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Choice Under Code: Algorithmic Nudging on Gig Worker Behaviour

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Abstract

Digital labour platforms introduce new forms of workplace governance through algorithms. This study examines how algorithmic nudges such as gamified targets, dynamic incentives, dashboard cues, and rating-linked prompts shape the everyday behaviour of gig workers in Kerala's platform economy, with particular attention to ride-hailing and food-delivery work. The analysis shows that platforms can influence workers' decisions through algorithms, rather than through direct supervision, while workers continue to be treated as independent. Findings indicate that gig workers experience nudges as simultaneously enabling and constraining, like incentives help workers earn independently, but also limit their choices by affecting their ratings and income.

Keywords: Algorithmic Management, Nudge, Gig Economy, Platform Work, Worker Autonomy

1.INTRODUCTION

The Indian gig economy is rapidly growing with its unique feature of autonomy and flexibility in its work. And act as a significant source of urban and semi-urban employment. Kerala also had a significant place in its growth, particularly in food and grocery delivery and ride-hailing. Current public policies are focused on wages, social security, and employment classification. And give less attention to the role of platforms to shape the workers' behaviour through interfaces, prompts, badges, and incentive timers (Duggan et al., 2020). Classic workers are closely connected to supervisors, schedules and the explicit instructions, but the platforms act as a largely invisible system of behavioural steering. This covers the domain of algorithmic nudges. Nudges are the small design choices that steer decisions without formally restricting the options available (Thaler & Sunstein., 2008). On gig platforms, nudges appear as streak bonuses for consecutive shifts, progress bars toward weekly incentive thresholds, pop-up prompts suggesting a worker 'go online' during projected high-demand windows, and badges that reward acceptance rates. These devices are officially voluntary. In practice, workers frequently describe them as functionally obligatory, since ignoring a nudge can mean forfeiting income or visibility on the platform (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016).

The foundational literature on algorithmic nudges and platform control originates from research on Uber, Deliveroo, and Amazon Mechanical Turk in North American and European contexts (Griesbach et al., 2019; Möhlmann & Zalmanson, 2017), leaving open how these dynamics play out in a state such as Kerala, which combines high social-development indicators, a strong historical tradition of labour organising, and rapid platform-economy growth. However, Kerala's own Platform-Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Bill remains in a consultative, pre-enactment stage. Existing comparative state legislation (Rajasthan, Karnataka, Telangana) addresses registration and welfare financing far more thoroughly than it addresses the specific behavioural mechanics of algorithmic nudging (The Karnataka Platform Based Gig Workers (Social Security and Welfare) Bill, 2025). The absence of a nudge-specific regulatory vocabulary means that a central lever of worker behaviour currently sits outside the frame of protective policy discussion.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Delivery apps promise flexible, independent work, but in reality, workers are controlled by computer algorithms that decide who gets jobs, how much they earn, and how fast they must ride. This pressure has sparked major protests across India, including strikes in Kerala and government pushback against ultra-fast "10-minute delivery" models that force riders into dangerous traffic to avoid app penalties. Even when delays are caused by heavy rain, road jams, or slow restaurants, the app blames the worker, leading to lower pay, bad ratings, or sudden account bans—all while riders pay for their own rising fuel and bike repairs. Although platforms call these workers "free partners," their daily choices and earnings are tightly steered by app nudges, making it crucial to study how automated control truly affects the livelihood, safety, and daily freedom of gig workers in Kerala. This paper asks how algorithmic nudges shape the day-to-day work behaviour, earning strategies, and coping responses of gig workers operating in Kerala, and what this implies for the design of state-level platform-worker policy.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The foundational base of this literature is that algorithmic management is a control system. Duggan et al. (2020) argue that platforms use algorithmic technologies to direct and allocate tasks, manage performance and rewards, and align worker behaviour with organisational interests, despite classifying workers as independent contractors rather than employees. In a later study, Duggan et al. (2023) extend this into the concept of algorithmic human-resource-management control, describing a system that differs from traditional workplace control in its pervasiveness and its blending of direct and indirect influence over worker conduct. This body of work establishes that algorithmic systems do not merely record worker behaviour; they actively shape it.

