

*Valued capital(s) and devalued labour in London's "Gig Economy"*

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This thesis was originally submitted to the London School of Economics and Political Science for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), September 2020.

## **Declaration**

I certify that the thesis I have presented for examination for the MPhil/PhD degree of the London School of Economics and Political Science is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it). The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. Quotation from it is permitted, provided that full acknowledgement is made. This thesis may not be reproduced without my prior written consent. I warrant that this authorisation does not, to the best of my belief, infringe the rights of any third party.

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## Abstract

A considerable body of literature on the “gig economy” is dedicated to exploited and precarious labour. This thesis set out to examine the undertheorised role of capitals (economic, social and cultural) and the relationship between these capitals and labour on gig platforms. It found that capitals, in combination with debt, play an important role in shaping the lived experiences of “entrepreneurs” in the “gig economy”. It is argued, therefore, that class analysis of the “gig economy” must consider not only exploited labour, but also debt and forms of capital. Methodologically, this thesis engages in thematic analysis of 40 in-depth interviews with “entrepreneurs” who use three “gig economy” platforms: AirBnB, Uber and Amazon Flex. These analyses offer insights into how obligations on platform users’ future labour, that is debt, degrade agency for the worker while increasing it for the company, increasing risk for the worker while decreasing it for the company. Debt is a core functionality of some “gig” platforms and built into their wider business model where some platforms operate in ways which produce dependency among their workers. Economic, social and cultural capitals, on the other hand, allow for some “entrepreneurs” to set themselves apart through distinction on platforms such as AirBnB; escape risk (across all three platforms); avoid aspects of labour (particularly on Amazon Flex and AirBnB); and avoid some of the downsides that other “gig” workers face. Rating systems play a big part in this, but a different part depending on the platform in question – on some competitive market platforms (AirBnB, for instance) they allow those with the right forms of capital to stand out and earn more money on the platform; on non-competitive market platforms (Uber, Amazon Flex) they serve predominantly as disciplinary mechanisms which put the driver under constant pressure to provide better service (without economic recognition). Overall, it is argued that, through these dynamics, the “gig economy” has the potential to increase existing inequalities by devaluing the indebted subject and those who bring mainly their labour, while valuing the capital-rich subject who is able to earn more through digital platforms than they could in traditional markets. This thesis therefore offers a theorisation of the “gig economy” that does not exclusively focus on destabilised labour, but rather, contextualises labour within frameworks of debt and capital that clarify dramatically different outcomes for “entrepreneurial” subjects with different resources.

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## 1 – Introduction

This thesis deals with the concept of social class in the proverbial “gig economy”. It is certainly not the first project to do so – many have spoken about how labour is exploited and how value is extracted from a precarious workforce through these platforms – indeed, I highlight many who have done this in the second chapter. So, what is different about the approach that I take here? I want to argue that there is more to learn about class in the “gig economy” by widening the scope of class analysis beyond labour exploitation. That is not to say that this thesis will dismiss the exploitation of labour – the opposite is true: it will bring in broader conceptualisations of class to look at how forms of capital and debt position labour exploitation on these platforms. It aims to employ this wider class lens to understand why some “entrepreneurs” on these platforms have better or worse experiences than others, why some are economically successful while others struggle to get by. In so doing, it also draws out the divisions that exist in the “gig economy” along two axes: The first involves differentiation in the mixture of labour, capital and debt being put to work. The second involves a division between competitive and non-competitive platforms. I argue that we need to understand these divisions across and within platforms in order to best utilise a pluralistic theoretical approach to class and classed subjectivity in the “gig economy”.

### 1.1 – Thesis questions

The wider approach to class of this thesis is instigated through two research questions – the first takes a more traditional socio-economic approach and asks: **How do relations of economic capital, labour and debt present themselves within the platform economy?** The second turns attention towards the symbolic economy and capitals which have to go through forms of transformation to realise an economic form – asking: **How are cultural and social capitals put to work in the platform economy?** In the second chapter (2) I discuss in detail how these questions emerge from the literature, and then in the methodology chapter (3) I expand upon the specific methodological approach to these questions that I employ – though I will also introduce this briefly later within this chapter (1.4).

### 1.2 – “Entrepreneurs”?

There is a significant debate over the terminology used to refer to those who seek out an income in the “gig economy” – this debate stems largely from the legal implications of classifying somebody as a freelancer, worker or employee (Crouch, 2019). Scholars such as Woodcock and Graham (2020), who look specifically at labour based platforms, take a clear position in describing people using platforms such as Uber and Deliveroo as workers. At the time of writing (March 2021), the UK Supreme Court has upheld a decision that Uber drivers are workers, against the counter arguments of the platform, and therefore subject to the additional rights that workers are entitled to receive – such as a minimum wage and holiday pay. While Uber contests that it has changed its relationship with drivers



over recent years, which it believes makes the ruling that related to a case from 2016 inapplicable to current drivers, it remains to be seen what the practical outcome will be for current drivers. Something that became apparent during my own research with Uber drivers was a level of confusion over what different these different statuses – freelancer, worker and employee – actually meant in practice. Some of the drivers that I spoke to were concerned that recognition as workers would mean they would be forced to surrender the flexibility of the job; leading them to take a stand against other drivers who were pushing for this type of recognition. As the Supreme Court has ruled that Uber drivers are *already* workers, the discussion over flexibility is less related to a driver's classification than it is to the platform's decisions and how they choose to operate.

The terminology of the “entrepreneur” has ascribed itself in many marketing and promotional discourses around the “gig economy” (Ravenelle, 2019). The terminology evokes the image of somebody independently establishing a business and operating on their own terms. This is an image that scholars of the “gig economy” have been keen to contest due to the reality of workers who have limited freedoms and opportunities, with their actions largely mandated by the platforms for which they work (Ravenelle, 2019; Rosenblat, 2018; Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017; Woodcock & Graham, 2020).

An important consideration for this study is the distinction between those who put their labour to work in the “gig economy” and those who rent out their capital – which presents further terminology problems of its own. The terminology of the “worker”, adopted by Woodcock and Graham (2020) in relation to labour based platforms, offers limited potential when attention is turned to those using platforms such as AirBnB – where the focus becomes less about working and supplying labour than about renting a property. The point being made is that there is a distinction between capital and labour platforms – and while users of the latter might accurately be described as workers, the former are often closer to rentier capitalists. This thesis will draw out this difference in great detail as the findings of the study are introduced – I will argue that classed divisions between capital and labour are extremely important within the “gig economy”.

Within the text I will utilise the quoted marketing terminology of “entrepreneur(s)” as a shorthand collective term for anybody within this study who is seeking an income, through capital or labour, as a rentier capitalist or a worker, from a platform – this is not an acceptance of the term as legitimate, my argument is that it is not an accurate descriptor at all, but rather a way of saving the debate until such a time as it can be drawn out in greater detail within the text. Later on, I will fully expand upon

the range and types of work and rentier practices I have found within what platforms have optimistically described as “entrepreneurship”.

### 1.3 – Trendy terminology

The “gig economy” itself is another contested term among scholars, as will be discussed more thoroughly in the following chapter. It has, however, found its way into popular discourse. Google Trends is a tool that provides insights into how often a term has been searched for using the Google search engine. In September 2016 when this research project began, the term “gig economy” had just 6 percent of the searches that it received at its current peak, occurring more recently in March of 2020. Intriguingly, within the United States (U.S.) the term receives its highest proportion of searches from within the District of Columbia (D.C.), the legislative hub of the country. California on the other hand, while being the corporate home of many of the platforms which fall under the term, has around half the proportional share of “gig economy” searches when compared to D.C. In contrast, the term “sharing economy”, which has often been used to refer to similar or even the same platforms as those within the “gig economy” has actually become less popular over recent years – achieving its search term peak in March of 2016 and more recently falling to just 49 percent in the same month of 2020. Once again, the term received its highest proportion of U.S. searches within D.C.

