

9 Working at the Nexus of Global Markets and Gig Work

US Gig Workers, Credential Capitalization, and Wealthy International Clientele

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9.1 Introduction

This chapter examines how US-based elite gig workers navigate the institutionalization of a new international and territorial division of labor processes in the global gig economy. Typically associated with low-paid jobs like ridesharing and food delivery, the gig economy has also thrust freelance professionals into global competition for consulting, bookkeeping, marketing, and other white-collar work. Yet, while gig platforms such as Uber, DoorDash, and TaskRabbit have become household names, and their low wages and workplace exploitation has been well-documented (Ravenelle 2019), online platforms that enable remote work are often described in more positive terms as enabling workers to manage multiple gigs simultaneously and increase their income accordingly (Wood et al. 2019a). As the popularity of white-collar gig work continues to expand across the globe, US-based workers' understandings of these competitive pressures reflect and reinforce the territorialization of remote work within an international status hierarchy.

Previous research has documented long-standing concerns about labor outsourcing in high-income countries (Egger and Egger 2005), as well as mixed consequences from the expansion of gig work in developing nations (De Stefano 2015), but little is known about the experience of international competitive pressures within the gig economy, especially on elite platforms. While early research suggests that workers turn to these platforms after being pushed out of a job, to fill a gap in employment, to supplement a full-time job with additional income, or to pivot careers (Ravenelle et al. 2021), little is known about the experience of international competitive pressures within the gig economy. In this chapter, we ask, as online gig platforms reduce the barriers to obtaining international work, how do US-based elite gig workers view their increased international competition? Does the ability to digitally traverse borders connect US-based workers with an expanded pool of potential clients, strengthening their position in the workplace, or do workers perceive the lack of boundaries as possibly reducing their ability to receive a sufficient income? And how do US-based workers understand their competitive position within the global market for these professional services?

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Drawing on demographic surveys and qualitative interviews with 35 workers with experience working on elite gig platforms such as Catalant, Graphite, and TopTal, this study examines how US-based gig workers perceive the global market and leverage the cachet of their US credentials to command higher wages. Although these high-status workers typically join online platforms to enjoy flexibility and a \$1000/day minimum wage, they soon find themselves competing with much cheaper foreign labor. At the same time, Americans with prestigious degrees and employment histories find themselves in high demand for easy, lucrative, and sometimes legally dubious jobs offered by wealthy overseas clients. These workers come to see themselves and their output as especially skillful, deserving a wage premium over labor from developing countries. This perception justifies migration to platforms that cater to higher-end clients, including foreign governments and multinational firms, which enables them to better capitalize on their American credentials.

9.2 Literature Review

9.2.1 *Globalization of the Gig Economy*

As digital connectivity spread throughout the 1990s, it accelerated labor outsourcing and eventually enabled remote work to be completed anywhere in the world with access to adequate internet infrastructure (Graham et al. 2017a). Concerns about job loss and worker exploitation in offshored manufacturing industries soon expanded to include digital services, communication, and entertainment sectors facing the prospect of “twenty-first century offshoring” (Levy 2005). In fact, white-collar work is now as “offshorable” as manual labor: in the United States, up to 25% of all jobs can potentially be performed overseas, with those requiring higher education more likely to be offshorable (Blinder and Krueger 2013).

Although global labor sourcing has sometimes been credited with raising wages in impoverished countries and allowing corporations to reach new markets with cheaper goods (Friedman 2005), logistical challenges and lack of regulatory oversight have historically posed serious risks to workers and consumers alike (Dicken 2015). In wealthy countries like the United States, gig platforms purport to offer workers flexibility, while skirting labor regulations that apply to conventional employers (Katta et al. 2020). Likewise, a range of NGOs and initiatives in developing countries tout digital gig work as a pathway out of poverty, yet many workers experience long hours, low pay, and uncertain schedules (Graham et al. 2017b).

