume such responsibilities. In addition, gig work offers greater flexibility in choosing jobs and work schedules. For employers, too, gig work implies flexibility, as it allows for the adjustment of employment and wages in line with market conditions (Friedman, 2014).

To answer the question: What are the social supply chain sustainability issues that on-demand delivery gig economy stakeholders need to address?, we

posit that actors' perceived influence within delivery companies informs how SSCS are handled in the sector. We use stakeholder theory to ascertain actors' influence. This theory is a relevant framework for understanding the potential influence of a stakeholder in business settings. In the current study, we utilise Mitchell et al. (1997)'s framework to determine whether gig workers engaged with delivery companies are influential and how this informs the handling of SSCS. According to Mitchell et al. (1997), to assess a stakeholder's influence, it is necessary to examine the following three attributes: legitimacy, power and urgency. Legitimacy refers to "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs" (Suchman, 1995 and Webber, 1947 cited by Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 869). Gig workers may meet the "legitimacy" criterion depending on whether their work and actions are deemed "desirable, proper, or appropriate" by gig companies. Power refers to the gain of authority through legitimacy and urgency. Urgency, finally, is "the degree to which stakeholder claims call for immediate attention" (Mitchell et al., 1997, p.869). Within the gig economy setting, the handling of social issues raised by gig workers may meet the "urgency" criterion as failure to address such issues can cause precarity and dependence (e.g., Schor et al., 2020) among gig workers. We posit that the handling of social issues within delivery companies is informed by gig economy actors' perceived legitimacy, power and urgency. In the coming section, we explore how supply chain managers address social issues within the gig economy.

### **3. SUPPLY CHAIN SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN THE GIG ECONOMY ERA**

Supply chain sustainability refers to 'the specific managerial actions that are taken to make the supply chain more sustainable with an end goal of creating a truly sustainable chain' (Pagell & Wu, 2009, p. 38). These actions rely on the company's strategic orientation (Beske & Seuring, 2014; Huq & Stevenson, 2018; Silva et al., 2022b); however, a huge imbalance exists between theory and practice

regarding physical and technical components (hard-wiring) and human and behavioural components (soft-wiring) in SCM (Shub & Stonebraker, 2009; Sweeney, 2013). Previous research has focused on tackling visible issues (such as hard wiring), while disregarding the fundamental factor that brings SCM to life: the people – the customers, suppliers and those who design, manage and execute operations (Sweeney, 2013; Silva et al., 2022a).

Social sustainability studies that address logistics and SCM need to extend their focus beyond the traditional indicators and investigate how to expand other elements to reduce the negative effects of supply chains. According to Abbasi (2017), concerns such as health and safety, accidents, human rights violations, corruption, bribery, and power abuse, among others, are understudied and, as such, should be given more attention. A trend has emerged in which supply chain sustainability studies highlight exemplary/good cases while ignoring the dark side involving some supply chain related activities in society (Carter et al., 2019). This has become more evident in emerging economies (Huq et al., 2014; Mani et al., 2016), where abusive practices continue to affect the trade process. These elements reflect a lack of strategic orientation, especially on social issues.

There has been no consensus on the definition of SSCS. Mani and Gunasekaran (2018, p. 151) claimed that SSCS adoption relies on “products and process aspects in the whole supply chain that invariably affect the safety, health, and welfare of people”. In this paper, we define SSCS as a set of specific managerial actions used to manage human resources in supply chains by providing support to a diverse range of stakeholders, including gig workers. To this end, we assume that greater transparency should exist for all stakeholders and not be limited to general expectations. For instance, Carter and Jennings (2002) asserted that logistics managers can use corporate social responsibility decisions to develop behaviours that reduce externalities for companies. Thus, social sustainability enables other sustainability initiatives for supply chains (Ahmadi et al., 2017).

Currently, the literature is broad and lacks a list of distinct social issues that may support SCM to facilitate SSCS, which is not surprising since SSCS depends on the individual context and industry needs. SSCS issues consist of several elements, including: health and safety, labour rights (equality, modern slavery, child labour), discrimination, diversity inclusion, responsible sourcing, responsible trade, governmental themes (regulations, norms, measurements), philanthropy and corporate social responsibility (Abbasi, 2017; Ahmadi et al., 2017; Bubicz et al., 2019; Carter & Jennings, 2002; Huq et al., 2014; Huq & Stevenson, 2018; Mani et al., 2016; Mani & Gunasekaran, 2018; Ruel & Fritz, 2021; Sarkis et al., 2010; Silva & Ruel, 2022; Stekelorum, 2020; Yawar & Seuring, 2017). Given the distinct characteristics of the gig economy, we present in Table 1 an overview of the social issues drawn from the SCM literature.