In the second chapter, I will discuss these terms in detail and relate them to the body of literature which has emerged over recent years in an attempt to explain them. I will show how the term “sharing economy” has fallen out of favour as it becomes increasingly apparent that there is not much actual sharing taking place within an economy heavily focused on economic transaction and exchange. I will also present literature that is highly critical of the precarious labour underpinning the “gig economy”, which might understandably make it a subject of interest for those with a legislative attention – and also a term less appealing to the corporations which have been defined by it. I will show how many of the key attributes which define this “new” economy are actually part of wider trends towards worker precarity and towards surveillance capitalism. While the “gig economy” is the object of this study, I will argue that it is a colloquial term rather than a scholarly one.

There is an understanding in public discourse of the trendy “gig economy” or “sharing economy” (Schor, 2014), but when we try to unpack what these terms actually mean conceptually, it starts to fall apart. What this study focuses on, to put it in more accountable language, is a sub-section of the digital platform economy wherein labour and capital are matched to people requiring services or products through market-making platforms – which has colloquially been referred to as the “gig economy” or “sharing economy”.

#### 1.4 – Methodological approach

Methodologically, this thesis employs in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with 38 platform users who live or work within the Greater London Area. I will briefly introduce the sampling, interview and analysis approach that this project utilises here, as a way of introducing the more thorough discussion provided in the third chapter.

##### 1.4.1 – Sampling

These platforms were chosen because they showcase a variety of classed subjectivities – AirBnB hosts may, at the extreme, be using the platform to gain rents on their properties (forms of capital and wealth). Amazon Flex and Uber, on the other hand, are more about labour – and as it emerged through the process of this thesis, Uber drivers are often tied into debt and financial obligations. These platforms, therefore, show a range of “entrepreneurs” from different class positions within a capital-labour divide. Within each platform, sampling aimed to show further class diversity, to the extent that this is possible within platforms which may appeal to subjects from different class backgrounds. “Entrepreneurs” on AirBnB were mostly rentier capitalists, earning an income from renting out property – sometimes barely providing any labour at all; but there were also hosts who did not own the property that they were listing on the platform, they often laboured extensively to make sure that the property was ready for guests each night and relied upon the money to make ends meet. Within Uber, there were highly indebted drivers who were struggling to repay their debts each week while earning enough to survive – but there was also a driver who simply drove as a way to keep busy and earn a little extra money during his retirement. This project captures these ranges of class experiences that are positioned by capital, labour and debt.

##### 1.4.2 – Interviews and analysis

All participants within this study are anonymised and any names that appear throughout this thesis are pseudonyms. Interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed, inductively seeking out forms of capital: economic, cultural and social, which appeared to be important to “entrepreneurs” in their use of the platforms. At the point of interview, this was led by a series of questions asking about the “entrepreneurs” educational and work history, their home ownership status, any other forms of income they have access to, and how they might utilise different assets and skills in their engagement with the platform in question. Overall, this approach is intended to collect a wide perspective of the class position of the subject, and how this relates to the platform that they are using. Labour is another important aspect to this project – understanding how much and the types of labour “entrepreneurs” provide; and also, if all of their labour is compensated. The role of debt largely emerged deductively

but proved extremely prominent among the majority of Uber drivers in this study – there was some scope for this in the pre-interview questionnaire which specifically asked Uber and Flex drivers if their car is owned outright, rented, leased, or bought through a credit scheme. Flexibility in the interview guide allowed for this to be discussed in detail. Another difference that emerged deductively was the striking difference between competitive and non-competitive platforms in terms of how forms of capital, and “entrepreneurial” subjects themselves, come to be valued. A more complete discussion of the interviews and analysis is provided in the methodology chapter (3) – for now I want to generate a general understanding of what is being looked at within this thesis.

### 1.5 – Key findings

This thesis has five main findings which emerge from the analysis: Firstly, in relation to **the importance of debt** I will showcase a role for debt in the positioning of labour within the “gig economy”: I argue that some platforms use debt traps which actively produce precarity and worker dependency. Next, I argue **the importance of economic capital** in allowing some income-seekers to avoid obligations of labour and reduce their experiences of risk. Third, I argue **the importance of cultural and social capitals** for allowing privileged “entrepreneurs” to achieve an economic benefit on certain platforms which provide room for such forms of subjectivity to be economised. Fourth, I argue that **non-competitive platforms limit this form of subjectivity** by providing a marketplace which misrecognises their workers as solely providers of unskilled labour, denying any economic advantage to a more skilled worker or one who makes additional effort - maintaining their workforce as ephemeral and replaceable. Finally, based on these previous arguments, I argue that **these platforms widen economic inequalities** among “entrepreneurs” by economically privileging already valued forms of capital while deprivileging labour and the forms of capital that working class “entrepreneurs” have access to.

Through these empirical findings I argue that a singular theoretical approach to class in the “gig economy” is insufficient. Because platforms that fall under this title vary in terms of the mixture of labour, capital and debt put to work, and in their level of competitiveness between “entrepreneurs”, any singular theory of class can only explain a section of experiences. Instead, I bring together a selection of approaches. Specifically, Bourdieu’s (1986) notion of a capital accruing subject helps to explain the advantages that some “entrepreneurs” experience on platforms where they compete against each other for customers, such as AirBnB. Skeggs’ (2004b) complication of this approach, alongside Tyler’s (2013) work on abjection, are useful for understanding how other platforms, in this study those which were not competitive (Uber and Amazon Flex), position “entrepreneurs” as deficit and prime them for value extraction – building also upon the work of Mazzucato’s work with Shipman

(2014) as well as ideas of Marx (1887). I draw further upon Lazzarato's (2012) indebted subject who owes a future obligation of their labour to their creditor – this insight is valuable for considering how some platforms produce dependency and precarity through debt and financial products. I also draw briefly upon Piketty (2014, 2015, 2016) to understand the more general economic trends that are playing out between capital and labour. I argue that it is only by combining these approaches that we can hope to understand the vast range of classed experiences in the “gig economy”.

### 1.6 – Thesis structure

Following this introductory chapter, I offer a chapter discussing the theoretical frameworks to which this thesis speaks. This begins with an examination of the underlying terminology of the “gig” or “sharing” economy before discussing a range of common tendencies attributed to the platforms under this heading – such as precarious labour, datafied surveillance mechanisms and discussions of barriers to access. From these discussions I aim to firstly connect the “gig economy” to trends in capitalism more generally to underline my need to place the term in quotation marks due to its lack of clear distinction. Secondly, I pull out aspects of this body of theory that I find particularly useful to the analysis and arguments I present in this thesis – the work which I aim to meaningfully build upon. I summarise this chapter by speaking about my research questions in relation to the existing body of theory – showing how this project builds upon work that has come before.

Next, attention is turned to the methodological approach employed by the thesis. This starts with an epistemological reflection on what the project is really looking at: the underlying class relationships which position subjects – and a note on how the methodology attempts to approach this. The majority of this chapter deals with the practicalities of the research: The case studies are explained and justified in detail, along with the sampling strategies employed. The final realised sample is discussed, along with its strengths and limitations. The approach to analysis is also discussed, explained and justified.

There are three chapters focusing on analysis in this thesis. The first of these (chapter 4) deals exclusively with the first research question of the project that looks at the economic relations between capital, labour and debt. Here I bring forward data from all three of the platforms examined within the project to show how these provide different opportunities for subjects from different class positions while looking at the economic resources and obligations of the “entrepreneur”. I theorise a double articulation whereby both the potential opportunities offered the platform (being more labour or capital focused) and the class position of the “entrepreneur” (having more or less capital, or debt) combine to provide an economic positionality. I argue the importance of both economic capital and debt in the positioning of labour on platforms.

The following chapter of analysis (5) shifts focus to cultural and social capitals and how these might be utilised on platforms – starting to address the second research question of the project. This chapter employs Bourdieu's (1986) theorisation of the capital accruing subject but applies it specifically to the contexts of these platforms – understanding how they provide scope for the transference of cultural capitals into economic benefit. I argue that, once again, there are differences both at the level of the platform and the individual: some platforms provide more scope for these types of capital to achieve an economic benefit than others, and within this, subjects with more of these capitals see more of an advantage. Those without the right forms of capital fall behind. I further argue that these capitals can reduce necessities for labour time. Where this theorisation holds on competitive market platforms, the “entrepreneur” with the right forms of capital is able to leverage them meaningfully for economic advantage. The individual, therefore, retains some sense of socio-economic power arising from an agency over their outcome. For the most part I use chapter 5 to address competitive market platforms, where these forms of capital allow “entrepreneurs” to stand out through a rating and review system – contrasting chapter 6 where I look at non-competitive market platforms where rating and review systems take a disciplinary approach and provide no economic advantage to the “entrepreneur”.