The global expansion of digital freelance work has unevenly incorporated different parts of the world. On platforms like Upwork, contracts are overwhelmingly offered by clients in the Global North to workers in the Global South (Horton et al. 2018). By 2013, employers from high-income countries outnumbered those from lower-income countries by 10 to 1 on the digital job platform oDesk (now known as UpWork), while 4.5 times as many workers

hailed from lower-income countries compared to high-income countries (Agrawal et al. 2015). The United States represents a partial exception, supplying a substantial amount of digital labor to other countries (Horton et al. 2018). This development is partly due to the widespread prevalence of gig work in the country. Based on tax filings, reliance on part-time self-employment is growing across the United States (Abraham et al. 2018), and in 2018, nearly 25% of US adults had experience working in the gig economy (Edison Research 2018). In general, online job platforms have thrown Western gig workers into direct competition with those in developing countries, a relatively new dynamic that requires further study (Beerepoot and Lambregts 2015).

In the Global South, gig work has grown rapidly and attracted controversy for its local economic consequences. Workers across Sub-Saharan Africa and other developing regions are increasingly reliant on informal work, including gig work (Anwar and Graham 2020). In one survey, 68% of gig workers from low- and middle-income countries reported that online gig work is a primary source of income for their households (Graham et al. 2017a). Digital freelancing is particularly prevalent in countries like the Philippines and India, though this work increasingly substitutes for traditional jobs in many regions struggling with high unemployment or weak local job markets (Dicken 2015).

9.2.2 Experiences of Precarity

Although the global expansion of gig work has contributed to the rise of a middle class in nations like India, Kenya, and Ghana, concerns remain about the highly unequal distribution of resources within the digital economy (Fish and Srinivasan 2012). Despite optimistic narratives about the “win-win” nature of fulfilling labor demand in the Global North with informal labor in the Global South, these ties have proven to be “an engine of vulnerable employment,” accelerating workforce casualization and eroding basic worker protections in many low- and middle-income countries (Meagher 2016). Even as multinational corporations have implemented responsibility codes or other means of monitoring labor conditions, bowing to pressure from activists and NGOs, workers in the informal economy reap few if any benefits from these protections (Barrientos 2008). Although some workers experience success in the gig economy, many others continue to face long hours, insecure employment, and meager compensation (Graham et al. 2017b).

Cross-national research reveals some broad similarities in how work precarity is experienced, specifically as a personal problem that “can only be overcome by individual effort and investment” (Mrozowicki and Trappmann 2021). Like their counterparts in the Global South, digital freelancers in the US, UK, Australia, and the EU are attracted to gig work by the promise of flexibility and freedom, and they too struggle with lack of basic benefits like healthcare, unemployment insurance, and family leave (Thompson 2018). Inconsistent contracts and lack of recourse against client demands often mean gig workers cannot manage their hours (Anwar and Graham 2020). Since gig workers also find themselves “normatively disembedded from social

protections” intended to safeguard their rights, they are forced to rely on interpersonal networks for economic or other support (Wood et al. 2019b). Further, wages are subject to downward pressure by fierce competition and perceptions of powerlessness, which lead many workers to underbid when negotiating contracts (Graham et al. 2017b:145).

9.2.3 Subjective Perception and Status in Markets

Despite the similar challenges with precarious employment facing gig workers around the world, workers based in the Global North and especially the US benefit from a symbolic association with high-status professional competence. Culture influences valuation of goods and services in part through “social performances of value,” or the “symbolic and relational work, and impression management strategies” that signify prestige, quality, or aesthetic desirability to potential buyers (Bandelji and Wherry 2011). Successful production of this “symbolic value” allows economic actors to command higher prices, as in the paradigmatic case of countries known for specific exports like wine (Ponte and Daviron 2011). On the world stage, strategic management of national image is an indispensable means to gain competitive economic advantage, particularly for countries with reputations “spoiled” by war, social unrest, or perceived lack of development (Rivera 2008). Therefore, global markets traverse not only national territories, but also their corresponding “cultural territories” (Jijon 2019) of unevenly distributed symbolic capital that affects the prices of exports, labor, and services like tourism.