The issues in Table 1 often apply to traditional supply chains, on which we based our categories for analysis. However, these social issues were chosen based on how frequently they appeared in the SSCS literature, particularly in relation to last miles, logistics, and downstream management. The goal was to give a set of social issues to inform studies in the sector due to the limited information connected to the gig economy. This increases the challenge of implementing SSCS since the logistics social responsibility concept (Sarkis et al., 2010) is not sufficient to address the complexity of the downstream side of the supply chain. The downstream side is further influenced by a multichannel delivery and shifts in the market to meet customers’ needs. For example, gig work has given rise to “algorithmic management” (Lee et al., 2016; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Wood et al., 2019), a new form of digital control that gives power to customers rather than managers. Algorithmic management is “an extension of ‘customer management’ strategies, which entails positioning customers ‘as agents in the management circuit’, so that ‘customers, rather than managers, are [...] the ones who must be pleased’” (Fuller & Smith, 1991, cited by Wood et al., 2019, p. 62). Thus, on-demand companies usually monitor the relationship between providers and end users to

control their brand as well as to prevent providers from committing what can constitute a violation of non-solicitation agreements. This new supply chain

configuration requires further reflection in terms of managing human resources and social issues.

Table 1: Social supply chain sustainability issues within gig companies

Social issue	Definition	Categories
<b>Human rights</b>	Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of nationality, place of residence, gender, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language or any other status. Equal rights entitlement without discrimination is the core of human rights.	- Discrimination - Equal rights
<b>Labour conditions</b>	Employee working conditions include wages, work hours, the right to form unions, contract labour and issues related to exploitation of the employee (including child and bonded labour).	- Right to form union - Bonded labour - Compensation - Labour rights - Employee relations - Career development
<b>Minority inclusion</b>	Minority development is the development of those populations considered minorities in terms of population by the virtue of such classifications as religion, race and ethnicity.	- Marginalised people - Disabled people
<b>Health and safety</b>	Health and safety includes physical and mental health issues directly related to safety and hygiene at work; it also encompasses hazardous working conditions that can have long-term effects on employees' personal health.	- Working conditions - Health
<b>Gender equality</b>	Gender equality refers to the equal treatment of male, female and transgender individuals, catering to their special needs and ensuring they have equal rights in the workplace.	- Equality

Sources : Adapted from Mani et al. (2016), Sarkis et al. (2010) and Yawar & Seuring (2017)

#### 4. RESEARCH METHOD

To learn how gig company stakeholders handle SSCS, this study took a qualitative and exploratory approach. We employed documentary research using secondary data (e.g., reports, newspapers) to answer the research question. Documentary research is a powerful method for bringing together a large amount of data (Smith & Smith Jr., 2008), especially when access to the field is difficult, which was so in our case. Indeed, our access to delivery workers was strongly hindered by their fear of speaking out because of the multiple controversies about their working

conditions and legal status<sup>1,2</sup>. For this research, we followed three steps to develop our documentary research: identifying the database, evaluating the database and mapping the results.

<sup>1</sup> In France, numerous delivery workers are undocumented migrants that prefer to keep a low profile. <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/les-coursiers-sans-papiers-d-uber-eats-et-de-deliveroo-nouveaux-forcats-de-la-livraison-de-repas-20210212>

<sup>2</sup> 55% of France-based deliverers are undocumented. <https://www.lecho.be/economie-politique/belgique/general/55-des-coursiers-controles-par-la-justice-sont-sans-papiers/10384503.html>

#### 4.1 Data collection

Data gathering was conducted between February and November 2020 to identify documents to include in our database. Since our study focused on a combination of on-demand delivery and gig economy subjects, we conducted our online searches using the terms 'gig economy' and 'social issues' in an effort to find reliable reports, newspapers and professional articles pertinent to our research. Initially, no delimitations were made in terms of the period of analysis; the documents selected spanned 2016–2020. Several documents that contained information related to the social impact of COVID-19 on on-demand delivery were added to our database, providing an interesting background for our analysis. Given that not every country experienced the COVID-19 pandemic in exactly the same way, we draw attention to the need of studying societal factors (Majumdar et al., 2020). For instance, Silva and Ruel (2022) note that because of the stability in the region, the consequences may be less severe in Europe. Therefore, through our online search, we gathered 86 documents. However, only 78 documents were indeed related to social issues.