The final chapter of analysis (6) addresses the same research question from a slightly different perspective. While the previous chapter dealt with “entrepreneurs” who achieved Bourdieu's (1986) subjectivity, being able to convert their cultural and social forms of capital into advantageous economic outcomes, this chapter deals with those who are not able to do so. This includes instances where the platform itself limits the possibilities of the “entrepreneur” in this regard by denying them possibilities for this type of individualised subjectivity – specifically, I argue that this is done through the way the platform is structured as a non-competitive market. I therefore argue that some platforms reduce the possibility for capital-based income to be realised by misrecognising the “entrepreneur” as an unskilled provider of labour. What I argue is that the “entrepreneurs” are not as unskilled as the platform might suggest, and often have skills (forms of cultural capital) that aid in their ability to provide high levels of customer service, but that the additional value produced by these actions is entirely absorbed by the platform. In these instances, “entrepreneurs” may receive high ratings, but these exist within rating systems that have no ability to increase their income potential. I therefore use theoretical approaches from Skeggs (2004b) which help construct an understanding of class closer to that of Marx's (1887) ideas first put forward in 1867, where power is articulated less clearly between individuals, instead being framed on broader scale between collectives (the “entrepreneurs”

and the platform). In these instances, the “entrepreneurs” are systemically devalued as a means of exploitation.

I then come to conclusions (in chapter 7), to summarise and connect the arguments that I have made throughout the thesis – showing how I have addressed both the research questions and existing literature through the research I have presented. I address this in relation to the wider question of inequality also – linking together findings that collectively show a devaluing of labour and a valuing of certain capitals on these platforms that may serve to widen socio-economic gaps more generally. I talk about the implications of the thesis, especially in relation to how we theorise the “gig economy” going forward, and the need for further research to build upon particular aspects of what I present here.

Overall, this thesis contributes to literature on the “gig economy” by offering clarity in relation to how a broad range of Neo-Marxist theoretical approaches to contemporary capitalism map onto platforms. By going beyond a perspective that looks at labour exploitation in isolation, by contextualising it within understandings of a subject’s capitals and debt, this thesis shows how labour exploitation is not a uniform phenomenon on these platforms. Instead, it is highly contextualised within complex capitalist relations based around dependency, subjectivity, competition and monopoly.

## 2 – Theorising class in the “gig economy”

This chapter provides a discussion of the theoretical framework that this project builds upon. It is worth noting that when this research project began a large section of the work cited here in relation to the “gig economy” had not yet been published – this is still an emergent subject of research. Some of the key works of scholarship that I draw upon, such as Ravenelle (2019), Woodcock and Graham (2020) and Rosenblat (2018), emerged after the fieldwork had concluded and therefore did not influence the research design - but nonetheless, proved extremely beneficial to the analysis that I provide within this thesis.

This chapter will be structured as follows: I will begin by delving into the debates that exist over the very terminology that we use to talk about the “gig”, “sharing” or “platform” economies. I try to deal with the ambiguity embedded within these terms to understand the limits of what this project speaks to. In doing so, I also offer some broad definitional insights into what is actually meant when we refer to, for instance, the “gig economy”. Some attention is also given to how these terms transcend the boundaries between academic and marketing discourses – and how often, rather than being a scholarly categorisation, platforms simply associate themselves with the trendy language of these emergent economies. Through this discussion I situate this projects object of study not as something entirely distinct from modern capitalism, as naming in popular culture might suggest – but rather a range of market platforms which have been colloquially distinguished.

Afterwards, I will discuss a number of key themes that emerge from the literature on these platforms. These are discussions of symptomatic features of the “gig economy”, such as low barriers to access, high levels of individualised risk, algorithmic surveillance and control. The main purpose of these sections will be linking these ideas to the concept of class – which will serve as the background for this project. I will also show that the distinctiveness of these platforms is often overstated when compared to pre-existing movements in capitalism where algorithmic surveillance and individualisation of risk are becoming more common overall.

I then turn attention to the wider body of research on class and subjectivity. I introduce Bourdieu’s (1986) theorisation of capital accruing subjectivity as a key basis for class analysis that I will employ – and then critiques of this offered by Skeggs (2004b) which I develop throughout my thesis to show how cultural and social capitals play a complex role across the “gig economy”. Finally, towards the end of this chapter I setup how I wish to address the existing literature through this research project – including the presentation of the key research questions and a discussion of how these connect to existing theory.



## 2.1 – Defining the “gig economy”

To begin with, it is useful to define the arena of focus for this thesis. While the “gig economy” is something that ‘everybody is talking about’ (Woodcock & Graham, 2020, p. 1), there is an immediately terminology problem. The vocabularies of a “gig economy”, “sharing economy”, “platform economy” and even “matchmaker economy” have often been used interchangeably. These terms have been applied in reference to a wide range of emergent forms of income-seeking that utilise digital platforms to match people with short shifts of work (“gigs”) or other opportunities to earn an income. It has been pointed out that there is a distinct lack of consensus on what these terms mean (Sundararajan, 2016) and that ‘definitions of the field vary and often seem arbitrary’ (Ravenelle, 2019, p. 26). In this section I will try to deal with some of this ambiguity and layout a groundwork of understanding that emerges from the literature.

### 2.1.1 – A general definition

Putting the challenge of naming aside briefly, what are these platforms? This is a question that many scholars have offered insights on. Ravenelle broadly explains that this economy ‘encompasses everything from the multibillion-dollar companies such as AirBnB (room rental) and Uber (on-call taxi service) to free durable-goods-sharing sites such as Neighbourgoods’ (2019, p. 26). This points towards the wide scope of what has been incorporated within these terminologies – but offers little insight into how they have come to be grouped together. So, what is it that unites them?

Schor and Attwood-Charles (2017) have been more specific to focus on the platforms’ technological function to claim that they ‘use sophisticated software to organise workers and asset holders, who provide the actual services to consumers, using crowdsourced rating and reputational data to facilitate stranger exchange’ – this technological focus occurs multiple times throughout the literature, with mentions of platforms serving as the digital matchmaker between economic parties (Evans & Schmalensee, 2016). In addition, these platforms are often referred to as being “lean” (Srnicsek, 2017) – a terminology that points to corporations that tend to have few physically owned assets or customer-facing employees.

Instead, they operate with a focus on providing a market matching service, often utilising high unemployment rates and taking advantage of an increasingly digital world which allows for platforms based on cloud architecture to sustain a high scalability factor (Schor, 2017; Srnicsek, 2017). These platforms become increasingly popular due to their low-cost advantage for consumers (Balck & Cracau, 2015) and potential for workers to earn an quick income (Schor, 2015). Network effects cause the

value of the platforms to increase as more users engage; these effects result in these platforms tending towards monopoly (Evans & Schmalensee, 2016) – this means that both consumers and “entrepreneurs” often end up gravitating towards dominant platforms through a lack of alternative platforms that have an adequate market share.

So, in brief: the “gig economy” contains a wide range of digital platforms run by lean corporations, serving as market matchmakers between those with labour or assets to provide and those with a demand. Because of their lean model, cloud-based infrastructure and susceptibility to network effects they tend to grow rapidly and quickly monopolise. But this definition is incomplete – later in this chapter I will discuss how they also tend to share a focus on low barriers to access (2.2), precarious labour (2.3) and datafied surveillance (2.4). Throughout this thesis I will complicate some of these ideas further – by looking at how barriers to access relate to class inequalities and key differences emerge between platforms and individuals who bring forward different resources – which has an effect on how labour is positioned. Likewise, I argue that datafied surveillance means different things across platforms where ratings and reviews offer dissimilar positioning of the subject. On some non-competitive platforms this surveillance is only disciplinary – on others it provides opportunities for economic advantage through the recognition of capitals where “entrepreneurs” can competitively set themselves apart.