Since market competition is mediated by attributions of value (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006), how actors understand and carry out these evaluations is fundamental to economic activity. In particular, the maintenance of symbolic boundaries that demarcate superior and inferior groups plays a major role in sustaining wage and status differentials (Lamont and Fournier 1992). These distinctions are the cultural foundation for social and professional closure, supplying justifications for inequalities between genders (Bolton and Muzio 2007) and by national origin (Jenkins and Reddy 2016). Even so, scholars have called for more research elaborating how processes of interpretation and status differentiation occur within markets (Beckert 2013). Jijon (2019) further cites the need to examine how globalization is experienced, arguing that meaning must be contextualized within global cultural diffusion and circulating images, narratives, and beliefs about the “foreign Other.”

9.2.4 Status Differentiation in Gig Work

Perceptions of status also play a crucial role in economic transactions in online gig work markets, both across and within platforms. Digital platforms operating in competitive markets often seek to differentiate themselves from competitors by developing “platform identities” based on distinctive app or website design and consumer segments (Cennamo 2021). Within digital platforms, status is largely based on reputation scoring, which is the major factor

affecting hiring decisions (Xu 2015). Further, the impact of these ratings on wages and likelihood of receiving contracts is strongest for highly skilled work like web development (Beerepoot and Lambregts 2015).

Status differentiation based on work reputation has profound consequences for workers' experiences on digital platforms. Many report facing significant pressure to avoid negative evaluations by putting in long hours and quickly answering customer requests, even to the point of exhaustion and sleep deprivation (Wood et al. 2019a). In many cases, high-reputation middlemen leverage their high status by subcontracting work, further diminishing pay rates for newer workers, and preventing them from building up their own scores (Graham et al. 2017a). As a result, the quantification of status hierarchies through reputation scoring is among the most successful "algorithmic management" techniques designed to increase productivity and intensify competition between gig workers (Wood et al. 2019a).

In addition to individual reputation, collective reputation based on country of origin plays a major role in hiring decisions within global labor markets. Xu (2015) finds that employers on digital labor platforms generalize first experiences with workers from a country to all workers from that country, substantially influencing future hiring decisions based on very limited information. Many gig workers in low- and middle-income countries report facing discrimination based on country of origin, and analysis of transaction data confirms "clients on average assume that workers from low- and middle-income countries provide less valuable work than workers from high-income countries" (Graham et al. 2017a: 7–8). Some digital workers have encountered ads specifically prohibiting South Asians from bidding, while many African workers describe overcoming pervasive stereotypes about their language abilities and internet access (Graham et al. 2017b). On the previously named-oDesk, an online job platform where Western workers compete directly with Indian and Filipino contractors, Beerepoot and Lambregts found some evidence of wage convergence due to competitive pressures, but ultimately "discriminatory recruitment practices" based on national origin ensured that Western workers received the highest absolute wages (Beerepoot and Lambregts 2015: 252–253).

9.2.5 Exclusive Platforms and Defining Elite Gig Workers

Perceptions of status are particularly salient within high status gig platforms that promise clients access to the most skilled or credentialed workers. Unlike lower status gig platforms, such as TaskRabbit, the personal assistant site, or Instacart, the grocery shopping platform, high status gig platforms market themselves as exclusive online talent enclaves. Catalant (previously called HourlyNerd), Graphite (formerly known as SpareHire), and TopTal (a portmanteau of Top and Talent), market themselves as offering "on-demand business expertise" and "top business talent." For instance, Graphite markets itself as providing "Access [to] the world's best independent talent, trained by Big-3 firms and vetted by our internal talent team" (Graphite n.d.). Graphite's 6,000 experts include more than 800 with big-three consulting experience

(Bain, McKinsey, and BCG), and more than 1,600 with an MBA from a top ten business school (Our Experts n.d.). Significantly more than half of their workers (65%) hold advanced degrees (Our Experts n.d.). Likewise, Catalant offers access to more than “70,000 independent experts” used by “more than 30% of the Fortune 100... to power strategic plan execution, enterprise portfolio management, centers of excellence, organizational redesigns... and post-merger integrations”(What We Do n.d.).

Unlike traditional gig platforms with few barriers to access beyond a background check and attendance at an orientation session, these elite platforms emphasize their exclusivity. Graphite notes that only 1 in 20 experts are accepted, and that the workers are “extremely talented individuals [who] are choosing to work independently” (Our Experts n.d.). TopTal requires applicants to complete a multi-stage three- to five-week application process, ultimately only accepting 3% of applicants. These platforms combine symbolic boundaries with restrictive access to achieve a partial form of professional closure that raises the perceived value of the labor offered to clients (Boussard 2018).

