

# Living on the Edge: Brazilian Creative Workers in the Gig Economy During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Diego Santos Vieira de Jesus  
ESPM-Rio, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

The aim is to analyse the situation of Brazilian creative workers in the gig economy during the COVID-19 pandemic. The main argument indicates that, despite the opportunities for entrepreneurship brought by gig economy during the COVID-19 pandemic, Brazilian creative workers may be open to exploitation and lower wages and show lower levels of satisfaction compared to the creative activities they used to have before the pandemic. The workers became even more exposed to the lack of long-standing protections—such as a minimum wage, safety and health regulation, retirement income, health insurance, and worker compensation—and risks that were previously shouldered by employers and the state, including responsibility for bodily injury, damage to tools and assets, coverage between paid gigs, financial malfeasance by customers, and harassment.

*Keywords:* creative economy, creative class, creative industries, gig economy, COVID-19 pandemic, exploitation

## Introduction

In the shift from older industrial models of economic organization (Jesus, 2011a; 2012a; 2012b; 2013b) to newer post-industrial and flexible economic systems, creativity—unlike land, capital, and labour—is understood as an unlimited resource, constantly improved by education, on-the-job experience, and human interaction. The occupational categories of the creative class—jobs that involve the generation of ideas and products and creative problem solving—fell under categories including design, entertainment, and media; computer sciences; management; law; architecture and engineering; life, physical, and social sciences (Jesus, 2011b; 2014c); education; and super-creative occupations such as professors, thought leaders, actors, musicians, dancers, novelists, and poets (Florida, 2002; 2014). Creative people are characterized by talent, technology, and tolerance (Florida, 2002; 2014; Jesus, 2014a; 2014b; 2017a; 2017b; Jesus & Kamlot, 2016; 2017). The link that makes all those separate occupations belong to the same class is the underlying creative skills, knowledge bases, and creative content (Florida, 2014). Wage inequality in the creative class is associated with educational human capital and technology, and income inequality is associated with race, poverty, lower levels of unionization, and lower taxes in different parts of the world (Figueiredo, Jesus, Robaina, & Couri, 2019; Florida, 2014; 2017; Jesus, 2009a; 2009b; 2010; 2013a; 2017c; Jesus & Dubeux, 2018; Jesus, Kamlot, & Dubeux, 2019).

The adverse work conditions of the creative class in developing countries—particularly after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic—can be identified in precarious contracts, with no social guarantees, as well as unemployment. It is also present in the management of fear, moral harassment, and the imposition of unattainable production goals on workers, as well as job insecurity, the result of organizational and

management models based on the lack of training of workers and the omission of information on risk, dangerousness, and protection measures. The loss of individual and collective identity increased the fear of unemployment and weakened labour organization and law (Druck, 2011; Jesus, 2020; Jesus, Kamlot, & Dubeux, 2020; Maranhão, 2020). Many creative professionals in Brazil started to see better opportunities to survive during the COVID-19 pandemic in the gig economy, which can be understood as markets that match providers to consumers on a gig or job basis in support of on-demand commerce. Gig workers enter into agreements with on-demand companies to provide services to company's clients, who request services through an internet-based platform or application that allows them to search for providers. Some analysts say that gig economy promotes entrepreneurship and innovation, as well as jobs with flexibility and autonomy (Kalleburg & Dunn, 2016). The gig economy may facilitate temporary employment between career jobs or full-time work and retirement, as well as provide opportunities to generate income when circumstances do not accommodate full-time employment. Nevertheless, the potential lack of labour protections for gig workers and the precarious nature of gig work have been met with concern in many countries (Donovan, Bradley, & Shimabukuro, 2016).

The aim of the article is to analyse the situation of Brazilian creative workers in the gig economy during the COVID-19 pandemic. The main argument indicates that, despite the opportunities for entrepreneurship brought by gig economy during the COVID-19 pandemic, Brazilian creative workers may be open to exploitation and lower wages and show lower levels of satisfaction compared to the creative activities they used to have before the pandemic. The workers became even more exposed to the lack of long-standing protections—such as a minimum wage, safety and health regulation, retirement income, health insurance, and worker compensation—and risks that were previously shouldered by employers and the state, including responsibility for bodily injury, damage to tools and assets, coverage between paid gigs, financial malfeasance by customers, and harassment.