These 78 documents were screened and evaluated by each author equally to avoid bias in the selection process (Seuring & Gold, 2012). In this step, we mapped the main information from these documents and used it to develop an overview of our sample. Then we selected the documents that we deemed relevant to the purpose of our study, thereby excluding any remaining papers that did not refer to specific social issues (i.e., those broadly mentioning the term social) as well as those that were not related to the on-demand delivery sector. At this point we retained in our sample documents that referred to mixed sectors (e.g., skilled manual labour and taxi driving), which provided additional information pertaining to the on-demand delivery sector. This overall process led to the exclusion of 50 papers that were not related to delivery firms although they addressed specific social issues, leaving a total of 28 documents.

We further analysed this sample and, based on the selection of social issues (according to Table 1), we eliminated seven additional documents that did

not completely match our study's focus. Finally, we integrated a total of 501 pages from 21 documents into our research corpus, including reports, professional magazines and newspapers. Based on these documents we identified insights from real-world practices (see the Appendix for further information). The final list of 21 documents is available upon request. When gathering the data, we made considerable effort to choose documents from a variety of sources and fields in order to ensure the legitimacy and credibility of our findings. The European Parliament, Mckinsey & Co, and The Guardian were some of the sources we examined. We looked at additional sources and papers, such as articles from the World Economic Forum and those from SHRM.org, the American Society for Human Resource Management, to make sure that our data collection was indicative of the setting of the gig economy under study.

#### 4.2 Data analysis

A content analysis was conducted (Mayring, 2000) during which we processed all data existing in our database to ensure the documental registers adequately informed our proposal. A free reading step was employed to develop the mapping previously mentioned. This step was needed to highlight information but also to establish a closer context with the research corpus. Next, an in-depth analysis was conducted to identify the pre-defined categories presented in Table 1 that served as a code system to guide our full comprehension of the content of the documents. A set of quotations (relating to various SSCS issues in the on-demand delivery sector) from each document was selected to represent our categories. This process of analysis was developed by consulting the literature to ensure consistency of results. Reliability actions were taken to reduce bias and inconsistencies in the analysis. For instance, a constant double-check (Seuring & Gold, 2012) was performed to ensure rigour in using the categories.

### 5. FINDINGS

This section highlights social issues that on-demand delivery stakeholders typically face, as well as their efforts to address these issues.

Our analysis of the selected secondary documents, summarised in Table 2, revealed that delivery company stakeholders mostly face issues related to labour conditions (cited in 17 documents) and health and safety (13 documents). They also encounter, to a lesser extent issues relating to human rights (cited in three documents) and minority inclusion and gender inequality (both

cited in two documents). We found that gig workers were central to the documentary research, as they faced various social issues. Finally, we noted that stakeholders (including gig workers and regular employees) did not receive equal treatment and benefits from delivery companies, which suggests these companies should pay greater attention to equality/equity matters.

**Table 2: Social issues identified in the selected documents**

Social issues	Categories	Example quotations	Documents addressing the topic *
Human rights	Discrimination	The gig economy has exacerbated racism in the service industry, with companies actively encouraging discrimination against migrants. (Doc 9)	Doc 9
	Equal rights	Traditional employees might complain or feel resentful toward gig colleagues who don't have to attend meetings, can arrive late and leave early and who are likely earning more than the regular employees. (Doc 17)	Docs 17 and 19
Labour conditions	Right to form union	The union claimed that not giving drivers collective bargaining rights breached Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The [Independent Workers Union of Great Britain] IWGB said that Deliveroo riders should be able to bargain collectively in order to negotiate terms and conditions and holidays. (Doc 4)	Docs 3, 4, 5, 7 and 19
	Labour rights	For employers, the upside to the freelance model is that the services of the worker are gained without having to provide training or benefits. (Doc 16) [The] on-demand food delivery gig is characterised by high pressure, considerable stress and a questionable degree of skilling (Doc 10) In 2019, the average wage in Thailand's broader transportation industry was approximately 18,000 baht per month. We estimate by comparison that platform-based food delivery riders earn between 15,000 to 40,000 baht per month. Income fluctuates depending on hours worked. From interviews with riders, however, we found that most riders have to work hours longer than typical full-time jobs to make earnings on the higher end of the spectrum. (Doc 10)	Docs 1, 2, 4, 10, 11, 15, 16, 17 and 18
	Compensation	Courier company Hermes is to offer drivers guaranteed minimum wages and holiday pay in the first UK deal to provide trade union recognition for gig economy workers. (Doc 15) Analysis shows that workers in the gig economy tend to have lower wages than [traditional] employees. They also often miss out on a number of other benefits. (Doc 8) On-demand food delivery apps promote informal or precarious work because most workers are paid a piece-rate	Docs 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14 and 15