Although their education levels, incomes, and cultural capital would easily qualify these workers as members of the elite (Khan 2012), we focus our categorization on the work itself. We define elite gig work as offering a \$100 an hour “minimum wage” or \$1,000 a day, and offering work that is considered to be highly lucrative and prestigious such as management consulting, strategic planning, and financial services. Traditionally seen as desirable jobs for top business school graduates, this work can now be found via gig platform, without any of the traditional workplace benefits, protections, or opportunities for advancement.

Our data shows that US-based elite gig workers respond to international competitive pressures by invoking a global status hierarchy based on merit, positioning themselves as more competent and prestigious than workers based in the Global South. US-based workers also associate the exclusive platform identities cultivated by high status gig platforms with this meritocratic status hierarchy, further cementing their distinctiveness in the global market for professional gig work. These interpretive boundaries bolster the symbolic value of US-based workers’ labor in a manner that reflects and reinforces prevailing wage differentials between white collar gig workers based in the US and the rest of the world, particularly the Global South.

9.3 Research Methodology

The 35 respondents for this study were recruited from the TopTal, Graphite, and Catalant platforms. Only workers who had at least one completed, and reviewed, project on their respective platform at the time of recruitment were eligible. Each participant completed a short demographic survey before being interviewed in a participant-directed semi-structured interview (Weiss 1994). Interviews were conducted between June 2019 and early March 2020, with most interviews conducted in person. Interview questions were open-ended and included such topics as how the worker became involved with the high

status gig economy and experience with other platforms, the challenges they encountered, memorable experiences, and their views on the future of work.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and index-coded before being coded inductively and analyzed for patterns (Deterding and Waters 2018). To preserve confidentiality, all respondents were assigned pseudonyms based on the most popular names from their birth year. To encourage participation in the study, workers were given a \$50 gift card incentive and, for in-person interviews, offered lunch or a small meal.

Respondents included 25 males and 10 females. Twenty-five participants identified as white, six as Asian, one as Hispanic, one as racially mixed, and one as American.¹ Their ages ranged from 25 to 66 with an average age of 39.4. Their household incomes were high: 28 had an income of more than \$100,000, including 16 with household incomes north of \$200,000 and only two had incomes below \$99,999. Twenty-four identified themselves as having a graduate degree, including two participants with doctorates and one with a law degree. All participants had at least a four-year college degree.

9.4 Findings

9.4.1 Brand Cachet: “I Have a Good Brand Name”

Cognizant of the power of prestigious American brands in finance, management consulting and media, respondents spoke of highlighting their experience with such companies in their online profiles. Much like Airbnb hosts and TaskRabbit workers rely on crafting desirable online listings to garner an income (Ravenelle 2016), elite gig workers also engage in digital impression management to market themselves to potential clients, often listing brand names or highlighting trendy concepts in order to secure interest and income. As noted by Bröckling (2016) and Gershon (2016, 2017), crafting an “entrepreneurial self” through self-branding is increasingly crucial to seeking and landing a job, particularly as workers are made to shoulder greater personal responsibility for their economic outcomes (Beck 1992).

As Josh, 39, a self-described “corporate development executive” explained, “I would say ‘I’m an ex-McKinsey consultant who’s worked across the innovation landscape on the operational side and investor side.’” Workers also linked their past affiliations at well-known successful companies with their own brand as independent contractors and consultants. Seth, 36, a freelance consultant who gets most of his work from his business network, noted: “I am lucky in that I have a good brand name, so I do very well on Catalant ... I do very well on Catalant and SpareHire relative to others. I say ‘I was a former market lead at McKinsey.’” Seth believes that the McKinsey brand name helps potential clients to believe that he’s “clearly very smart.” Additionally, Seth, who had previously worked in Hollywood, further increased his success rate by referencing his work with a well-known film production company when aiming for media clients. As he explained, “The hit rate that I get back from that when I’m applying to projects is very high.”