### 2.1.2 – Naming

This sector as a whole has been referred to as the “sharing economy” based on its peer-to-peer nature and the possibility of reduced consumption through the sharing of assets (Sundararajan, 2016). Along a similar vein, others have referred to it as the “matchmaker economy” (Evans & Schmalensee, 2016), focusing on how the apps bring together two client bases – the people with the service or capital, and their customers. However, these sharing terminologies have been widely critiqued for masking the underlying economic nature of transactions undertaken by many of the for-profit platforms available (Ravenelle, 2017; Schor, 2017; Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017). As Woodcock and Graham note of the “sharing economy”, this is a term ‘that sounds very optimistic in light of the evidence that followed’ (2020, p. 11). The economic arrangements of many dominant platforms challenge the terminology of “sharing” – for instance, ‘an AirBnB host isn’t so much “sharing” her home or “hosting guests” as she is renting her home out’ (Ravenelle, 2019, p. 29). The term has further been critiqued for its conceptual vagueness – as Schor argues:

coming up with a solid definition of the sharing economy that reflects common usage is nearly impossible. There is great diversity among activities as well as baffling boundaries drawn by

participants ... self-definition by the platforms and the press defines who is in and who is out (2014).

Because the terminology of the “sharing economy” is often constructed through marketing discourses as a self-defining process, rather than through external academic assessments, it becomes unclear if the term can be used in any convincing way to group platforms together conceptually. As Gibbings and Taylor’s study of Ubers arrival in Winnipeg demonstrates, there is a symbolic value attached to these emergent economies. As they describe, Uber is held up as an ‘icon of innovation ... key to the future of cities’ (2019, p. 575). For this reason, there is a prestige in the discourse of the “gig” and “sharing” economies that marketing departments may be eager to adopt. As Crouch (2019) expands, it is a central strategy of these platforms to define themselves at the cutting edge of modernity, something exceptional and new, so that opposition to them can be framed as opposition to progress more generally. The core of these platforms, however, is a more widely known form of capitalist exploitation.

Another popular vernacular is that of the “gig economy”. As Woodcock and Graham explain, ‘the “gig” in the term “gig economy” refers back to the short-term arrangements typical of a musical event ... this is of course no guarantee that they will get to perform regularly’ (2020, p. 3). Unlike the terminology of the “sharing economy”, which appears in ways that focus on the equitable sharing of assets (Sundararajan, 2016), “gig economy” brings a focus to labour. Woodcock and Graham (2020) further discuss how the “gig economy” works around a relationship in which one person sells their time to another. The labourer transfers their labour power (the capacity to work) to the owner of capital.

This distinction between labour and capital is theoretically important in ways that exceed terminology but reflect back upon the language that we use to describe these platforms (where “gig” has attached itself to the more labour-focused platforms and “sharing” has attached to those which utilise assets and capital). The fact that some platform users are simply renting out their assets, such as AirBnB hosts who contract out the management of multiple properties that they own, rather than labouring themselves, is why I choose to utilise the ideologically loaded term of “entrepreneur”, rather than “worker”, in this thesis. The former allows an inclusion those who don’t actually do any work for the income that they obtain from the “gig economy”.

As an alternate interjection to the understanding developed thus far, Ravenelle does not distinguish between “sharing” and “gig” economies based on an asset/labour division, instead she argues that

more generally that “sharing economy” is ‘a collection of app-based technologies that focus on the lending/renting of assets or services either for profit or for a higher good’ (2019, p. 31) – the use of “services” here implies that labour is shared in a similar manner to assets. Instead she appears to use “gig” to refer to platforms which have a focus on short-term income opportunities – therefore, ‘while not all aspects of the sharing economy are part of the gig economy, platform based gig-economy services fall under the sharing economy heading’ (2019, p. 31). Ravenelle satisfies this by using the terms interchangeably to refer to companies that she considers to be operating platforms that are simultaneously both “sharing” (exchanging assets or services) and “gig” (short duration) platforms.

A more general term is that of the “platform economy” or, indeed “platform capitalism” – the latter being a language that Srnicek utilises to bring attention to the ‘economic context and the imperatives of a capitalist system’ (2017, p. 2). Talking about platforms allows researchers to overcome some of the pitfalls associated with the “gig” and “sharing” labels by bringing focus to the one unambiguous uniting feature: the utilisation of a digital platform. Hill (2015) argues that the dominant feature of these platforms is the use of digital technologies to link buyers and sellers of good, labour or services. Srnicek offers a similar general definition of the platforms that he refers to, arguing that: At the most general level, platforms are digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact, positioning themselves as intermediaries (2017). Unfortunately, the terminology labyrinth does not find an absolute resolution here for the purposes of those wishing to look at the “gig” and “sharing” economies, because while they can be fitted into the wider and more conceptually clear definition of the platform economy - This use of “platform” goes beyond what we would usually include in studies of the “gig” or “sharing” economies – Srnicek provides examples of Google and even Microsoft’s Windows operating system. Therefore, when we say “gig” or “sharing” economy we might be referring to a sub-section of a wider movement towards “platform capitalism”. A question therefore remains over how we might convincingly distinguish platforms such as Uber and AirBnB that appear in popular discourse as self-evident case-based definitions of the “gig” or “sharing” economy.

Thus far, this thesis has solely dealt with these terminologies through quotation marks – This is a deliberate attempt to draw distance from any scholarly claim to representing any of these particular terms in their entirety – or to take a position on the ambiguities that any of these terms might present. While platform capitalism has emerged as a scholarly category it is important to underline that this thesis is representing a sub-category of this economy – one which has often been colloquially, academically and/or self-referenced as the “gig” or “sharing” economy. The specific platforms that this study engages with (AirBnB, Uber and Amazon Flex) have each been named through a variety of

these vocabularies – but it could also be contested that on occasions these points of reference are less than perfect.

I argue that these naming systems are not always conceptually useful because the range of platforms that have been addressed by them often vary significantly – muting any attempt to draw clear conceptual lines. These companies are part of a movement towards platform capitalism, but they are often sporadic parts of this movement. While I draw upon vocabularies of the “gig” and “sharing” economy myself - utilising quotation marks - I do so colloquially without intending to locate an underlying conceptual category that exists in a way that is more meaningful than a reference point in popular discourse. As De Stefano argues, the “gig economy” ‘should not be seen as a parallel and watertight dimension of the labor market with structurally separated needs’ (2016, p. 472) – the distinction of these platforms is often colloquial rather than scholarly. In the following sections of this chapter I highlight a range of features which are identified as common characteristics of the “gig” or “sharing” economy, but it is notable that many of these, such as precarious labour and datafied surveillance, are commonplace across the entirety of modern capitalism – not just in these platforms which have developed their own discursive reference points.

## 2.2 – Access barriers

A theme that has been widely identified across the “gig economy” is its relatively low barriers to access for “entrepreneurs” wishing to earn money. Ravenelle (2019) splits this idea into two sections: skill barriers and capital investment barriers. She argues that there is variation between platforms as they tend to have different levels of barrier across these two axes. AirBnB, for instance, might have a high barrier to entry in the form of investment capital – the host needing to have a property with surplus living space in order to earn an income from the platform. Other platforms do not present such barriers; as Woodcock and Graham discuss, ‘many platforms operate with limited barriers to entry for workers, in part because of the relatively low levels of formal training needed for workers to engage in the job’ (Woodcock & Graham, 2020, p. 67). But I would argue that this approach can be nuanced in a number of ways. Firstly, capital barriers to access may be overcome through financing and credit products (which allows access but may also have detrimental impacts). Secondly, individuals bring in different levels of resources when they use a platform – not all “entrepreneurs” on the same platform have an equal starting point (either in economic, social or cultural capitals). Third, often these perspectives of low skill barriers rely upon a devaluation of working-class skillsets, related to a history of class exploitation. These are three of the complications I want to highlight to allow for a more comprehensive class analysis of these platforms – the first two of these I expand upon in the following sections while the third is discussed later in this chapter.