		<p>fee for each delivery, with no guarantee of steady work. (Doc 10)</p> <p>Deliveroo has been the subject of much criticism for categorising riders as self-employed – a classification that means they are not guaranteed the minimum wage and that the company does not have to make National Insurance contributions on their earnings. (Doc 4)</p>	
	Employee relations	As for motivating the gig worker, Kreisler suggested that you give them as much autonomy as possible. (Doc 17)	Docs 3, 15 and 17
	Career development	<p>‘There is not really a career path for a gig worker in a specific organisation,’ said Marc Solow, director of HR shared services at Deloitte. ‘The coaching of gig workers is optimised for contribution on the task or project at hand or for the duration of the contract, versus long-term career, skill and experience development.’ (Doc 17)</p> <p>Contingent workers themselves also felt that they had not received enough training. The research found that contingent workers around the world were most likely to say that the current training they receive has had no impact on their performance at work (24% compared to 19% for people on permanent contracts). (Doc 2)</p>	Docs 2 and 17
	Bonded labour	No mention	n/a
Minority inclusion	Marginalised people	<p>Some observers point out that platforms play a positive role in the labour market in that they offer an easy first step into paid employment for excluded or marginalised groups, a stepping stone into more stable jobs, and that they facilitate integration in the labour market. (Doc 12)</p> <p>The number of [Black, Asian and minority ethnic] BAME women on temporary and zero- hours contracts in particular has soared, and our membership is more than 90% BAME. I think that’s something that can’t be ignored. (Doc 4)</p>	Docs 3, 4 and 12
	Disabled people	No mention	n/a
Health and safety	Working conditions	<p>The relationship between precarious work and accidents on the road is increasingly well known, with one report on road accidents in Thailand concluding that ‘[delivery workers] must work against time, resulting in accidents from speeding and fatigue’. (Doc 19)</p> <p>One rider lamented the hard work and its precarious status: ‘Ten hours, every day, and you’ll have burning eyes and a sore nose. It will be difficult to depend on [gigs] in the long run, because I might get sick. I cannot be on the road every day for 10 hours a day. I’d prefer to be a permanent employee. (Doc 10)</p>	Docs 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 19 and 21
	Health	<p>In one reported incident, an individual in London stated he suffered serious injuries after a collision with a Deliveroo cyclist that left him unable to work for two months. (Doc 21)</p> <p>Figures obtained [...] under the Freedom of Information Act last week found that ambulances had been called 600 times in the past three years in Amazon’s UK warehouses. (Doc 1)</p>	Docs 1, 9, 11, 13, 15, 18, 19 and 21

		In addition to increased work demands and the risk of exposure to illness, China’s millions of gig economy drivers have also been forced to adjust to more stringent health and safety protocols. Companies such as Yum China’s KFC, Ele.me, Meituan, and JD.com have implemented “contactless delivery,” and some meal deliveries come with notes detailing the temperature readings of the workers who prepared and delivered the food. (Doc 11)	
<b>Gender equality</b>	(In)equality	Women earned, on average, less than men: €179 compared to €258 per month, respectively. They worked shorter hours and so their earnings were proportionately lower. (Doc 12)	Docs 12 and 20
<i>Note (*): Details of each document analysed are presented in the Appendix.</i>			

### 5.1 Labour conditions: a major concern

Appearing in 17 out of 21 documents in our sample, labour conditions ranked first among social sustainability issues in the on-demand delivery sector. These issues mostly included compensation (cited in 11 documents), labour rights (cited in 8 documents), the right to form unions (in 5 documents), employee relations (in 3) and career development (in 2). Gig workers and/or their supporters (usually unions) overtly expressed concerns about their employment relationships, such as poor and precarious working conditions (e.g., considerable stress, not earning minimum wage and no guaranteed holiday), lack of control over their schedule, receiving lower wages than traditional workers and not being offered proper training. They insisted they were denied basic rights and access to benefits that are usually granted to ‘nine to five’ employees, including having fixed schedules and a guaranteed fair pay rate.

