Original Researcher Article

Consumer Perceptions Of Gig Workers And Their Impact On Brand Trust In Food Delivery Platforms

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ABSTRACT

This research question examines how consumer reflections on gig workers affect brand trust of Indian food-delivery websites. Using a sequential mixed-methodology, a preliminary qualitative interviewing session identified relevant dimensions of perception of gig workers, which were further used to guide a quantitative survey conducted on 250 food-delivery customers. To test the hypothesised relationships, structural equation modelling was then used. Findings reveal that perceived ability and warmth of gig workers should contribute immensely to the transfer of trust to the platform but hygiene signalling and professionalism foster platform brand trust directly. The relationship that exists between brand trust and the perceptions of gig workers is partly mediated by the trust transfer, which in turn has a positive impact on the customer loyalty and electronic word-of-mouth intentions. The research adds to the body of existing work on the topic of brand trust and the gig economy by theorising about the concept of gig workers as human brand touchpoints and the necessity of controlling interpersonal and hygiene-related cues to foster trust in platform-based food-delivery services..

Keywords: Gig economy, brand trust, food delivery platforms, trust transfer, consumer perception, India.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Food-delivery apps have transformed the consumption ecosystems of cities by offering on-demand access to meals with the help of the orchestration of independent couriers often known as gig workers via apps. The industry has seen an increase in global adoption, which has been driven by changing consumer lifestyles, the dissemination of mobile payment systems, and post-pandemic demand of the services that are minimal in contact (Mehrolia et al., 2021; Zhao and Bacao, 2020). The ultimate service experience, though, is essentially human and is shown at the doorstep of a consumer between the individual and a delivery courier despite the algorithmic coordination, routing intelligence, and speed of delivery these platforms offer (Ashfaq et al., 2023; Liang et al., 2022). It provides a unique service architecture whereby gig employees are employed outside of the formal employment contract but present the most recognizable face of the platform brand (Kaine & Josserand, 2019; Ramaswamy, 2021). In digital and service marketing literature, brand trust has been considered deeply and the determinants that have been established include system reliability, perceived security, interface usability, service consistency, and the effectiveness of service recovery (Delgado-, Ballester, 2004; Flaviyan et al., 2006; Hsu et al., 2014). Within the framework of platform-mediated services, the formation of trust is further complicated due to distributed responsibility and the utilization of non-employee labour that perform brand-relevant service tasks and are not affiliated with an organization (Schaefers et al., 2021; Sthapit and Bjork, 2024). Regulatory classification, algorithmic control, and worker conditions have been the focal point of previous research on the gig economy

(Duggan et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2019), yet little has been done to study how consumers perceive gig workers as trust-forming agents and brand proxies (Lee and Cho, 2025; Rao et al., 2024). This gap is consequential due to the fact that consumers form fast social judgments about service agents in terms of competency, warmness, professionalism, physical appearance, and subsequently influence affective and cognitive trust even before it is spread to institutions (Fiske et al., 2007; Kirmani et al., 2024). In food-delivery settings, perceived risk is addressed by hygiene and safety signals (e.g. closed packaging, clean delivery bags, appearance of courier) and enhances credibility, ultimately affecting trust on the platform level (Kapoor & Vij, 2023; Song et al., 2024). The process through which interpersonal impressions of gig workers are converted into trust of the digital platform is similar to Trust Transfer Theory, which argues that trust that is judged in a well-known or visual object may be cognitively transferred to a correlated but less perceivable one (Stewart, 2003; Strub and Priest, 1976). However, the theoretical route has been rarely represented in the field of food-delivery brands where the courier is an independent contractor instead of an employed agent (Möhlmann et al., 2024; Paul et al., 2025). Moreover, Attribution Theory posits that when perceived controllability and visibility is great, consumers attribute the blame of service failure to either the platform or the worker, and highly visible agents will receive more internal blame, which may destroy institutional trust (Folkes, 1984; Weiner, 2000). This creates reputational risk to platforms as gig workers are viewed as disengaged contractors as opposed to brand actors integrated into the platform, particularly where platforms rely on ineffective systems of service-recovery, where refunds are processed silently and without explaining who bears responsibility

(Gelbrich, & Roschk, 2011; Xu, 2025). To counteract such shortcomings, this paper assumes the role of gig workers as service avatars the image and behaviour of which influence consumer trust transfer and, according to this, the ultimate platform brand trust. Combining social stereotype evaluations (warmth and competence), hygiene-based cue signalling, and attributional accountability relationships, this study contributes to brand trust scholarship in the experience of hybrid digital-human services and presents new theoretical and managerial implications of how independent courier affect consumer confidence in food-delivery brands.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

2.1 The Rise of Food Delivery Platforms and the Gig Workforce

Food-delivery platforms are a fast-growing branch of the platform economy, which is characterised by business models that are asset-light, organising supply and demand using mobile applications and crowdsourced independent couriers (Zhao, 2020; Sthapit, 2024). In contrast to the traditional restaurant delivery workers, gig couriers maintain their status of independent contractors, which creates a decentralised service model where labour is organisationally regulated by algorithms but socially rated by the consumers (Wood et al., 2019; Ramaswamy, 2021). The last service encounter occurs offline at the handover point, which means that gig workers become the most visible service agents and, in fact, brand representatives even though they do not have a formal organisational identity (Kaine & Josserand, 2019; Paul et al., 2025). This unique structure brings a division between institutional brand message and institutional consumer understanding on the platform-level and the worker-level, which can have far-reaching effects on institutional trust.