### 2.2.1 – Using debt to gain access

While it has been pointed out that labour-focused platforms ‘often create a lower barrier to entry for work, ... this does not mean that workers start out on an equal playing field’ (Ticona, Mateescu, & Rosenblat, 2018, p. 53). One aspect of this that I particularly want to draw attention to is the common relationship of debt that Uber drivers enter into. Because Uber’s rules often mean that drivers are required to have relatively new cars which meet particular requirements (Ravenelle, 2019), many drivers are forced to obtain new cars using credit or finance options. More concerning, Uber themselves have been acting as a credit broker and generating revenue from its drivers who take on debt. Ravenelle (2019) discusses Uber’s partnership with Santander Bank to offer sub-prime lending to drivers that trapped them into an obligation to continue working for the platform – which she relates to indentured servitude. Uber’s credit brokering has taken multiple forms in different countries. The specific service described above by Ravenelle, which operated in the United States, was halted briefly in 2015 but then resurfaced less than a year later. Currently, in the United Kingdom Uber is brokering car financing through its subsidiary company Xuberance Limited, trading as “Partner Point”. This financing arrangement complicates access barriers to access significantly – while the barrier might at first appear low with sub-prime finance options enabling “entrepreneurs” quick access to appropriate vehicles, it comes with the subsequent cost of what appears to resemble indentured servitude. I address the importance of debt in my response to the first research question of this project, provided in chapter 4.

### 2.2.2 – Entry point inequalities

While the traditional job market provides a more sophisticated gatekeeping service, “gig economy” platforms allow a wider variety of “entrepreneurs” access to the marketplace and begin offering their labour, skills and assets. However, this barrier to entry is simply a starting point to an “entrepreneur’s” experience on the platform. As Schor (2017) points out, more research is needed to determine if people with differing levels of income or educational attainment generate different outcomes from the use of gig economy platforms. This thesis offers a response to this requirement by bringing the focus to wider conceptualisations of class. Later in this chapter (2.6) I offer a conceptualisation of capital accruing subjectivity provided by Bourdieu (1986) which I will utilise throughout the thesis to aid in an analysis of unequal experiences within the “gig economy” based upon class. Rather than speaking of capital investment and skill barriers, as Ravenelle (2019) does, I utilise Bourdieu’s theorisation of capitals to offer a more diverse understanding of economic subjectivity; this includes a full range of economic capitals and skillsets (which Bourdieu refers to as forms of cultural capitals). Overall, I want to shift from simply seeing entry point barriers – which can sometimes be overcome

with financial products (see 2.2.1) – to instead look at entry point inequalities which take into account the wider class positioning of the “entrepreneurial” subject.

### 2.3 – Precarious labour

The precarity associated with working in the “gig economy” has attracted a wide range of scholarly attention. Woodcock and Graham (2020) note that, despite being framed as independent contractors, workers in the gig economy are highly alienated from their labour and suffer from extremely low rates of pay. In an increasingly competitive international market ‘many workers have no choice but to accept whatever work they can find’ (2020, p. 92). This is not an issue that is unique to the “gig economy”; There is a significant stand of scholarship stemming from Marx (1887) that poses a challenge to the mythology that a worker is *free* to exchange their labour (Woodcock & Graham, 2020) – instead they are ‘obliged to do so in order to subsist’ (Huws, 2014, p. 152). Rather than being something entirely new about these platforms, the precarity of labour in the “gig economy” is part of a larger downwards harmonization of labour rights and a reduction in the labour share of income that has been taking place for some time (Crouch, 2019). Piketty (2014) provides data showing that, since the 1970s, capital’s share of income has been increasing while labour’s share of income has decreased in Britain. This indicates that more generally within the economy, owners of capital are benefiting to a greater degree from economic growth than waged labourers.

In this thesis, I take the debates over precarious labour further by framing the provision of labour against the “entrepreneur’s” debt and capital – to understand how labour is positioned within the “gig economy” by the subject’s class position. In the following section (2.3.1) I bring forward a more detailed discussion of debt and, in particular, Lazzarato’s (2012) theorisation of debt as an obligation on future labour. Then (in 2.3.2) I talk about how labour is positioned by forms of capital – predominantly utilising Bourdieu’s (1986) theorisation of the capital accruing subject.

#### 2.3.1 – Positioned by debt

Hill describes how Uber is able to ‘suddenly and unilaterally change the drivers split with the company of the income from each ride, as well as the rate charged to passengers ... [Uber] has shown no willingness to dialogue, much less negotiate, with drivers’ (2015, p. 87). This evidence is not in keeping with the idea of an agentic worker who is free to remove their labour if the company does not treat them fairly. As discussed earlier (section 2.2.1) many Uber drivers enter into financial arrangements which limit their ability to move freely in and out of their arrangements with the company, further negating the mythology of agentic providers of labour.

Debt is not a new economic occurrence – In Graeber’s (2014) anthropological history of debt he argues that it both precedes and forms the basis of all currency. However, shifts towards neoliberal financialisation since the 1970s have produced an acceleration of a debt economy; Lazzarato (2015) notes that there has been a restructuring of class relationships from the division between capitalists and wage-earners towards debtors and creditors. The difference between the two relationships, however, is not clear cut. As Harvey (2017, p. 23) argues, debts are a claim on a future value production that depends upon the provision of labour. In fact, Lazzarato (2012, 2015), Graeber (2014) and Harvey (2017) agree that debt is a way to force the labouring subject into capitalist productivity. This disciplinary power is explained by Lazzarato, who argues that by ‘training the governed to “promise” (to honour their debt), capitalism exercises “control over the future”, since debt obligations allow one to foresee, calculate, measure and establish equivalences between current and future behaviour’ (2012, p. 46). On a macroeconomic level, therefore, high levels of debt among the working class allows capitalism to reliably guarantee a supply of labour into the future because the debtors are under a requirement to continue selling their labour power on the market to whichever capitalist will offer them work.

But there is also a more direct function of debt borne out through the idea of indentured servitude. Such a relationship exists when the debtor and the capitalist are a combined entity, as are the labourer and debtor – in these instances the debtor owes their labour directly to their creditor. The difference between indentured servitude and an indebted labourer is the mobility of the debtor’s labour power. In indentured servitude, the labourer is no longer able to provide their labour elsewhere, to another capitalist, to pay their debts. Instead, they become bound to a particular capitalist through a relationship of debt. As Graeber (2014) explains, indentured service has traditionally been a form of contract labour where workers were bound into providing their labour for long periods of time, often years, as a way to repay a debt. This form of contract is illegal now across much of the world, and is specifically delegitimised by article four of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (The United Nations, 1948) – the idea of contractually forcing a labourer to provide service to any particular creditor is unenforceable.

In discussing the phenomena of drivers getting their cars through sub-prime leases and lending agreements, Rosenblat refers to a ‘debt-to-work pipeline’ (2018, p. 65), while Ravenelle (2019) goes somewhat further to make a passing reference to indentured servitude. But neither really expand upon what these debt relationships really mean. The role that financial obligations play in positioning “gig economy” labour remains undertheorised. Debt has a long history of mirroring class inequalities,



and reinforcing them as markers of symbolic difference when the indebted subject is seen as not only economically but also morally lacking (Graeber, 2014) – this ties in to arguments I will make later about abjection and how precarious labourers often get symbolically positioned as undeserving of rights.

### 2.3.2 – Positioned by capital

While there is relatively extensive discussion of labour exploitation in the “gig economy” literature – something that is less discussed is the role of capital and the specific relations between capital and labour that explain a range of experienced outcomes. The Marxist tradition has generally argued that inequalities stem out from ‘the class struggle between capital and labour’ (Harvey, 2010, p. 56). Marx argues, in relation to productive capitalism, that capital accumulation occurs when a capitalist ‘extracts unpaid labour directly from the labourers, and fixes it in commodities’ (1887, p. 400). The capitalist is then able to sell these commodities and convert the money gained into capital. The surplus value extracted from the labourer therefore accumulates in the form of capital owned by the capitalist. Recently, economists have used extensive international data sets to map the empirical importance resonating out of ‘the unequal ownership of capital’ (Piketty, 2015, p. 26); and though this, show how capital accumulates over time as its rate of returns on capital exceeds the rate of growth in the economy (2014). Data presented and analysed by Piketty (2014, 2015, 2016) has indicated that, at the national level, capital’s share of income has significantly risen throughout the final quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while also concentrating to a smaller group of capitalist elites. I argue throughout this thesis that the role of capital is undertheorised in relation to the “gig economy”. This project aims to draw further attention to capital and the relationship that exists between capital and labour in the “gig economy” in order to contextualise platform work within these wider debates on inequality.