Regarding the right to form unions, gig workers claimed that, although bargaining rights are guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights, they were deprived of these rights (e.g., Documents 4 and 5), which prevented them from earning decent wages and benefits such as paid holidays. Additionally, they reported that employee relations and career development are barely addressed, probably because such services are usually intended for regular employees. As gig workers are ‘independent’ stakeholders, companies may not feel compelled to offer them such practices, which can increase the companies’

expenditures. In some documents (e.g., Documents 2 and 17), gig workers indicated they were not offered any career planning or appropriate training to help them advance in their careers.

Finally, the category bonded labour, which is also seen as a ‘labour condition’ issue within gig companies, did not appear in any of the documents we analysed. This may be due to the characteristics of the gig economy business model. Gig economy companies claim their gig workers who enjoy their self-employed status are free to accept or refuse proposed missions, organise their own schedules and even terminate the business relationship if they so wish. However, given gig workers’ complaints about unreasonable control by delivery firms over their work, as well as their desire to be recognised as actual employees due to this control (e.g., Documents 1 and 5), one can rightfully question these workers’ supposed freedom.

### 5.2 Health and safety issues

The documents reveal that gig work may result in physical injuries to workers, illness and even death. Gig work may cause road accidents, body pain and fatigue (‘burning eyes and sore nose’) and necessitate sick leave (e.g., Documents 9 and 10). Labour conditions also include actions related to the safety of gig workers when they work as suppliers. They are exposed to various influences (e.g. climate) and have to comply with strict restrictions.

### 5.3 *Other social issues faced by on-demand delivery companies*

Following the literature, three other main social issues related to SSCS emerged from the analysis: human rights, minority inclusion and gender equality. Human rights (addressed in three documents) are a concern within on-demand delivery companies, although their weight is relatively low compared to labour conditions and health and safety matters. Human rights matters that on-delivery companies typically face are equal rights and discrimination. However, only Document 9 points out that discrimination issues, which result in more unfair treatment of migrants compared to national workers, are ‘exacerbated in the service industry’. Equal rights also are an issue for on-demand delivery companies to consider, although overlooked in the documents analysed (i.e., barely addressed in two documents). Our analysis suggests equal rights should be a primary focus for delivery companies, as both regular and gig workers complained of unfair treatment and appeared to envy what the other receives. While some regular employees are ‘resentful’ of gig workers because of the freedom and flexible work the latter allegedly enjoy, gig workers feel they are victims of social injustice because they receive fewer benefits than regular employees.

Another social issue barely discussed in the selected documents was minority inclusion. Of the 21 documents analysed, only Documents 2 and 12 featured gig work as an opportunity for marginalised individuals to access the job market. Relatively low entry costs into the gig economy (Burtch et al., 2018; Drahoukoupil & Piasna, 2019) may be one of the reasons these workers can easily access this market. Underrepresented and disadvantaged groups (e.g., ethnic minorities and LGBTQIA+ individuals) who often experience discrimination in traditional work settings are believed to be welcome in the gig economy. However, only two documents commented on this: Document 4 acknowledges the increasing number of BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) employees in the industry, while Document 12 underlines gig companies’ roles with respect to marginalised people.

None of our documents mentioned disabled persons. We believe that on-demand delivery companies may not appeal to candidates with disabilities, as these candidates may prefer an ‘employee status’ (far more protected by law) over an “independent status”. The other reason for the lack of mention of disabled people in our documents may be associated with their disabilities. Gig work requires workers to be fully independent in terms of skills and resources, which may prevent people with disabilities from accessing the industry, particularly if their disability is incompatible with working independently.

Gender equality is the final social issue expected in terms of SSCS in the gig economy realm but was discussed in only two of the documents, both of which commented rather unfavourably about women. For example, Document 12 noted that women usually receive lower paycheck than their male counterparts because they work shorter hours. In addition, it was asserted that women are more likely than men to experience difficulties in maintaining their job while raising a family. This analysis revealed a set of considerations that should be observed by on-demand delivery companies when managing social issues. We believe there is a huge opportunity for micro, small and medium enterprises (MSEs) to contribute to sustainability (see Stekelorum, 2020). For instance, MSEs can help to reduce poverty and inequality by including marginalised groups in their supply chains, thereby achieving sustainable development goals, as expected by the United Nations (UN, 2020).