Thaler & Sunstein (2008) defines a nudge as any feature of a choice environment that predictably alters behaviour without forbidding options or significantly changing economic incentives. Applied to platform work, this concept helps explain design features that stop short of direct command yet still narrow the practical range of worker choice. Rosenblat & Stark (2016) document how Uber's driver-facing interface uses predictive messaging, gamified engagement patterns, and selectively disclosed performance data to produce what they term 'soft control': drivers are not ordered to work particular hours, but the interface's information asymmetries make deviation costly enough that compliance becomes the default. Woodcock & Johnson (2018) critique of workplace gamification adds that game-like elements such as points, leaderboards, streaks can obscure the underlying labour-extraction logic behind a veneer of play, a dynamic directly relevant to platforms' use of streak bonuses and acceptance-rate badges.

Möhlmann & Zalmanson (2017) uses the term autonomy paradox: gig workers report a strong subjective sense of freedom to log on or off at will, even as the algorithmic system's reward structure narrows their actual room for manoeuvre. Their study of Uber drivers found that although workers could formally choose their hours and routes, algorithmically generated recommendations and performance metrics created strong incentives to comply with the platform's preferred patterns. This autonomy paradox is especially salient in the Indian context, where limited alternative employment can deepen a worker's practical dependence on a single platform even when formal exit options remain open.

Jarrahi et al. (2019) discussed in their study of Upwork freelancers found that users actively develop 'algorithmic competencies', practical knowledge of how the system evaluates and ranks them, which they use to work strategically within, and sometimes around, the platform's rules. Rosenblat & Stark, (2016) Similarly, describe how Uber drivers used online forums

to share tactics for anticipating surge pricing and collectively logged off to trigger artificial scarcity and drive prices up. These findings distinguish coping strategies that absorb hardship (resilience), strategies that adapt existing practices to new constraints (reworking), and strategies that directly challenge the structuring conditions (resistance). Applied to platform work, this typology offers a way of classifying gig workers' informal countermeasures without assuming that all such responses amount to organised labour resistance.

Taken together, the literature establishes three things clearly: that algorithmic systems actively shape gig-worker behaviour through both hard control and soft, nudge-based design; that workers experience this shaping as a paradox of enabled and constrained autonomy; and that workers respond with a range of everyday coping and resistance strategies. What remains underexplored is how these dynamics manifest specifically within Kerala's platform economy, where a strong historical tradition of trade unionism and cooperative labour organising coexists with a newly digitised, algorithmically mediated workforce, and where state policy is only beginning to grapple with algorithmic transparency as a distinct regulatory object. This study addresses that gap through thematic synthesis.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To understand how gig workers experience algorithmic nudges.
2. To explore how platform nudges influence workers' choices and work behaviour.
3. To understand how workers respond to and cope with algorithmic control.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Design and Sampling

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design built around thematic analysis, following the reflexive six-phase approach of familiarisation, coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. And used purposive sampling

5.2 Data Corpus

Both primary and secondary data were used for the study. The primary data were collected through a semi-structured interview schedule. The study included 32 active gig workers. They came from different types of platform work, including ride-hailing, food and grocery delivery. This helped the researchers understand experiences across different types of gig work. The corpus comprises three categories of secondary material: (a) peer-reviewed journal articles and conference proceedings on algorithmic management, platform work, and nudge theory, drawn primarily from management, information-systems, and sociology outlets; (b) primary legislative and policy texts, including Kerala's draft gig-worker Bill and comparable state Acts from Rajasthan, Karnataka, and Telangana; and (c) institutional and policy-research documents, including materials from the International Labour Organization and PRS Legislative Research. Sources were purposively selected for direct relevance to algorithmic management, behavioural nudging, and Indian platform-work regulation.

6. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Theme 1: Gamified Earnings and the "Streak Trap"

Platforms use game-like features to encourage workers to work in the way the platform wants. These include Streaks (rewards for working for several days or sessions continuously), Progress bars (showing how close a worker is to reaching a daily or weekly incentive) and Badges and ratings (based on how many tasks a worker accepts and completes). Workers are

not forced to follow these features. However, the platform presents its preferred behaviour like a game or challenge, making workers feel motivated to complete it. In simple terms, the app makes work look like something to achieve in a game, rather than simply a job.

Almost all participants described incentive structures such as bonus ladders, streaks, and badge systems as the most immediate and powerful algorithmic nudge shaping their daily behaviour. Workers frequently described chasing incremental bonuses even when the marginal effort no longer made economic sense, a pattern consistent with variable-ratio reinforcement schedules used in behavioural design.

"If I stop at nine trips, I lose the whole bonus for the day. So I always end up doing one or two extra, even if I'm tired and it's not really worth the fuel." — P4, food delivery, 2 years.

"The app shows you a badge, a little animation when you complete a streak. It feels good for two seconds, then you realise you worked three extra hours for it." — P11, ride-hailing, 4 years

"I have missed my daughter's school function twice because I was one order away from the bonus slab. I know it sounds stupid when I say it out loud." — P22, ride-hailing, 3.5 years

"New drivers don't understand — the bonus looks big on paper, ₹500 extra, but by the time you finish those extra trips, your fuel and time cost is almost the same amount." — P10, ride-hailing, 4 years

"Some days I tell myself I'll log off at 2pm, but then the app shows '2 more trips for guaranteed payout' and I can't stop." — P29, food delivery, 1.3 years

The important point is not just that these game-like features exist, but how they influence workers' thinking. For example, a streak reward may make a worker feel that completing the streak is their own personal achievement, even though the platform designed the reward to encourage them to work more. So, a target created by the platform may start to feel like a goal the worker chose for themselves. This gives workers a feeling of control, even though the platform is still influencing their behaviour.

There are also two forms of control: Soft control and hard control. Soft control, such as rewards, streaks, badges, progress bars and incentives, encourages workers to continue working. On the other hand, the Hard control, like low ratings, loss of access, restrictions or deactivation, can discourage workers from refusing tasks or failing to meet platform expectations. Overall, the rewards pull workers towards the behaviour the platform wants, while the penalties push them in the same direction. These accounts illustrate a design logic in which small, frequent psychological rewards like badges, near-miss messaging, streak counters are used to sustain effort beyond what pure economic incentive would justify — echoing behavioural-economics "nudge" theory (Thaler & Sunstein., 2008) applied asymmetrically in the platform's favour rather than the worker's. Notably, P22's account extends this beyond financial cost into family and personal-life trade-offs, suggesting the streak mechanism's influence is not purely economic but emotionally and socially entangling.

Theme 2: Opacity and Information Asymmetry

Workers felt that the platform's algorithm was unclear and difficult to understand. They could see the results, such as fewer orders, lower incentives, or sudden ID checks, but they did not know why these things were happening or how the platform made these decisions.

Information asymmetry simply means that the platform knows much more about how the system works than the workers do. Workers may see how much they earned, how many orders they received, their ratings, incentives, and whether they received or lost an opportunity. But they often do not know exactly why the platform made a particular decision. For example, workers may not know why one person receives more orders, why an incentive changes, or why accepting or rejecting certain jobs affects future opportunities. Because of this, workers often depend on other workers to understand the system. They share their experiences, compare what happened to them, and try to figure out how the platform's algorithm works.