### 2.4 – Surveillance and control

A key theme of the “gig economy” that emerges from the literature is that of surveillance as a means of control. Woodcock and Graham address the digital legibility of “gig work” – pointing back to its roots in managerial control: They discuss how ‘managers wanted to ensure they got the most out of buying a worker’s time’ (2020, p. 23) but often struggled to do so effectively, especially in cases where workers might work inefficiently because of their bad working conditions or low compensation. Therefore, there was a movement towards ‘trying to make the work legible, making it visible so it could be understood by managers’ (2020, p. 24).

As with increasingly precarious labour, surveillance modes are becoming more commonplace across modern capitalism. Zuboff (2019) refers to this shift as a movement towards surveillance capitalism, a system of datafication as a means to exploitation, commodification and profit-making. Zuboff builds

upon the Marxist framework by offering eight varying definitions of surveillance capitalism that relate to the different mechanisms through which a datafied form of capitalism operates – covering a wide range of progressions within modernity. The type of surveillance capitalism that operates within the “gig economy” is just one part of Zuboff’s model – wherein it is possible to modify real-time actions in a ‘means of behaviour modification’ (2019, p. 293). This is an approach that has already been noted on platforms. Because of an oversupply of labour power, workers do everything in their power to avoid bad feedback, this includes agreeing to work extra hours, to provide extra deliverables to the client or even offer lower rates (Rosenblat, 2018; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Woodcock & Graham, 2020, p. 92).

In this thesis, I will argue that not all “gig economy” surveillance systems work in the same way. In particular, I argue that some appear to recognise perceptions of value within a competitive marketplace to allow customers to choose between providers (as I argue happens on AirBnB). This type of surveillance system encourages “entrepreneurs” to

“stand out” and “make a connection” ... to navigate the unspoken cultural norms that shape activity on these platforms ... [therefore] these platforms are structured around the assumption that workers will employ “self-branding” (Ticona et al., 2018, p. 26).

This phenomenon is something which I argue can be connected to the theory of a capital-accruing subjectivity offered by Bourdieu (1986) (discussed further below in section 2.6).

However, this self-branding initiative is not present in the same way on all platforms. In other parts of the “gig economy”, especially those which lack the same type of consumer choice (such as Uber), I argue that surveillance functions more as a simple disciplinary measure. Rosenblat and Stark (2016) argue that the consumers are encouraged embody the role of the manager themselves. In their study of Uber, they claim that passengers act as middle managers through their ratings. Importantly, they argue that this is part of a wider pattern where companies ‘create expectations about their service that workers must fulfil through the mediating power of the rating system’ (2016, p. 3772). As I will discuss in chapter 7, the rating and surveillance systems of Uber and Amazon Flex do not provide scope for drivers to set themselves apart in a competitive marketplace, but rather serve as an overhanging threat to their ability to earn an income if they do not score high enough. In this thesis I will draw these two modes of legibility apart and tie them to the underlying forms of class subjectivity produced by platforms.

There is also evidence that, as well as using customers as supervisors, the corporations that manage platforms also partake in more direct forms of surveillance. Ravenelle (2019), for instance, discusses how discussion forums for drivers are known to be lurking grounds for Uber staff. If Uber are secretly monitoring online driver spaces, generally built by and designed for drivers to discuss issues and problems that they face, then this poses important ethical questions. This also poses problems for Uber drivers who might be engaging in forms of labour organisation using these spaces.

## 2.5 – Risk and protection

Risk is a concept that has been widely discussed in academic literature. One of the most routinely cited sources comes from Beck's (1992) arguments put forward in *Risk Society*. Beck argues that 'poverty attracts an unfortunate abundance of risks. By contrast, the wealthy (in income, power or education) can purchase safety and freedom from risk' (1992, p. 35)– but the more recent literature from the "gig economy" points to risk being less about "misfortune" for the impoverished than a direct trading of risk from the wealthy to the poor. As Ravenelle (2019) argues, Uber has not entirely ignored worker risks – it's just that any costs associated with protecting drivers passed to the workers themselves. Not only are the day to day risks (such as unexpected costs) passed to "entrepreneurs", but due to their status as independent contractors, they risk being excluded from existing labour protections (De Stefano, 2016). Crouch (2019), however, highlights that these processes that Ravenelle and De Stefano describe are not unique facets of what we call the "gig economy", instead they are found more generally in the economy as neoliberal policy and practice changes actively shift risks to the most vulnerable – it is therefore important to avoid "gig economy" exceptionalism. The process of risks being forced by the powerful onto the less powerful has an established tradition.

In this thesis, I put forward an approach to risk that requires a consideration of an "entrepreneur's" labour, capital and debt – to show how each of these three concepts relates to their experiences of risk. While many make (usually accurate) generalisations that 'working in the so-called sharing economy both increases the risk that workers will get hurt on the job and forces them to assume sole financial responsibility for dealing with any such injuries to themselves or their property' (Ravenelle, 2019, p. 109) – I want to show in more detail how these risks relate to the classed positionality of the "entrepreneur". Risks are passed to "entrepreneurs" in the "gig economy", but they fall unequally – with some doing better than others – something that Ravenelle comes short of explaining. In this thesis, I argue that those with the least resources (and those with debt) face the more significant risks while those with capitals and resources are often able to escape it.

## 2.6 – Subjects of capital(ism)

So far in this chapter, I have focused predominantly on platforms and their attributes – while sometimes discussing how these interact with the “entrepreneurial” subject. Now I will develop this subject of capitalism in greater detail. Marx (1887) explores class as a way of understating power relationships between groups who occupy distinct economic positions within a society. For Marx, capitalists occupy a position that is maintained through the extraction of value from labourers’ socially necessary labour time. Labourers, while producing the value that the capitalists extract, are maintained in a subordinate position due to their lack of capital – for Marx, capital specifically referred to the means of production.

This division between value producers and value extractors has often been detrimentally blurred in modern neoclassical and neoliberal economics. Within these schemas, value extraction and rent seeking have been measured as if they were productive within national accounts in since the 1970s (see critical accounts by Mazzucato, 2019). This turn towards neoclassical and neoliberal economics as the orthodoxy blurs class relationships by seeing financial service workers and rentiers as being *more* productive than labourers simply because they receive higher sums of money. This irregularity occurs from a blurring of the separate concepts of value production and income – the result of this confluence being that high earners are seen as productive because of their high income, despite the real value of their earnings emerging from undercompensated productive labour elsewhere in the economy (Mazzucato, 2019; Mazzucato & Shipman, 2014).

This shift in discourse points towards a symbolic form of class power, where those whose income comes from exploitation, extraction and dispossession are able to legitimise their economic activities and shape economic discourse. This blurring of income sources shifts focus from the relational nature of class that Marxist theory describes (exploiter/exploited) to the ideological idea of an economy where everyone earning an income is equally positioned and where the methods of income generation become less discussed. This is part of a symbolic shift towards the idea of a “classless society”; Scholars such as Beck (1992) and Giddens (1984, 1991) have interpreted this discursive shift by rejecting traditional categorisations of class all together – shifting instead to an individualistic model of society where subjects are seen to be agentic and increasingly free to move around society. This approach has been critiqued by the likes of Skeggs (2004a) and Savage (2000) for its rejection of the underlying class processes that still shape society – exploitation, dispossession and rent seeking.

This thesis sets out to test the theorisations of capital accruing subjectivity put forward by Bourdieu (1986, 2013). Bourdieu (1986) builds upon Marx’s work by offering a view of classed subjectivity where

everyone is, to some extent, an owner of capital. Bourdieu's capital accruing subject departs from the economic subject of Marx, in part, by broadening the scope for what is considered capital. Bourdieu argues that labour accrues not only into traditional economic capital, but also into cultural and social capitals that attach to a subject through ownership and embodiment. For instance, Bourdieu sees skills as a form of capital – so a labour utilising a specialist skillset to earn an increased income can, in this theoretical construct, be seen as earning income from capital. This approach allows for an understanding of how complex income stratifications occur in modern capitalism by mapping an individual's forms of capital to their capacity to earn an income. It also links understandings of economic outcome to the cultural and social aspects of class, building upon the approach put forward by Weber (1964). What often gets lost in Bourdieuan approaches are the classed processes of exploitation, extraction and dispossession that were the focus of much Marxist analysis (as Skeggs (2015) discusses), and through this, the idea of classed groups who are collectively exploited or exploiting others. I will come back to these critiques later in this chapter and discuss their importance, but first I will lay out Bourdieu's model of subjectivity in more detail.