### 5.4 *How are on-demand delivery stakeholders handling social issues?*

Our analysis indicated that some delivery companies and/or workers have taken steps to address the issues identified in this paper. Documents 1 and 3, for instance, suggest that gig workers may be pushed out if they report wrongdoings by gig companies. To prevent this, gig workers turn to unions in the hope of benefiting from their protection. This can lead to positive outcomes, as evidenced in Document 1, where Hermes offered drivers a ‘self-employed-plus’

status. Media coverage is also cited as a way to handle social issues within delivery firms, as it increases pressure on gig companies to improve workers' rights. Similar to what we found in terms of SSCS in traditional supply chains (e.g., Huq & Stevenson, 2018), the role of media is important in supporting changes. The same is noted when unions can help gig workers to better position themselves in the market.

Additionally, in some documents (e.g., Documents 5 and 8), it is shown that gig workers sometimes have no choice but to take their cases to court or rely on policy makers to improve their rights. These documents reveal that gig workers who have deemed themselves 'misclassified' as independent workers have filed lawsuits to obtain benefits usually granted to traditional employees. Document 4 indicates that offering alternative forms of learning and development (such as self-service learning, and online and offline learning) may compensate for the lack of training that gig workers have faced. These solutions, although limited in number, all suggest that gig workers have attempted to reduce their feelings of being treated inequitably primarily by seeking an increase in their output (petitioning lawmakers and courts to grant them more rewards and benefits).

Our analysis suggests that equality/equity is the primary issue on-demand delivery companies should focus on to increase both their regular and gig workers' perceived (social) justice as well as their motivation. In most of our documents, gig workers contend that they have received fewer benefits than regular employees, although they hold the same positions and sometimes work longer and under poorer conditions than these employees. Gig workers deem their compensation unfair and lower than that of regular employees. They expect to receive compensation according to their efforts and input but, instead, experience poorer working conditions, unequal access to resources and a lack of social protection.

In the coming lines, we use Mitchell et al. (1997)'s stakeholder theory to examine why the two stakeholders – regular employees and gig workers – are treated so differently.

We argue that gig companies' regular employees may hold some or all these attributes (power, legitimacy and urgency) identified by Mitchell et al. (1997), which may make them more relevant to the firm than gig workers.

- **Power:** gig workers use their own material to carry out their activity in addition to possessing skills that may be sought-after by gig companies. Gig companies' regular employees may have greater power than gig workers although working under their company's authority. Contrary to gig workers, regular employees are bonded by law to their employers. Therefore, employers must provide them with social security, collective bargaining rights, a safe working environment, and other legal benefits that are not usually granted to gig workers. These benefits grant regular employees, greater power than gig workers, which may explain the reasons employees mentioned in our documents were offered higher compensation and better working conditions than gig workers.
- **Legitimacy:** As regular employees are legally bonded to gig companies, they are expected to work for and represent these companies' interest, which may not be the case of gig workers who are independent, self-employed, and work on their own. While gig workers work toward increasing their own profit, regular employees do so for their employers. Therefore, regular employees' legitimacy may be rated higher than that of gig workers as they work for the good of the company and its success.
- **Urgency:** Our documents indicate that gig companies are more accommodative to their staff members' demands than to those of gig workers. One of the reasons for this may lie on the fact that employees' demands require more immediate attention from gig companies. Employers have legal responsibilities toward their staff and must comply with local, national or federal legislation when recruiting,

promoting, terminating or training. Documents 2 and 17 in our sample indicate that gig companies prefer to provide training and employee development plans to their staff than to gig workers probably because existing legislation makes the provision of such benefits urgent. Therefore, gig companies may perceive regular employee demands as more urgent to address than those of gig workers.

The study indicates that the way both regular and gig workers are treated is informed by whether they are perceived as holding the stakeholder theory's three attributes: power, legitimacy, and urgency. In our documents gig workers insisted they were treated poorly and were sometimes denied basic rights. We argue that this unfavourable treatment of gig workers might be due to the fact that they are not perceived as holding the three attributes.