"Nobody has ever explained why some days I get long-distance orders and other days only short ones. We just guess. Some drivers say it depends on your rating, some say it's random." — P19, grocery delivery, 1.5 years

"I called customer support once to ask why my incentive suddenly dropped. They just read from a script — 'this is calculated based on various factors.' That's not an answer." — P7, grocery delivery, 1.5 years

"We have a theory that the app gives fewer orders if you reject too many, but no one from the company has ever confirmed this. It's all guesswork passed from senior riders to new ones." — P16, grocery delivery, 1.2 years

"Even the support agents don't seem to know why. I think even they can't see what we can't see." — P31, ride-hailing, 2.5 years

This lack of information affects almost everything else. For example, if workers do not know how the algorithm works, they cannot easily decide whether an incentive is really a good earning opportunity or simply a way to encourage them to work more. Similarly, if a worker does not know what will happen after rejecting an order, they may accept it just to avoid a possible negative consequence. So, the basic problem is that the platform knows the rules of the game, but workers do not know all the rules. This difference in information gives the platform more power to influence workers' decisions.

This opacity generates what several participants termed "algorithmic folklore" — informally circulated, often inaccurate theories about how the system works, shared through WhatsApp groups and driver-waiting-point conversations. The absence of formal disclosure pushes workers toward speculative sense-making, increasing anxiety and mistrust even where the underlying system may be neutral.

Theme 3: Ratings and Surveillance-Linked Discipline

Participants felt that customer ratings and acceptance rates were constantly judging their work. They saw the rating system not just as a way to give feedback, but as a way for the platform to control and pressure them to perform better.

"One bad rating and you feel it the whole week — like someone is watching you every second, even when you didn't do anything wrong." — P6, ride-hailing, 8 months

"A customer gave me one star because the restaurant packed the food wrong. I had no control over that, but my score still dropped and I got fewer good orders for days." — P24, food delivery, 1 year

"I smile even when I don't want to, I say sorry even when it's not my fault, because I know the rating decides if I keep getting orders." — P3, grocery delivery, 1 year

"If your acceptance rate drops below a certain number, you stop getting the good, high-paying orders. So you end up accepting orders you don't even want, just to protect the number." — P18, ride-hailing, 2 years

The rating system functions as a form of distributed, algorithmically mediated surveillance (echoing Foucauldian panopticon framings used elsewhere in platform-labour literature), where the worker self-disciplines behaviour in anticipation

of an invisible, aggregated evaluative gaze. P3's and P18's accounts show this discipline extending into emotional labour and involuntary order acceptance, beyond simple task compliance.

Theme 4: The Autonomy Paradox

The platform tells workers that they have freedom and flexibility. Workers can choose when to start working, when to stop, and how many hours to work. However, in reality, workers may feel that they cannot always use this freedom without consequences. For example, a worker can technically log out whenever they want. But if they log out during a busy period or a time when the platform needs more workers, they may worry that they will receive fewer tasks later. So, workers have freedom in theory, but less freedom in practice.

Workers clearly noticed a difference between the platform's promise of "complete flexibility" and their actual experience. Although the platform said they could choose when and how much to work, workers felt pressured by the algorithm to work at certain times and follow its demands.

"They say 'log in whenever you want,' but if I don't log in during the morning peak-incentive hours, I basically lose a third of my daily income. So how is that really my choice?" — P23, ride-hailing, 3 years

"On paper I am my own boss. In reality, the app decides my shift timing through the bonus structure." — P15, ride-hailing, 6 years

"I took a day off for a family wedding and lost my weekly streak bonus completely — almost ₹1,200. It didn't feel like a holiday, it felt like a fine." — P9, grocery delivery, 2 years

"Flexibility is real only if you don't care about the bonus money. But nobody can afford to not care." — P27, ride-hailing, 5 years

The platform does not directly say: "You must continue working." Instead, it influences workers indirectly. Workers make their own decisions, but they may change those decisions because they are worried about losing income or future opportunities. Therefore, the worker is technically free to log out, but the possible financial consequences make that choice difficult. This can be particularly important when platform work is a worker's main or only source of income. Such workers may feel that they cannot simply stop working, even though the platform officially gives them that choice.

P9's framing of a missed bonus as a "fine" is particularly notable, as it reframes an opportunity cost as a penalty, revealing how loss-framing is internalised by workers themselves.

This "autonomy paradox" means formal independence coexisting with substantive behavioural steering is central to the study's core argument: algorithmic nudges do not remove worker choice outright but reshape the cost structure of choices so that only certain choices remain economically rational, producing a soft, non-coercive but highly effective form of control.