Cultural capital, for Bourdieu, builds up over time and takes three forms: the embodied state, the objectified state, and the institutionalised state. The embodied is that which has been internalised by the individual – 'in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body' (1986, p. 243) – a product of an individual's specific socialisations and experiences; this can also include skillsets that a subject has the capacity to call upon as well as mannerisms that allow the subject to get ahead in the economy. Objectified cultural capital can be physically obtained as 'cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.)' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243) – this broad list deals with objects that, through ownership or access, allow an individual to succeed economically. Then, finally, institutional cultural capital – which Bourdieu saw as a specific form of objectified cultural capital – 'confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). For instance, evidence shows that educational qualifications have an institutionally conferred assurance from the awarding institution, and discrepancies continue between individual institutions in the UK (Mike Savage, 2015; Wakeling & Savage, 2015). Meanwhile, social capital for Bourdieu refers to the social network resources of the individual, which they possess or have the access to utilise. This is demonstrated through largely institutionalised 'relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248).

Bourdieu (1986) borrows Marx's labour theory of value here, suggesting that all forms of capital originally emerge from labour power. As Skeggs emphasises: 'labour is the source of all value. Without

labour there is no capital as capital develops through primitive accumulation’ (2014, p. 8). Skills, for Bourdieu (1986), are the result of the labour time expended in learning, while social capital is the result of spending time networking and building connections – in these ways labour is producing value. However, capital also has the potential to accumulate when value does not stay with its producer – something that Marx (1887) discussed extensively in the form of labour exploitation. Others have built upon the Marxist framework to discuss other pathways to accumulation in greater detail, for example the roles of extraction (in the form of rents) which Mazzucato (2019) discusses, or inheritance (Piketty, 2014). These mechanisms, like exploitation, have the potential to expand inequalities by providing ways for value to accumulate through a relational tie – one person gets richer at the expense of others from whom they take value (who produce it through labour). While Bourdieu (1986, 2013) talks extensively about inheritance of capitals, he often overlooks exploitation and extraction (Skeggs, 2015).

The definition of capital that Bourdieu (1986) offers is broader than the one put forward by Marx (1887) not only in that it broadens focus beyond instantly convertible economic resources (by bringing in cultural and social capitals), but also in the economic sense. For Marx (1887) and the economic tradition more generally, there was a distinction between capital as the means of production and other economic elements such as income and wealth. Bourdieu’s model simplifies these nuances. But this simplification is also engaged with by economists when looking at inequality: Piketty uses the terms capital and wealth interchangeably, arguing that ‘capital in all its forms has always played a dual role, as both a store of value and a factor of production’ (Piketty, 2014, p. 48). Piketty’s approach to viewing them as alike in his analysis has been critiqued for its inability to distinguish between the different economic mechanisms of capital and wealth (Varoufakis, 2014). However, this study is not interested in separating the particular mechanisms (profit, rents, interest) that allow economic forms of capital to produce returns so much as how these are distributed and the realised experiences that “entrepreneurs” have when putting their capitals to work in the “gig economy”. Therefore, the broader conceptualisations of economic capital offered by Bourdieu and Piketty are utilised here.

Bourdieu (1986) argues that the most important advantage of all types of capital is the freeing up of time; this emerges from the ability that capital provides to derive greater economic benefit from labour time (Piketty (2014) suggests that some degree of labour is usually required in order to obtain economic returns from all forms capital, for instance, associated administrative duties with renting out a property). Bourdieu recognises that this not only has an immediate impact (less time spent earning the same amount of money), but also has a secondary impact as this acquired spare time can

be used to gain further advantage through additional capital accrual. Capital, therefore, reduces the dependency on labour time by allowing subjects to earn higher incomes – it is this aspect of capital accrual at the level of the subject that I argue has importance for how we frame labour in the “gig economy”.

Forms of capital, therefore, benefit a subject by allowing them to achieve a greater economic yield from their labour time, or even to potentially remove the requirement for labour in order to provide an income obtained solely from interest, profits and rents upon capital. This is one clear way in which Bourdieu’s form of capital is distinct from those posed by other social theorists; Putnam (1993), for instance, talks about social capital as a civic good within the collective society that benefits the potential of democracy. Instead, Bourdieu’s work keeps focus upon the individual as an economic subject who can gain *personal* economic benefit from their forms of capital. This approach allows for a closer analysis of interpersonal inequality by recognising the unequal distribution of resources within society and the potential for divisions to deepen between subjects. This core theoretical understanding also allows for analysis that branches away from the specific examples of capital that Bourdieu describes – capital in this sense is anything that exists as an accumulation of labour that can be utilised for economic advantage. As an extension, it is important to keep in mind that not everything is a form of capital within Bourdieu’s framework – only resources that can return economic benefit. There are cultural and social practices which fall outside of the potential for economisation (Skeggs, 2014).

Later in this chapter I will further lay out critiques of Bourdieu (1986) and the limits to what his theory of capital accruing subjectivity can offer us. Further on in this thesis, I will showcase these limits more specifically, indicating how capital accrual is superseded by exploitation in the data I present for some cases. I say this now to highlight an important point: While the aim of this thesis is to look at forms of capital in the “gig economy”, it does not mean that this approach works in the ways that Bourdieu (1986) describes in all cases. My ambition is, instead, to highlight where and how a theory of capital accrual might be useful as well as producing a more nuanced theoretical understanding of what occurs at its limits.

### 2.6.1 – Forms of capital in the “gig economy”

I discussed how Ravenelle (2019) talked about the importance of skills and capital investment in her findings. However, she did not offer a thorough conceptualisation of these or position them within a wider theoretical consideration of inequality. In the conceptualisation of capital accruing subjectivity offered by Bourdieu these can be seen as forms of embodied cultural capital and economic capital

respectively. But beyond being a barrier to access – how do forms of capital provide an economic advantage within the “gig economy”?

Sundararajan (2016) has argued optimistically that platforms have the potential to reduce inequality by giving a greater number of people access to methods of economic capital utilisation. Giving the example of Funding Circle, an investment-based platform, he argues that platforms could allow people to ‘experience the other side of the coin by making money through investing or owning rather than labouring’ (2016, p. 124). However, the idea of spare money for investment remains a challenge as levels of household debt are growing in the UK, both in low and middle income brackets (Henry et al., 2017) – it is unclear how Funding Circle could offer a benefit to those who do not already have money to invest using non-“gig economy” methods. Likewise, as Schor (2017) found AirBnB hosts earning vast amounts of money, but only those who owned a valuable property. There appears to be a divide in who has the ability to benefit from these platforms. It has, therefore, been argued by some that a new theoretical understanding is needed to determine how categories such as labour, profit and rent relate to platform economies (Bernhardt, 2014; Fuchs, 2017; Huws, 2014; Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017). As Schor (2017) points out, more research is needed to determine if people with differing levels of income or educational attainment generate different outcomes from the use of gig economy platforms.

However, rather than offering something entirely new I have aimed, in this chapter, to link understandings of the “gig economy” to more established theoretical frameworks which allow us ways to see both how and why some people get ahead while others fall behind. In this chapter I have been resistant towards “gig economy” exceptionalism – building upon the work of those such as Crouch (2019) who link these platforms to pre-existing trends towards reduced worker rights, increased exploitation and precarity. As discussed, the even the terminologies of “gig economy” and “sharing economy”, among others, are ambiguous, interpreted pluralistically and used as marking spin (Schor, 2014). I therefore look backwards, theoretically, to build upon Bourdieu’s theorisation of subjectivity to explore these types of question, to understand how individual “entrepreneurs” live out classed experiences in the “gig economy”. To investigate the range of different outcomes based on the capitals that “entrepreneurs” have access to – or, as I discuss in the following section, their lack of capital. I use these previous works as a basis to address the idea of capitals (and their relationship to labour) at a greater theoretical depth.