Current affiliations were also seen as an asset, as Chris, 35, a consultant and adjunct instructor at an elite university explained. “It’s a ladder the program I teach in is a really selective program. And then it’s [Ivy League business school] and, and for better or worse, like people say, ‘Oh, you know, [Ivy League business school] allows him to teach. You must be really smart,’” he said. “I don’t think there’s any truth to that ... but like I think people, that’s how people see it. For better or worse. So I think that really helped.” Chris’s reference to a “ladder” further illustrates his awareness of status stratification. With high levels of education, and previous and current experiences working for well-known and successful companies, these workers were often aware that they were valuable commodities. As Seth, the former Hollywood employee, notes:

I can be quite a valuable name to put on a proposal. There are some people that I work with who I said, ‘Listen, if you ever need to check with me if I can ever be valuable just as a name on a proposal, go for it. You don’t have to commit to bring me into the project if and when it closes. We can have that conversation then, and if it makes sense on both sides, great. If it helps you win business, put my name there because it’s, for me, it does me no harm to put my name there.’

As part of this brand cachet, and their perceptions of themselves as “valuable commodities,” workers often found themselves in demand with international clients in Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Singapore, Switzerland, Canada, and Germany. This international demand meant the opportunity to travel extensively, and respondents routinely spoke of managing consulting engagements across multiple continents and time zones. Occasionally, demand from wealthy overseas clients created conflicts with workers’ self-perceptions of themselves as competent, but also ethical workers, as Mark, 49, a “generalist consultant” soon realized after engaging in consulting to the royal family in Saudi Arabia:

I just wasn’t ramped up on – I mean, I should have been – I’m actually a news person. I wasn’t ramped up on the horrible things that the royal family had done, especially Khashoggi, etc. Only after we took the project and people had reactions to me telling them what I was working on, I was like, “Oh, yeah, okay. Probably shouldn’t do that. That’s, yeah, that’s bad.” Other than that, I wouldn’t take projects that I feel bad about.

Although workers like Mark sought to add symbolic value to their labor by adopting prestigious self-branding, they often cast work that seemed ethically dubious as mercenary, and therefore incompatible with their high-status sophistication. Even so, respondents generally appreciated the platforms’ ability to facilitate access to international clients, though such sites increased the porosity of international borders and increased competition for elite consulting work, as the next section will show.



9.4.2 Competing with Cheaper Labor: “I Was Competing against People ... Working for \$2 an Hour”

Respondents expressed concern that the proliferation of lower-status platforms also made it harder for them to gain lucrative work commensurate with their position at the top of the international status hierarchy. Bret, 37, a marketing and design consultant, noted that the platforms enabled “much more of a free-for-all” with “50 proposals from different small businesses,” with not just a large number of applicants, but also “randoms from all over the world.” With so many applicants competing, especially those from lower-cost countries, hourly rates are a concern. As George, 59, a management consultant, explained:

They serve to tamp down billable rates because you have a lot of competition between people pitching for particular jobs. I find that myself, I’m maybe competing against some guy in Bangalore who is willing to work for \$10 an hour.

Although these high-status workers typically join online platforms to enjoy flexibility, pivot into a new field, or to recover after a bad corporate experience (Ravenelle et al. 2021), the consultants saw themselves and their output as especially skillful, deserving a wage premium over labor from developing countries. Cari, 42, a director of marketing for a book publisher who used online work to supplement her salary, explained:

I found UpWork, which was good except I was competing against people who were in Thailand or the Philippines, working for \$2 an hour, and it wasn’t somebody who could charge the prices I wanted to charge and people at my level. I felt like Graphite was a better version and a more high-level version.

Even when workers didn’t view themselves as working in direct competition with international workers, they still viewed the projects and rates on less elite platforms as undesirable. “I’ve done one project through Upwork but it was just, like, ‘help us make this PowerPoint look pretty’ and frankly Upwork is like, ‘we recommend charging \$18 an hour,’ and I was, like, ‘no that sounds terrible,’” said Sophia, 32, a management consultant. “You can’t have the same kind of work through them and it’s very much kind of, like, the lower-tier stuff.” Anastasia, 41, CEO of her own consulting company, was blunt in her assessment about the appropriateness of certain platforms.