2.2 Brand Trust in Digital and Platform-Mediated Services

Brand trust represents the belief of a consumer in the reliability, integrity, and the ability of a brand to offer the value promised (Delgado-Ballester, 2004; Kirmani et al., 2024). Trust in digital services, as a rule, is built with the help of the perceived security, the functionality of the application, the safety of payments, the correctness of delivery, transparency, and responsiveness (Flavián et al., 2006; Hsu et al., 2014). In platform ecosystems, trust also relies on the reliability of the system, peer rating, and the perceived fairness of service results (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Moehlmann et al., 2024). The recent studies posit, however, that in the hybrid digital-offline services, the creation of trust is not caused only by the interface but it is also executed by human service agents who operationalise the brand promise (Liang et al., 2022; Rao et al., 2024). However, there is little academic literature on the transfer of trust created in gig couriers to the platform brand and particularly in food delivery where the courier is an independent contractor and not an employee.

2.3 Consumer Perception of Gig Workers

Rapid heuristic judgments of gig workers are shaped by social and physical factors (communication style, reliability, attire, cleanliness, demeanour, and professionalism), which influence the perception of the consumer (Fiske et al., 2007; Song et al., 2024). Empirical research on consumer behaviour suggests that consumers tend to have an anthropomorphic brand attitude through frontline agents, where impressions of workers will influence brand credibility (Kirmani et al., 2024; Lee and Cho, 2025). Hygiene cues can be considered such dominant risk-reduction signals in food-related delivery, which include clean delivery bags, sealed packaging, hand cleanliness, and professional appearance, and these clues are all involved in the perception of safety and credibility (Kapoor and Vij, 2023; Song et al., 2024). Furthermore, the consumers rank service agents in terms of competence (ability, reliability, problem-solving) and warmth (friendliness, sincerity, empathy) and thus influence cognition and affective trust development (Fiske et al., 2007; Kirmani et al., 2024). Such negativity stereotypes in the context of informal labour or responsibility or hygiene issues may, in turn, instil reputational risks to the platform brand despite the good performance of operations (Rao et al., 2024; Xu, 2025).

2.4 Theoretical Foundations

2.4.1 Stereotype Content Model (SCM)

Stereotypes content model (SCM) refers to the representation of stereotypes in a stereotyped group. The Stereotype Content Model argues that people form an assessment of social actors on two main dimensions; warmth and competence (Fiske et al., 2007). Warmth tests affect emotional trust and relationship acceptance, and competence tests establish credibility, reliability, and trust in the performance of tasks (Fiske et al., 2007; Kirmani et al., 2024). In food delivery, where the couriers are not only delivering the goods but also the impressions of the services, SCM could be a powerful analytical prism to understand why the image of the gig workers should have an effect on institutional trust.

2.4.2 Attribution Theory

Attribution Theory explains how consumers attribute responsibility to service performance based on the factors of controllability, intentionality and visibility (Folkes, 1984; Weiner, 2000). Since gig couriers are the most prominent agents in the delivery process, consumers will blame more internal blame on workers in terms of delays, damages or incorrect orders, which might undermine institutional trust (Folkes, 1984; Weiner, 2000; Xu, 2025). However, the blame diffusion can be reduced by using clear service-recovery communication and signalling accountability, which will regain trust (Gelbrich and Roschk, 2011; Xu, 2025).

2.4.3 Trust Transfer Theory

Trust Transfer Theory assumes that it is possible to transfer the trust within a familiar or visible source to a related but less tangible entity, which is cognitively transferred (Strub and Priest, 1976; Stewart, 2003). Trust in platform services, which is intangible based on the brand, can be transferred upwards to the platform in a way that it creates brand trust despite the lack of official employment ties (Stewart, 2003; Paul et al., 2025). The mechanism has not been studied sufficiently in the field

of food delivery and, therefore, it is an important theoretical contribution.