### **The Gig Economy**

The gig economy is characterized by short-term engagements among employers, workers, and customers. It is a digital version of the offline, casual, freelance, or contingent work arrangements in which workers have a specific task, with little to no connection to their employer and no predictable hours and wages, fringe benefits, or clear promotion paths. The gig economy work ecosystem is managed by online platforms, which broker work between employers and workers and exert control over the cost of jobs and the worker's share. They can be crowd work, transportation, delivery/home task, and online freelance platforms. Gig jobs differ in the degree of flexibility workers have over when and how long they work, and those that require higher skills typically pay more (Kalleburg & Dunn, 2016). They may differ from traditional freelance jobs because the coordination of jobs through an on-demand company reduces entry and operating costs for providers and allows workers' participation to be more transitory. On-demand companies may collect a portion of job earnings and control the brand as well as the provider-client relationship (Donovan, Bradley, & Shimabukuro, 2016).

The emergence of many platform-based companies coincided with the 2008 recession, which facilitated the companies' expansion by creating a pool of workers who could be matched with value-seeking consumers. Some of those companies experienced rapid growth outside the traditional economy because they used the internet to conquer existing markets or create new ones. One type of platform includes architects and technologists of the platforms, highly skilled employees, and independent contractors. Another type is characterized by cloud-based consultants or freelancers who offer professional services. Micro-tasking

platforms include activities such as describing or classifying the content of images, editing computer-generated text, validating user accounts on social media, or transcribing brief audio clips. Finally, some services are engaged via platforms and generally performed offline, as in ride-hail, food delivery, home repair, and care work. Although the arrangement affords the provider with flexibility in terms of work schedules and autonomy, workers must assume responsibility for operating costs and risks, forego protections enjoyed by employees, and conform to the temporal rhythms of customer demand, which can reduce their autonomy (Vallas & Schor, 2020).

Gig economy has provided a virtual marketplace for on-demand buying and selling of flexible work and involved the exchange of labour for money among individuals or companies via digital platforms that facilitate matching between providers and customers on a short-term and payment by task basis. Nevertheless, gig economy does not include people who find permanent or short-term employment via an agency, use digital platforms to provide goods or services, use assets that are not directly labour-related, and find tasks via advertising (Lepanjuuri, Wishart, & Cornick, 2018). Gig economy workers may come from multiple backgrounds and have different experiences and skills. The type of work they undertake varies from physical work, such as cleaning and dog walking, to administrative and short online tasks, driving and delivery work, and creative work (Broughton, Gloster, Marvell, Green, Langley, & Martin, 2018).

### **The Workers in the Gig Economy**

Although people who work in the gig economy typically have more freedom to choose which jobs to accept and reject, their experiences in these activities depend heavily on whether they are carrying out gig economy work as the main source of income. If this is the case, they are potentially vulnerable to fluctuations in working time and pay levels, short notice of working schedules, and loss of employment rights. Most gig economy workers do not have any formal training and opportunities for career progression (Broughton, Gloster, Marvell, Green, Langley, & Martin, 2018). Benefits such as paid sick leave, health insurance, and retirement income—typically associated with traditional employment—may not be available to them (Donovan, Bradley, & Shimabukuro, 2016; Gandini, 2019). Workers may have multiple choices and opportunities and differ in their expectations and needs about what is important in a gig job. For example, gig jobs might be good for workers in areas where labour markets do not offer them good job opportunities. For others, gig jobs might supplement their earnings. Some online freelance platform companies provide workers with specific skills—e.g., software developer—access to gig jobs. Workers are hired typically on a project basis, so the jobs tend to be longer in duration. Some transportation and delivery/home task platforms are highly branded, workers are core components of the brand, the platform dictates pay and wage rates, and there is a low level of transparency in how work is allocated. Uber, for example, exerts considerable control over the terms of the employment relationship and the customers who can be driven and picked up. Some proprietary platforms exert even more control over workers in terms of providing branding, uniforms, equipment, and direction. In some crowd work platforms, the balance of power favors employers, who can set the wage rate for the task without workers having the option of negotiating rates (Broughton, Gloster, Marvell, Green, Langley, & Martin, 2018; Kalleburg & Dunn, 2016).