Even though I figured out how to make Upwork work, I realized that it’s not ... it doesn’t cater to the market I really want to target. It’s almost ... for a long time I was and still am, a little bit – embarrassed is not the right word – but I do recognize that [Upwork] is misaligned with my branding.



Seth, 36, had an even more visceral reaction to Fiverr, another online gig platform. “I set up a profile to see what it is, and then immediately said, ‘No, that’s not the work I do.’”

Respondents’ brands were not just their personal affiliations, intimately connected with their sense of self (Gershon 2016), but also how they viewed themselves in the global marketplace. Particularly upon entry into white collar gig work, these workers struggled with direct competition from low-wage contractors in other countries. They eventually rationalized their decision to join elite platforms not simply in terms of material benefits but also symbolic alignment with their high-status position in the international hierarchy. Additionally, in an effort to counteract the race to the bottom on rates, respondents tried to emphasize their “brand” as members of an elite, with prestigious qualifications and high-level skill sets justifying wage premiums, as illustrated in the final section.

9.4.3 Skilled and Deserving a Wage Premium: “The Value That You Can Bring Versus Other People”

Workers sought to justify higher wages through appeals to the meritocratic nature of the international status hierarchy, not only by highlighting their personal skill but also by asserting the inferior quality of labor performed by workers based outside the US. In order to secure higher wages and to further build their brand identity as elite workers, respondents spoke of finding work that was “appropriate” in terms of the expected skills and income. For instance, Nathan, 46, who focused on growth strategy consulting, described his attraction to an elite platform as a good fit on multiple levels.

I like that they had the appropriate kinds of projects that interested me. A lot of them are within my field, I’m a generalist but I do like IT consulting, there’s a lot of variety there but there’s a lot of stuff that I feel qualified to do ... And the rates are appropriate. Some are not at all – but I choose not to apply to them – but some are within the sweet spot.

To counteract the race to the bottom in terms of wages, and to further support their own identity as an elite worker with prestigious qualifications, respondents cast themselves as uniquely capable of performing skilled labor, as opposed to the menial and interchangeable tasks carried out by contractors based in other countries. George, 59, noted that it was, “A big challenge in terms of conveying your value and making sure that everyone understands the value that you can bring versus other people,” clarifying that he differed in:

my experience in decision-making responsibility. Also, frankly, the level of work I do, right? So, somebody can call themselves a management consultant, but they’re really just doing clerical work for a particular client. And that’s a different type of job than I do.



The idea that workers in other countries, in addition to charging less, were offering inferior work that was missing a critical component was further echoed by other respondents. In this way, the elite workers further compare and contrast their skills and experience with those of workers who they viewed as less capable or innovative. “I’ve done a lot of independent consulting since graduating with my MBA. I looked at other platforms, some of them, the rates are just ridiculously low,” said Nathan, 46, the growth strategy consultant.

I did a lot of writing of business plans back in the day and a lot of Indian companies or Indian individuals, people in India, they would just undercut you. When we would put out for our business plans, we were charging between \$10,000 and \$15,000. They’d be doing it for \$200.

In addition to charging less, Nathan viewed the work as insufficient, further adding:

They’re just doing cookie-cutter. I mean fill in your name and it’s kind of like doing your taxes on Turbo Tax kind of thing. It just doesn’t work. We would get a lot of clients actually that went with these kinds of organizations and we’d have to clean up their mess. ‘Cause not all businesses are the same. Even if you have two restaurants, they’re vastly different models.



Through their reasoning about foreign competition, US gig workers construct an international status hierarchy to defend and benefit from the “symbolic value” (Ponte and Daviron 2011) attributed to professional labor from the United States. While some respondents described workers from the Global South as incapable of completing jobs to an acceptable standard, other elite workers saw them as performing menial tasks very different from their own highly skilled labor. For instance, Bret, 37, who spoke of “a free-for-all” with the online consulting platforms, limited his experience on non-elite platforms to hiring workers, describing the experience as “transactional.” He further clarified,



And I would only use them for no-brainer transactional stuff. Last week I hired someone on Fiverr, and it was because I needed something overnight. So I hired someone in Southeast Asia, and they did Photoshop work. It required no direction. It was just, “Here’s three bullet points of what you need to do, here’s the files.” As long as they’re ready in the morning, we’re good. And we’re done, and from what I understand it was a good rate for them, and it was incredibly cheap for me.