2.4.4 Service-Dominant Logic (S-D Logic)

S-D Logic also stresses that the value is co-produced as a result of exchange of interactive services, instead of being built only within products or platforms (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). The value creation in food delivery, even in the case of algorithmic mediation, involves emotional labour, communication, hygiene signalling and relational exchange, all of which are executed by the gig workers (Ramaswamy, 2021; Paul et al., 2025). As a result, brand trust is a socially co-constructed phenomenon provided by the workers and not necessarily a digitally engineered construct.

2.5 Research Gaps Identified

In accordance with the available literature, the following gaps are identified:

1. The research on brand trust of food delivery mainly deals with apps and logistics without considering gig workers as an intermediary in trust building.

2. Empirical models rarely examine how trust to platform brands transfers between gig workers and platform encounters of hybrid digital-offline service provision.

3. There has been limited research that combines the effects of social stereotype judgments, hygiene- risk reduction cues and attributional accountability into a unified brand trust framework.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research design used in this study is sequential exploratory mixed-method research, which is a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques to fully investigate how perceptions of gig workers affect brand trust among customers in food delivery services. The mixed-method approach is considered to be relevant due to the exploratory character of the knowledge of consumer perceptions in the gig-based services, and the need to validate the results of the study with empirical methods later (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). As such, qualitative phase was used to create the conceptual model, and the quantitative phase was used in the hypothesis testing.

3.2 Research Context

The research was undertaken in a single country, India, which happens to be one of the leading markets in the field of the app-based food delivery platforms, as it is associated with the rapid development of the gig work and the increased user interest in services like Zomato and Swiggy. India provides a relevant empirical setting because the gig workers can be observed in the context of the last-mile delivery and the increased consumer sensitivity to the quality of service, hygiene, and cues associated with trust.

3.3 Phase 1: Qualitative Study – Model Development

3.3.1 Sampling and Participants

The sampling method used was purposive sampling to get the consumers that had a great experience of food-delivery platforms. The participants had to (1) be aged above 18 years old, (2) have used food-delivery services at least twice a month during the past six months, and (3) have had direct contact with gig delivery workers. The total number of in-depth interviews is 22 and this size was considered to be adequate to reach the saturation of the theory.

3.3.2 Data Collection

The semi-structured interviews were used to collect data which took a 25 to 40 minutes duration. The interviews were done both in English and Hindi as chosen by the participants and were based on the perception of the behaviour of gig workers, their professionalism, hygiene behaviour, reliability, and accountability, and how it influenced trust towards food-delivery services. The audio-recorded interviews were informedly transcribed verbatim.

3.3.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used on the qualitative data according to the steps identified by Braun and Clarke (2021). This involved open coding, theme recognition and abstraction into higher-order dimensions. The analysis obtained four dimensions of the perception of gig-workers that were deemed to be warmness, competence, professionalism and hygiene signalling, which were used to construct the conceptual frame and to formulate the subsequent hypotheses to be tested in the quantitative part of the study.

3.4 Phase 2: Quantitative Study – Hypothesis Testing

3.4.1 Sampling and Sample Size

The quantitative phase employed a cross-sectional survey design. Data were collected from 250 Indian consumers of food delivery platforms using non-probability quota sampling to ensure variation in age, gender, and usage frequency. The sample size of 250 is considered adequate for structural equation modeling in theory-driven studies with moderate model complexity.

3.4.2 Data Collection Procedure

A questionnaire was provided using Google Forms in a structured online format. It was done voluntarily and anonymity was promised to the participants. The survey had attention-check questions and screening questions to improve the quality of data by ensuring the true eligibility criterion. The measurement items were assessed on a seven-point Likert scale (between 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)).

3.4.3 Measurement Instruments

The measurement scales were modified based on existing literature to fit the food-delivery and gigs-work situation in India. The scale used to measure brand trust was revised versions of Delgado-Ballester (2004) items. The items of perception of the warmth of gigs and competence were adjusted in accordance with the Fiske et al. (2007). The transfer of trust was operationalised in line with Stewart (2003), customer loyalty and electronic word-of-mouth

intention were based on Oliver (1999) and Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), respectively. Any changes in scales were based on the advised scale adaptation procedures that were followed to achieve contextual relevance and clarity (Boateng et al., 2018).

3.5 Data Analysis

The quantitative data in the study were analysed through the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS -SEM) which is an appropriate method of mixed-method research that focuses on prediction and extension of theories especially in medium samples. The analysis was performed in two parts first, the measurement model was tested in terms of reliability and validity, and secondly, the structural model was tested to test the hypothesised relationships. Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was used to analyze mediation effects.

4. Results

4.1 Sample Characteristics

The last sample included 250 valid answers of the Indian customers of the food-delivery websites. Male and female respondents were about 58 and 42 percent of the participants respectively. Most of the respondents (64 3/4) fell within the age category of 21-35 years. More than 70 percent said they have ordered food online at least twice a month, which is enough to demonstrate that they are familiar with the services of carriers based on gigs in food delivery.