Theme 5: Spatial-Temporal Nudging

Workers often used heat maps and areas showing high demand for a limited time, but many of them did not fully trust the information shown on the app.

"The heat map lights up an area, so we all rush there, and then there are ten of us waiting for two orders. Sometimes I think the app just wants us spread out, not that the demand is really there." — P14, food delivery, 1 year

"I have stopped trusting the red zones. Half the time I reach there and there is nothing, just five other riders standing around like me." — P2, food delivery, 8 months

"Sometimes the surge shows in an area for exactly ten minutes, and by the time you drive there it's gone. It feels timed to make you keep moving, not to actually match you with a ride." — P5, ride-hailing, 5 years

Spatial nudges can create self-defeating crowding effects, where workers' collective response to a nudge erodes its individual benefit — a pattern with implications for both platform design and worker earnings volatility.

Theme 6: Worker Countertactics and Collective Sense-Making

Instead of simply following the instructions or suggestions given by the platform, workers actively tried to manage and work around the system. They developed their own strategies, often by working on multiple platforms at the same time, sharing information about which areas or working hours were better or should be avoided, and carefully choosing when to log in or log out to maintain good ratings and avoid losing income.

"We have a group chat. If someone gets a bad order pattern, they warn everyone — don't go to that zone today, the algorithm is punishing that area." — P9, grocery delivery, 2 years

"I run three apps at once. Whichever gives the better order first, I take that one and reject the others quickly before it affects my rate too much." — P17, food delivery, 10 months

"The senior riders taught me — never accept an order in the first ten seconds, wait and see if a better one comes, but not too long or the app flags you." — P30, grocery delivery, 6 months

"New riders don't know these tricks. It took me almost a year to learn how to work with the app instead of against it." — P21, food delivery, 7 months

These practices constitute a form of everyday, informal labour agency — a "counter-algorithm" of peer knowledge that partially offsets information asymmetry, though it remains fragile, informal, and unevenly accessible to newer or less networked workers.

Theme 7: Psychological and Emotional Toll

Almost all participants said that the unpredictable nature of the platform's algorithm created ongoing stress. They worried about earning enough money, losing sleep while trying to work during peak incentive periods, and the constant fear that the platform might deactivate or block their account. These uncertainties made workers feel insecure about both their income and their continued ability to work.

"Even on my day off, I check the app to see the surge, in case I'm missing something. It doesn't really switch off." — P27, ride-hailing, 5 years

"I got a warning message once — 'your account is under review' — for no reason I could understand. I didn't sleep properly for two days waiting to see if I'd lose my only income." — P13, grocery delivery, 9 months

"The uncertainty is the hardest part. Some weeks I earn well, some weeks the same effort gives me half. I can never plan anything — rent, school fees, nothing." — P20, grocery delivery, 3 years

"My wife says I am always on my phone even at home, checking the app. I don't enjoy it, but I am scared that if I don't check, I'll miss something important." — P26, ride-hailing, 5 years

The always-on nature of algorithmic incentive signalling appears to extend work-related cognitive load beyond active working hours, a pattern with implications for gig-worker wellbeing that mirrors findings in the broader literature on platform

precarity. However, as P21 highlights, this knowledge is unevenly distributed and takes considerable time to acquire, meaning newer or less-networked workers are structurally disadvantaged during their initial months on the platform.

7. KEY FINDINGS

1. Algorithmic nudges operate primarily through gamification and loss-framing (streaks, near-miss bonuses) rather than transparent economic incentives, encouraging effort beyond rational marginal return.

2. Opacity in algorithmic logic is the single largest driver of worker mistrust, more so than income level or platform type.

3. Rating and acceptance-rate systems function as informal disciplinary tools, producing continuous, internalised self-monitoring akin to surveillance-based control.

4. Platform-advertised "flexibility" is substantially constrained in practice by incentive-linked scheduling pressure — an autonomy paradox rather than genuine worker discretion.