Juxtapositioning their work as analytical and skillful, versus transactional and clerical, further enables respondents to see themselves and their output as especially skillful, deserving a wage premium over labor from developing countries. This perception further justifies migration to platforms that cater



to higher-end clients, including foreign governments and multinational firms, which enables them to better capitalize on their American credentials. Lastly, the respondents' reasoning legitimates their belief in an international status hierarchy by grounding it in meritocratic principles.

9.5 Conclusion

Although digital work platforms seek to suppress collective consciousness and labor organizing by cultivating a sense of “placelessness” among workers (Lehdonvirta 2016), our data shows that in the context of international competition, US gig workers understand the digital labor market in terms of national identity within an international status hierarchy. By asserting the relevance of national origin for the quality of services, US freelancers devalue the labor of workers in the Global South while upholding the prestige (and higher wages) associated with skilled digital labor from the United States. This interpretive process supports and reflects nation-based professional closure in the international gig economy, contributing to US gig workers' ability to garner consistently high ratings (Xu 2015) and to command the highest absolute wages for many skilled digital services (Beerepoot and Lambregts 2015). We find that US gig workers draw symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Fournier 1992) that attribute competence and expertise to US workers, while casting workers from the Global South as offering substandard or potentially counterfeit services. By positioning themselves at the top of an international status hierarchy justified on the basis of merit, US gig workers draw upon and reinforce the “symbolic value” (Ponte and Daviron 2011) of perceived quality and prestige associated with skilled digital labor from the United States.

Beginning with decades-old concern about the consequences of “twenty-first century offshoring” (Levy 2005:687), the institutionalization of a global labor market for professional services has increasingly prompted white collar workers in the US to rethink their labor in the context of international competition. US-based elite gig workers occupy a unique position within this market. Even as the conditions of digital freelance labor expose them to many of the same problems as white collar gig workers in other countries, including long hours and lack of social benefits (Mrozowicki and Trappmann 2021), US-based gig workers enjoy the highest absolute wages (Beerepoot and Lambregts 2015) and preferential hiring over workers from other countries (Xu 2015). This combination of economic precarity and relative privilege leads US-based workers to territorialize their understanding of the global labor market in terms of a meritocratic status hierarchy corresponding to national origin. They deploy symbolic boundaries to distinguish their own skilled and competent work from the menial and substandard labor of workers from the Global South, contributing to the professional closure of consulting work that occurs on exclusive gig work platforms (Boussard 2018).

One question that naturally arises is how successful and elite these respondents are if they agree to an interview for \$50. Given the frequency with which they discuss the need for high pay commensurate with their elite qualifications,

giving an hour or more of one's time for \$50 raises questions about the potential precarity of the respondents. While few respondents declined the incentive, for most, the opportunity to contribute to research – and the promise that they would be able to access the published findings – was appealing. Most research on gig work has focused on lower status platforms, resulting in a dearth of information on the experiences of elite workers. Additionally, for those workers who regularly interview others as part of their consulting work, there may have been a sense of “research karma” and a desire to experience the interview process as an interviewee.

Our research answers the call for further attention to the role of interpretation and social status in markets (Beckert 2013; Podolny and Signals 2008; Wherry 2014), while detailing how globalization shapes perceptions of the “foreign Other” (Jijon 2019) within an international economic context. This study also elaborates questions about how Western workers understand and subjectively contend with the “new international division of labor” (Cho 1985), particularly how they perceive foreign competition within labor markets – an area needing further study (Beerepoot and Lambregts 2015). Future research can extend examination of these perceptions to workers in other countries and regions, as well as to those gig workers in the Global South who are involved in novel forms of transnational labor organizing (Lehdonvirta 2016; Lindell 2013).

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Note

- 1 It is relatively common for individuals in the United States to reject racial categorization and opt instead for national identification (DiAngelo 2018).

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