Gig jobs are typically more flexible, which is something appreciated by many workers engaged in them, but flexibility is usually a trade-off for any lack of security and employment rights. The little expectation of a more stable working environment can be explained because many of those working this way expected that, at

some point, they would move into something else, although many had no immediate plans to stop. Most gig economy workers are not satisfied with work-related benefits and level of income. Those who rely on the gig economy as their main source of income usually report that they are not doing so well or are finding it difficult to get by financially, a higher proportion compared to those to whom the income from gig economy is an extra source. People who work in the gig economy are typically young (18-34-year-old people) and usually rent their accommodation or live with parents, family, or friends. For some of those involved in the gig economy, the involvement in the gig work takes place daily, and others provide goods and services two or three times a week. The provision of courier, transport, and food delivery services is more common in the gig economy. Those providing food delivery services are less likely to be satisfied with their ability to determine where and when they work, and people providing transport are less likely to be satisfied with their ability to decide what type of work they do (Broughton, Gloster, Marvell, Green, Langley, & Martin, 2018; Lapanjuuri, Wishart, & Cornick, 2018). Although flexible ad hoc employment may lead to greater entrepreneurial activity because it affords the nascent entrepreneur the ability to optimize the entrepreneur's time to garner the resources to initiate a firm, unemployment and underemployment may be the drivers of entrepreneurial activity, because people who do not have acceptable employment options may choose to engage in entrepreneurial activity because of their low opportunity costs. In this context, the gig economy may reduce entrepreneurial activity by providing alternate employment opportunities for entrepreneurs of necessity (Burtch, Carnahan, & Greenwood, 2018).

Gig economy platforms constitute a new type of governance mechanism which is different from hierarchies which centralize power, markets which disperse it, or networks which parcel it out to trusted collaborators. These platforms exercise power over economic transactions by establishing a digital infrastructure to govern the service triangle among employers, workers, and customers. They retain authority over important activities—the allocation of tasks, collection of data, pricing of services, and collection of revenues—but they cede control over aspects of the labour process, such as the specification of work methods, control over work schedules, and performance evaluation, for example. They may use their power to exploit their labour forces, as in ride-hail and delivery. Platforms enable efficient operations and exchanges, but their profits often depend on the ability to externalize the costs that conventional firms must pay. They also transform employment relationship saying they offer considerable autonomy over when and how often to work, but critics view this autonomy as largely illusory. Although there may be the absence of routinization, scripting, or the imposition of formal rules, some platforms in ride-hail and delivery, for example, may have a considerable level of supervision through geolocation monitoring and suggested work practices. The efficacy of such monitoring tactics varies widely, especially in some cities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where monitoring mechanisms could be more easily circumvented as workers grew more experienced. Ratings systems have redistributed much of the labour of surveillance to customers, but even in this case firms vary in the extent to which they use poor ratings to penalize or deactivate earners. The spatial dispersion among gig workers also generates individualization that can undermine workers' capacity for collective action (Vallas & Schor, 2020). In creative economy, even workers who do not work in the gig economy face the challenge to implement collective action. As a neoliberal construct, creative economy is largely devoid of unions and collective bargaining, because the individual labour market power of creative workers supposedly makes the need for unions irrelevant (Coles, 2016). The precarious situation of creative workers has become more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **The Brazilian Creative Workers in the Gig Economy During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Some members of the Brazilian creative class have been working in the gig economy even before the COVID-19 pandemic, such as workers that were hired in click-work platforms to perform digital-based micro-tasks that contributed to a broader project. Some platforms facilitated the meeting of workers with clients for the hiring of either local or manual labour (e.g., decorators) or global knowledge-based freelance work (e.g., graphic designers). With the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, many creative professionals in Brazil lost their jobs due to the crisis because projects were either put on hold or cancelled, and clients rescinded contracts. With creative businesses on a hiring hiatus, many creative professionals were relying on savings and government financial support. Some unemployed creatives were trying to reinvent themselves and hoping the new skills would help them stand back on their feet when the pandemic was over. Some had to start a gig economy job in delivery work or cab driving (e.g., Uber) (Brewer, 2020; Gandini, 2019; Jesus, 2020).

The organization of work and labour markets in the creative industries has been characterized by conditions of non-standard employment and chronic precarity, which calls into question the ability and intent of creative economy to solve socioeconomic inequalities. In Brazil and other countries, creative economy has been framed as a viable economic development strategy, but it normalizes and justifies prominent features of labour markets and employment relations based on freelance or self-employment, income insecurity, excessive overtime, and individualized risk, which is devolved from the employer to the worker. Most creative production happens under the independent production model and a highly flexible labour force of self-employed freelancers work in high-pressure environments for long hours on short contracts (Coles, 2016). When some Brazilian creative workers had to migrate to gig economy platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic, they became even more exposed to the lack of long-standing protections—such as a minimum wage, safety and health regulation, retirement income, health insurance, and worker compensation—and risks that were previously shouldered by employers and the state, including responsibility for bodily injury, damage to tools and assets, coverage between paid gigs, financial malfeasance by customers, and harassment. They bear the costs of inadequate demand and lost earnings and are subject to deactivation when customers rate them poorly. Therefore, precarity becomes more apparent when creative workers are submitted to the uncertain conditions of gig economy (Vallas & Schor, 2020).