## **6. DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

By connecting social sustainability issues with the gig economy business model, we were able to explain gig companies' treatment of their stakeholders, especially gig workers, drawing on Mitchell et al.'s (1997) three attributes of the stakeholder theory (power, legitimacy, urgency). Our findings indicate that gig workers may be perceived as less relevant stakeholders than regular employees, which may be behind the less favourable treatment they have received from gig companies. This finding calls for further discussion (see Carmagnac, 2021) and research to determine what, if any, other reasons gig workers may not be viewed as valuable as regular employees. Our study reveals that managing social issues is a major challenge for the traditional SCM (Yawar & Seuring, 2017), but also for the gig economy.

Our theoretical contribution is twofold: (1) we identified the main social issues related to the gig economy (as shown in Table 1 and our findings), and (2) we emphasized the need to pay greater and special attention to equality/equity.

According to Becker et al. (2010), a socially responsible on-demand company is not focused

simply on making profit but should introduce ethical responsibilities and be aware of any negative consequences of its actions. Additionally, companies should not view employees as commodities, as it is consistently observed in the gig economy but should rather see them as strategic resources that create a favourable environment for the emergence of SSCS. Our findings suggest that gig companies need to better manage their stakeholders acting as suppliers (i.e., gig workers) if they want to improve sustainability performance. This, however, may be more difficult for micro, small and medium-sized companies to achieve due to their limited resources to manage their supply chains (Ruel and Grezolle, 2022; Stekelorum, 2020). In parallel, for gig workers to be perceived as having as much value and relevance to the company as regular employees, they must have skills and resources that are not easily replicable or held by regular employees. This would allow them to achieve sustainable development goals (UN, 2020), including gender equality, and go beyond simply meeting legal and economic goals (e.g., minimum wage and equal pay). However, this may call into question their legal status as self-employed and deprive them of the freedom that goes with this status, such as the choice of their work schedule and hours.

Our findings also show that the gig economy can emerge as a way for companies to increase social sustainability once social inclusion efforts are advanced in related companies and a new order is implemented in which the human dimension of supply chains becomes a strong part of the market. A significant need to observe more soft-wiring elements on SCM is necessary (Sweeney, 2013). According to our sample, gig workers may carry out the same responsibilities as regular salaried workers (e.g., see Document 8). Indeed, although their three attributes (legitimacy, power and urgency; Mitchell et al., 1997) are believed to be less relevant than those of regular employees, they are expected to produce equal outcomes as these employees. This calls for the need to move from unequal opportunity (i.e., gender rights; Ruel & Fritz, 2021) to greater equality within the gig economy.

Social inclusion also should be addressed to allow diverse and marginalised groups to (re)enter the job market.

We believe future research should focus on improving equity/equality in the gig economy and increasing the representation of underrepresented workers. Indeed, this study points out that equity/equality is a major issue within the delivery sector. Both regular and gig workers assert that the other party is treated better than they are. While gig workers claim they are treated poorly, receiving lower salaries and unfavourable working conditions, regular workers seem to envy the freedom gig workers have in choosing their work schedule. This requires gig companies to pay greater attention to equity and equality issues, and scholars to look into how these issues may be addressed effectively.

Future research could also explore how the gig economy may help overcome workplace discrimination by allowing underrepresented workers to (re)enter the job market. Our study suggests that gig work is often an opportunity for disabled people and ethnic minorities to land a job. Future research could examine what makes gig companies particularly attractive to these demographic groups and what makes them succeed where government officials and lawmakers seem to have partly failed.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This study has raised several points in response to our research question: *What are the social supply chain sustainability issues that on-demand delivery gig economy stakeholders need to address?* We found that on-demand delivery stakeholders are mostly preoccupied by issues relating to labour conditions, and health and safety issues. The findings demonstrate certain connections with what has been done through traditional SCM, which requires further reflection. In addition, we found that human rights, minority inclusion and gender equality are barely addressed within gig companies. This calls for delivery companies to make a greater contribution to social inclusion and, therefore, to SSCS.

At the theoretical level, this study creates pathways for new research on the topic and points out that the current literature lags behind when discussing downstream supply chain issues. For instance, this study opens room to studies that focus on SCS practices by emphasising human-related emotions (Silva et al., 2022a) and *habitus* (Lissillour & Bonet-Fernandez, 2021). Through Table 1, this paper contributes to the literature by providing a clear summary of SSCS issues within the gig economy, information that is scarce in the literature. In addition, we provide reflections on what issues should be considered for social inclusion toward SSCS (Silva and Ruel, 2022).