5. Spatial-temporal nudges (heat maps, demand zones) can produce self-defeating crowding effects that undermine the very efficiency they are designed to create.

6. Workers develop informal, peer-based counter-strategies (multi-apping, information sharing) that partially mitigate — but do not resolve — structural information asymmetry.

7. Algorithmic unpredictability is strongly associated with chronic low-grade psychological stress and blurred work–non-work boundaries.

8. Newer and less-networked workers are disproportionately disadvantaged, as they lack access to the informal peer knowledge systems that experienced workers use to interpret and counteract nudges.

8. CONCLUSION

This detailed thematic analysis has traced a single interpretive line through five themes: platform design motivates through gamified architecture that workers cannot fully evaluate because of information asymmetry; this unevaluable environment produces a paradox between felt and actual autonomy; the paradox becomes the substance of workers' informal resilience, reworking, and resistance strategies; and these strategies are only now beginning to find a formal channel in Kerala's still-forming regulatory response. This study set out to understand how algorithmic nudges — embedded in gamified incentives, opaque decision logic, rating systems, and spatial-temporal signalling — shape the lived experience of gig workers. The expanded qualitative evidence, drawn from 32 participants across ride-hailing, food and grocery delivery, and hyperlocal service platforms, indicates that algorithmic management operates less through overt coercion and more through the subtle reshaping of choice architecture: workers remain formally free to log in or out, accept or reject an order, yet the accumulated weight of streaks, bonuses, ratings, and opaque allocation logic narrows what counts as a "rational" choice in practice.

The central tension identified — the autonomy paradox — captures the core contribution of this research: platforms can simultaneously market flexibility and engineer behavioural compliance, without either claim being strictly false. Participant accounts further reveal that this dynamic extends beyond economics into emotional labour, family trade-offs, chronic anxiety, and a cumulative trust deficit that persists even during favourable outcomes. At the same time, workers are not passive: informal countertactics and peer knowledge networks represent a meaningful, if unevenly distributed, form of everyday agency.

Addressing this will require coordinated action: platforms adopting more transparent and wellbeing-conscious nudge design, regulators establishing baseline disclosure and appeal rights, and worker collectives building the algorithm literacy

needed to convert individual coping tactics into collective bargaining power. Ultimately, the findings suggest that the future of fair gig work depends not on eliminating algorithmic management altogether, but on making its influence visible, contestable, and balanced against the interests of the workers who sustain these platforms.

9. SUGGESTIONS

9.1 For Platform Companies

• Publish plain-language explanations of how core algorithmic decisions are made (order allocation, incentive eligibility, rating weighting) without necessarily disclosing proprietary code.

• Introduce "nudge transparency" notices — e.g., flagging when a bonus structure or heat-map zone is incentive-driven rather than purely demand-driven.

• Cap the marginal aggressiveness of streak/loss-framed incentives to reduce overwork-inducing designs, and pilot opt-out or "soft" bonus structures.

• Build formal, in-app peer-support or grievance channels so informal WhatsApp-style knowledge networks are supplemented by accountable, platform-endorsed information.

• Introduce cooling-off indicators or wellbeing nudges (e.g., voluntary break prompts) alongside earnings nudges, to balance behavioural design intent.

9.2 For Policymakers and Labour Regulators

• Consider disclosure obligations for algorithmic management systems, similar to emerging EU Platform Work Directive-style provisions, requiring explanation of automated decisions affecting worker access to work and income.

• Explore minimum-notice or appeal mechanisms before rating-linked deactivation, given its outsized psychological and livelihood impact.

• Support portable, cross-platform reputation or rating systems to reduce individual platform dependency and associated leverage.

9.3 For Worker Collectives and Support Organisations

• Formalise and scale existing informal peer-information networks into structured worker associations or digital cooperatives for algorithm literacy.

• Develop accessible "algorithm literacy" training for new entrants to reduce the knowledge gap identified in Theme 6.

• Advocate for periodic third-party audits of platform algorithms focused on fairness and psychological-impact metrics, not just efficiency.

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