Gig economy platforms are places whereby the social processes of production are put under the logics of management and work organization, in which gig workers log in to an app and come to be subject to an external authority that translates consumers' or clients' demand into orders they need to execute, determines how much money they will be paid for the execution of such tasks, and controls the execution and performance of the work. Even if the work is done physically out in the street as in the case of a courier or a cab driver or digitally as a graphic designer, platforms are more than market intermediaries: They act as decentered points of production in which the capital-labour relation is enacted upon workers. Most platforms embed forms of emotional labour because of feedback, reviews, and rating systems—translated into metrics, most commonly a reputational score that impacts upon a worker's status and influences a consumer/client's hiring decision—in the labour process. These metrics work as instruments for the enactment of techno-normative forms of control, even in the form of gamified practices aimed at fostering the achievement of personal bests to stimulate and reward a worker's productive disposition. The feeding of these metrics affects their income and the continuity of employment of workers who are monitored in real time. The indeterminacy of temporariness in gig jobs,

particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, generates forms of control at a distance, some of which are typical of traditional freelance work, but are repurposed on digital platforms (Gandini, 2019).

### Conclusion

People working in the gig economy hope for more regularity and predictability of work, as well as lower costs for providing services on websites and apps and less competition from others providing similar services (Lepanjuuri, Wishart, & Cornick, 2018). Paid work associated with gig economy platform embodies features which complicate the application of traditional labour regulations and standards, because there is uncertainty regarding the minimum standards and remedies in the realm of irregular digitally mediated work. Policymakers should strengthen and expand the regulatory framework governing gig work, such as enforcing existing laws and creating a new category of independent workers as well as rights for them (Stewart & Stanford, 2017).

The number of creative professionals working in the gig economy may increase in the following years in Brazil because, thanks to the government's inability to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, the country has become a global health risk. Slow vaccination and high virus circulation provide the ideal setting for the emergence of new variants and the perpetuation of the COVID-19 pandemic. To reduce the risk, it would be necessary to develop public environmental policies and invest heavily in biotechnological solutions. However, the current government has been unable to plan purchases of vaccines and supplies and effective information campaigns for the use of masks and social distancing measures (Pasternak, 2021).

### References

- Brewer, J. (2020). Half of currently unemployed creatives lost their job due to coronavirus, says survey. Retrieved 11 May 2020 from <https://www.itsnicethat.com/news/creativepool-coronavirus-survey-creative-industry-110520>
- Broughton, A., Gloster, R., Marvell, R., Green, M., Langley, J., & Martin, A. (2018). *The experiences of individuals in the gig economy*. London: HM Government.
- Burtch, G., Carnahan, S., & Greenwood, B. A. (2018). Can you gig it? An empirical examination of the gig economy and entrepreneurial activity. *Management Science*, 64(12), 5497-5520.
- Coles, A. (2016). Creative class politics: Unions and the creative economy. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 22(3), 456-472.
- Donovan, S. A., Bradley, D. H., & Shimabukuro, J. O. (2016). *What does the gig economy mean for workers?* Congressional Research Service 7-5700. R44365.
- Druck, G. (2011). Trabalho, precarização e resistências: Novos e velhos desafios? *Caderno CRH*, 24(spe. 1), 37-57.
- Figueiredo, J. L., Jesus, D. S. V., Robaina, D. T., & Couri, C. L. (2019). The development potential index of creative economy for Brazilian federal state capitals. *Creative Industries Journal*, 12(2), 185-203.
- Florida, R. (2002). *The rise of the creative class: And how it's transforming work, leisure, community, & everyday life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Florida, R. (2014). The creative class and economic development. *Economic Development Quarterly*, 28(3), 196-205.
- Florida, R. (2017). *The new urban crisis: How our cities are increasing inequality, deepening segregation, and failing the middle class—and what we can do about it*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gandini, A. (2019). Labour process theory and the gig economy. *Human Relations*, 72(6), 1039-1056.
- Jesus, D. S. V. (2009a). Da redução da incerteza estratégica à perpetuação da exclusão: A relevância dos fatores ideacionais na análise de política externa. *Contexto Internacional*, 31(3), 503-534.
- Jesus, D. S. V. (2009b). Os processos de partilha da soberania na União Europeia. *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, 52(2), 115-132.
- Jesus, D. S. V. (2010). Alternative analytical axes of Brazilian foreign policy. *International Political Sociology*, 4(4), 419-435.
- Jesus, D. S. V. (2011a). Desde Angra hacia Teherán: La política nuclear brasileña bajo la administración Lula. *América Latina Hoy*, 58, 103-120.