At the managerial level, we discussed the need for a more systematic way to think about SSCS. SSCS cannot be limited to a few activities. As mentioned in our definition, another contribution of this paper, managers should include specific actions intended to manage human resources in the supply chain, which may lead to innovation (Ageron and Lavastre, 2015). The unique characteristics of the gig economy led us to rethink social sustainability and its implications for the daily operations of on-demand delivery companies. Our discussion also uncovered benefits of the new configuration of supply chains that are more closely related to the multichannel approach, which was primarily employed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, managers should be open to the possibility of new actions; for instance, a special line of delivery may be possible for companies that wish to facilitate social inclusion but do not know how to adapt their current strategies. Additionally, managers might also anticipate the use of new platforms, tools, or programs to enhance the ability of business to interact with workers in a variety of circumstances (see Lissillour & Sahut, 2022). Therefore, this study may be of interest to *policy makers* who wish to enact or enforce diversity-friendly laws.

One of this study's limitations is relying on the sources we used. The latter were mostly related to manufacturing companies and formal contractual relationships, which made it difficult to generalise our findings. In addition, we did not consider the national context in our analysis, nor did we take into account specific companies as we were

interested in multiple stakeholders' perspectives. Thus, further studies could investigate the influence of both national and corporate contexts on SSCS. We also faced definition issues. For instance, "labour conditions" and "health and safety" appeared very similar to us. To limit any confusion, we consistently applied the definitions presented in Table 1. Also, since we emphasised the downstream because of the on-demand delivery focus, we did not identify potential practices to be applied on the upstream supply chain side. Finally, the delivery firms that were this study's focus may not represent all gig companies. Therefore, they may not adopt the same practices as other gig companies.

We invite further studies to investigate how the service literature is connected to SSCS and whether it is possible to create effective actions, in both upstream and downstream supply chain sides, to better introduce strategic orientation for the gig economy. The study definitely calls for additional research. It invites research on service supply chains and suggests there is a need to identify the impact of the gig economy on manufacturers.

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## 9. BIOGRAPHY





**Dr Minelle E. Silva** is an Associate Professor of Supply Chain Sustainability in the Supply, Purchasing and Project Management Department at Excelia Business School. He received in 2023 the HDR (Habilitation à Diriger des Recherches) diploma at Université Grenoble Alpes. His research interests concern mainly supply chain sustainability, including sustainability learning and practice, and social sustainability. Minelle is a member of the European Operations Management Association (EurOMA) acting on the Board as a member of the Strategic Initiative Team. He has published in journals focused on Sustainability and Operations & Supply Chain Management.



**Dr. Sara Nyobe** is an associate professor of management at Excelia Business School and a CERIIM (Center for Research in Managerial Intelligence and Innovation) researcher. Her primary research focus is on international human resource management.

Dr. Nyobe's teaching interests include human resources management, cross-cultural management, and management and leadership, which she teaches at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

<sup>1</sup> **Minelle E. Silva**, Excelia Business School, [silvam@excelia-group.com](mailto:silvam@excelia-group.com),  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2074-6478>

<sup>2</sup> **Jean Babei** Excelia Business School, [nyobes@excelia-group.com](mailto:nyobes@excelia-group.com),  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4444-5277>

**Appendix: Main information of our database**

<b>Document ID</b>	<b>Type of document</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Scope</b>	<b>Sector</b>	<b>About COVID-19</b>
01	Professional website	2019	UK	Delivery	No
02	Newspaper	2020	UK	Delivery	No
03	Newspaper	2020	Asia	Delivery	Yes
04	Newspaper	2017	UK	Delivery	No
05	Newspaper	2019	USA	Delivery	No
06	Professional magazine	2018	UK	Delivery	No
07	Professional magazine	2018	UK	Food delivery	No
08	Report	2018	UK	Food delivery	No
09	Professional website	2019	Russia	Food delivery	No
10	Newspaper	2020	Thailand	Food delivery	Yes
11	Newspaper	2020	China	Food delivery	Yes
12	Report	2019	Belgium	Food delivery	No
13	Professional website	2019	USA	Food delivery	No
14	Report	2020	Global	Mixed	Yes
15	Report	2020	UK	Mixed	No
16	Report	2016	Global	Mixed	No
17	Report	2017	Europe	Mixed	No
18	Newspaper	2020	USA	Mixed	Yes
19	Professional website	2017	Europe	Mixed	No
20	Newspaper	2019	UK	Mixed	No
21	Report	2017	UK	Mixed	No