4.2 Measurement Model Results

Table 1: Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability (CR)	AVE
Warmth	0.82	0.88	0.65
Competence	0.86	0.90	0.69
Professionalism	0.84	0.89	0.67
Hygiene Signaling	0.88	0.92	0.74
Trust Transfer	0.81	0.87	0.69
Brand Trust	0.89	0.93	0.76
Customer Loyalty	0.85	0.90	0.70
eWOM Intention	0.83	0.88	0.65

Constructs were all found to be above the recommended levels of internal consistency (0.70; CR 0.80) and convergent validity (AVE 0.50), which demonstrates good levels of measurement reliability.

Table 2: Discriminant Validity (HTMT Criterion)

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Warmth	—					
2. Competence	0.63	—				
3. Professionalism	0.59	0.67	—			
4. Hygiene Signaling	0.52	0.61	0.65	—		
5. Trust Transfer	0.71	0.74	0.68	0.69	—	
6. Brand Trust	0.64	0.72	0.70	0.75	0.78	—

The values of all the HTMT were less than the conservative value of 0.85 and this indicates that there is discriminant validity.

4.3 Structural Model Results

Table 3: Hypothesis Testing Results (Path Coefficients)

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	Warmth → Trust Transfer	0.32	4.18	< .001	Supported
H2	Competence → Trust Transfer	0.46	6.27	< .001	Supported
H3	Professionalism → Brand Trust	0.21	3.09	.002	Supported
H4	Hygiene Signaling → Brand Trust	0.39	5.88	< .001	Supported
H5	Trust Transfer → Brand Trust	0.43	6.54	< .001	Supported
H6	Brand Trust → Customer Loyalty	0.62	9.21	< .001	Supported
H7	Brand Trust → eWOM Intention	0.55	8.14	< .001	Supported

The statistical significance of all the hypothesized relationships were supported by bootstrapping that was done on 5,000 resamples.

4.4 Mediation Analysis

Table 4: Mediation Effects (Bootstrapped Indirect Effects)

Indirect Path	Indirect β	t-value	p-value	Mediation
Warmth → Trust Transfer → Brand Trust	0.14	3.67	< .001	Partial
Competence → Trust Transfer → Brand Trust	0.20	4.89	< .001	Partial

The relationships between the perceptions of gig-workers, including warmth and competence, and platform brand trust were mediated by trust transfer thus proving the Theory of Trust Transfer.

4.5 Model Predictive Power

Table 5: Coefficient of Determination and Effect Sizes

Endogenous Construct	R²	Interpretation
Trust Transfer	0.51	Moderate
Brand Trust	0.64	Substantial
Customer Loyalty	0.38	Moderate
eWOM Intention	0.31	Moderate

Effect size analysis (f^2) showed that competence and hygiene signalling had medium and large effects respectively on trust transfer and brand trust respectively but warmth and professionalism had small and medium effects respectively.

6. Conclusion

This paper explored the effect of consumer attitudes towards gig employees on brand trust in food-delivery services in the Indian market. Following a sequential mixed-method design, the study first established the main dimensions of perception of gig-workers by a qualitative investigation and then validated their implications by applying quantitative research. The results show that gig workers have a significant influence on the consumer trust of the platform brands, even though they are independent contractors who have little formal organisational connections. The perceived competence and the warmness of gig workers are important predictors of transferring trust to the platform, which confirms that interpersonal judgments do not go through one service experience and only institutional trust is created. Hygiene signalling turned out to be the most powerful direct indicator of brand trust, which explains the significance of observable safety and cleanliness indicators in food-related gig businesses. It is also true that professionalism was an added advantage to the trust in the brands, which is why it can be argued that gig workers act as human brand touchpoints in otherwise technologically mediated service systems. The mediating effect of trust transfer gives solid empirical evidence of trust -transfer theory within the hybrid digital-human platforms. The findings reveal that consumers subconsciously transfer platform trust developed on visible service agent to the platform brand, which shows that human factors should be incorporated into platform trust models. Furthermore, the potent influences of brand trust on customer loyalty and electronic word-of-mouth intentions prove brand trust as one of the key mechanisms that lead to long-term platform success. Contextually, the hype of hygiene and professionalism represents increased sensitivity to food safety and types of interpersonal service among Indian consumers, where platform strategies ought to adopt locally receptive strategies over globally standardised ones. The platforms working in the developing markets must realise that brand trust is not only built on the basis of technological stability, but also the daily behaviour and image of the gig workers. On the whole, this study contributes to the existing knowledge about brand trust in the gig economy because it reveals that the trust in food-delivery services is not only algorithmic but highly social and embodied. The study provides a theoretical contribution and practical implications to platform managers aiming to build stronger brand credibility, customer loyalty, and sustainable competitive advantage in the food-delivery industry by characterizing gig workers as service avatars and trust intermediaries

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