- Jesus, D. S. V. (2011b). Triunfo, desgraça e outros impostores: Um ensaio sobre hierarquia e exclusão no esporte e nas relações internacionais. *Revista Brasileira de Educação Física e Esporte*, 25(3), 417-430.
- Jesus, D. S. V. (2012a). Noites tropicais: O Brasil e a nova era da não proliferação e do desarmamento nucleares (2003-2010). *Revista de Sociologia e Política*, 20(43), 43-57.
- Jesus, D. S. V. (2012b). In the name of autonomy and development: Brazil and non-proliferation, disarmament and peaceful uses of nuclear energy. *Meridiano 47—Journal of Global Studies*, 13(129), 28-34.
- Jesus, D. S. V. (2013a). De Nova York a Durban: O processo de institucionalização do BRICS. *Oikos*, 12(1), 32-62.
- Jesus, D. S. V. (2013b). Lighting the fire: Brazil's Energy Diplomacy, 2003-2010. *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 24(3), 499-515.
- Jesus, D. S. V. (2014a). Mundo macho: Homens, masculinidades e relações internacionais. *Revista Brasileira de Estudos Políticos*, 109, 309-364.
- Jesus, D. S. V. (2014b). O mundo fora do armário: Teoria queer e relações internacionais. *Ártemis*, 17, 41-51.
- Jesus, D. S. V. (2014c). Juntos Num Só Ritmo? Diplomacia e Esporte Internacional. *Recorde: Revista de História do Esporte*, 7(2), 1-37.
- Jesus, D. S. V. (2017a). A arte do encontro: A paradiplomacia e a internacionalização das cidades criativas. *Revista de Sociologia e Política*, 25(61), 51-76.
- Jesus, D. S. V. (2017b). Só para o moço do corpo dourado do sol de Ipanema: Distribuição espacial da economia noturna LGBT na cidade do Rio de Janeiro. *Revista Brasileira de Estudos Urbanos e Regionais*, 19(2), 288-309.
- Jesus, D. S. V. (2017c). Saudade de mim: Patrimônio cultural e economia criativa no Rio de Janeiro. In J. L. Figueiredo and D. S. V. Jesus, *Cidades criativas: Aspectos setoriais e territoriais* (pp. 157-178). Rio de Janeiro: E-papers.
- Jesus, D. S. V. (2020). Necropolitics and necrocapitalism: The impact of COVID-19 on Brazilian creative economy. *Modern Economy*, 11(6), 1121-1140.
- Jesus, D. S. V., & Kamlot, D. (2016). *Economia criativa e políticas públicas*. Curitiba: Prismas.
- Jesus, D. S. V., & Kamlot, D. (2017). Stuck in the middle of nowhere: Cultural policy, development and creative industries in Brazil. *Creative Industries Journal*, 10(2), 139-154.
- Jesus, D. S. V., & Dubeux, V. J. C. (2018). The crisis in private higher education in Brazil: Main causes and possible solutions. *International Journal for Innovation Education and Research*, 6(1), 35-46.
- Jesus, D. S. V., Kamlot, D., & Dubeux, V. J. C. (2019). The decline of creative education in the city of Rio de Janeiro: Main causes and consequences. *Creative Education*, 10, 1670-1684.
- Jesus, D. S. V., Kamlot, D., & Dubeux, V. J. C. (2020). Innovation in the “New Normal” interactions, the urban space, and the low touch economy: The case of Rio de Janeiro in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Social Science Studies*, 8(5), 17-27.
- Kalleburg, A. L., & Dunn, M. (2016). Good jobs, bad jobs in the gig economy. *Perspectives on Work*, 20, 10-74.
- Lepanjuuri, K., Wishart, R., & Cornick, P. (2018). *The characteristics of those in the gig economy—final report*. London: Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy.
- Maranhão, R. A. (2020). Os Cientistas Sociais No Combate Ao Coronavírus E Contra A Necropolítica: Primeiras Batalhas. *BOCA*, 2(5), 1-14.
- Pasternak, N. (2021). Próxima pandemia pode surgir no Brasil. Retrieved 30 April 2021 from <https://blogs.oglobo.globo.com/a-hora-da-ciencia/post/proxima-pandemia-pode-surgir-no-brasil.html>
- Stewart, A., & Stanford, J. (2017). Regulating work in the gig economy: What are the options? *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 28(3), 420-443.
- Vallas, S., & Schor, J. B. (2020). What do platforms do? Understanding the gig economy. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 46, 273-294.