### 2.6.2 – The symbolic nature of capital

Capitalism relies upon a symbolic realisation of value in capital at the point of conversion. It is through symbolic processes, for instance, that the skills involved in certain types of labour are deemed more valuable than others; or that certain objects are seen as more prestigious than others and, therefore, worth more. As Bourdieu (2013, p. 246) notes, ‘the conversion rate between one sort of capital and another is fought over at all times and is therefore subject to endless fluctuations’. Forms of capital do not derive their exchange value as a neutral property, but rather through symbolic struggles. Bourdieu (2013) handles this through the concepts of symbolic capital and distinction: respectively answering the question of who has the power to define exchange value and how do they do it.

While symbolic capital is never defined at length by Bourdieu in the way that cultural and social capitals are, he does suggest that it is based around ‘a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability’ (2013, p. 291). There is often overlap in his work between symbolic capital and forms of cultural capital. Having a degree from a highly ranked university, for instance, might simultaneously be a form of institutional cultural capital and a marker of competence that constitutes symbolic capital. Beyond this, those who have highly regarded resources that might simultaneously have an exchange value (cultural capital, for instance) and work as a marker of competence (symbolic capital) would tend to bring about judgements of taste (distinctions) which reinforce the value of their own forms of capital, as it is in their own interest to do so.

Bourdieu (2013), at times, uses the terms symbolic capital and symbolic power as if they are interchangeable ideas – and it has been argued that symbolic capital is the basis of Bourdieu’s understanding of power (Skeggs, 2015). But the notion of symbolic capital requires more criticism here. There is a need to link together symbolic struggles with broader discourses that go beyond conceptualisations that are limited to individual subjectivity. Skeggs (2004b), for instance, links symbolic violence to broader themes of class, gender and race that cannot be contained within a theory of power limited to individual subjects as social actors – these forms of symbolic structuring are historically entrenched through colonialism, racism, sexism and a long running legitimisation of class exploitation. That is not to say that individuals aren’t the beneficiaries of symbolic power, just that it cannot be conceptualised in its entirety as if it were an individual’s possession that exists outside of these broader discourses. Likewise, it is critical to underline the importance of symbolic power for its real purpose: exploitation, extraction and dispossession of value. In departing from Marx (1887), Bourdieu (1986, 2013) often leaves behind the underlying nature of class as a relationship where one party gains through the loss of another. By delegitimising and devaluing the forms of capital

that a subordinate group has access to, dominant groups are able to extract value and labour from them – This might be referred to as abjection.

## 2.7 – Abjection

Related to theorisations of subjection, are those of abjection. Abjection is a state of exclusion from full subjectivity – the abjected individual is produced from systems of power which put a barrier in place to full realisation of subjectivity (Tyler, 2013). While Skeggs (2004b) does not use the terminology of abjection specifically, it appears to be close to what she is describing when she talks about how working-class individuals often get viewed as valueless when considered by Bourdieu's (1986) model of a capital accruing subject. Skeggs describes the working class as, 'those who cannot accrue value in themselves by dominant symbolic techniques' (Skeggs, 2004b, p. 91).

While Skeggs has distinguished her critique of Bourdieu away from Foucauldian ideas of subjectivity (see Skeggs, 2004b), it is worth acknowledging the Foucauldian nature of class disidentification (Skeggs, 1997) and the critique that she poses of the classed language adopted through modern scholars' utilisation of Bourdieu (Skeggs, 2015). In particular we can see how Foucault (2000, p. 331) allures to the nature of power struggles which take the form of a 'refusal of a scientific or administrative inquisition that determines who one is'. Skeggs argues throughout her corpus that working class struggles are struggles against being identified as valueless (see also Skeggs & Loveday, 2012). Skeggs provides us with a point of confluence between the languages of Bourdieu and Foucault by using the latter to reconsider the theorisations of social power suggested by the former, putting the emphasis back on broad symbolic identifications rather than the economised exchange-value language of Bourdieu that has been widely adopted by sociologists (See critiques by Fine 1999, 2001; 2000). However, Skeggs (2015) does not abandon the specifically Marxist roots of Bourdieu, instead she reaffirms them by placing the emphasis back on the ways in which broader symbolic judgements of value reproduce relations of exploitation and dispossession – verbs that tend to be lost in Bourdieuan (or indeed, Foucauldian) study.

As a result of this abjection, the individual is framed as disposable (Tyler, 2013). In the Bourdieuan (1986) model, this means that the person is not judged upon a range of capitals that are read as indicators of value – but instead reduced to a replaceable supply of labour. When presented in this way, the subject is primed for exploitation because they are denied the form of personhood where, in Bourdieu's model, they are able to set themselves apart as valuable within the market.

### 2.7.1 – Abjection in the “gig economy”

In this project I want to build upon Skeggs’ (2004b) critique of Bourdieu (1986) to understand how platform mechanisms might (re)produce these types of symbolic structuring. Some sense of abjection has already emerged within the previous section on precarious labour (2.3). For instance, workers in the “gig economy” are not usually considered employees and are subsequently denied the traditional rights of the employed subject - as Woodcock and Graham summarise, ‘evidence is pointing towards ... dangerous working conditions, one-sided contracts and a lack of employment protection’ (2020, p. 5). This appears to be a something of process of abjection from the traditional labouring subject who is afforded these basic forms of recognition as being someone who is more than replaceable labour – worthy of basic protections.

Importantly, I will take this further to understand how this form of abjection is linked to the rating and algorithmic management mechanisms of platforms. As discussed earlier in this chapter (2.4), I am presenting an argument that not all systems of surveillance are equal within the “gig economy” – and while some appear to recognise the value of a subject in competitive marketplaces where choice exists, others deny the “entrepreneur” the possibility of setting themselves apart in any meaningful way. As a result, the platform limits the subjectivity of the “entrepreneur” by preventing them from personally economising their forms of value. My argument here is not that these workers do not have value beyond their labour power, but rather, this value is exploited by the platform who retain any associated economic benefits by providing a system where all “entrepreneurs” are interchangeable. Because economic returns are denied to the “entrepreneur”, they do not realise the subjectivity discussed by Bourdieu (1986).

### 2.8 – Intersections

The concept of intersectionality was brought into common use by Crenshaw (1991) as a way of explaining how the impacts of multiple forms of inequality (such as class and race) can combine to produce specific instances of disparity. While this thesis places its conceptual focus around class, it is important to acknowledge that class always exists within intersectional context. As Skeggs argues:

The processes by which capitalists divided labour through difference and work is a complex race, gender and class issue. It is not a straightforward analysis of difference. It is a complex intersection of different forces that make and unmake value as they materialize on bodies in different spaces and time (2019, p. 32).

That is to say, we cannot ever take class to be something that exists outside of other subject markers which allow capitalism to prescribe various ideas of value (or lack of value) to a subject. While Skeggs’ (1997, 2004a) work has long underlined the fact that analysis of gender cannot exist without class and

vice-versa, Virdee additionally argues that there must be a movement to ‘wilfully entangle demands for economic justice with anti-racism and thereby embrace and demystify the differences inscribed into the collective body of the proletariat by capitalism’ (2019, p. 3). While a majority of focus is given to classed inequalities in this thesis, it is important to remember that it is never possible to fully disaggregate inequalities of class, race and gender (Crenshaw, 1991).

### 2.8.1 – Gender

A body of research on gender in the “gig economy” is emerging in recent years. Scholars have noted, for instance, that among Uber drivers there is an ‘extreme underrepresentation of women’ (Berger, Frey, Levin, & Danda, 2018, p. 7), this has been attributed to the fact that Uber driving is perceived as ‘entrepreneurial masculine labour’ (Ticona et al., 2018, p. 12). More generally, studies have shown that women tend to engage in less capital enhancing activities online when compared to their male counterparts (van Deursen & Helsper, 2017). However, women do not disappear entirely from the gig economy’s labour market. Instead, studies have found that they end up using gig economy platforms that more closely reflect traditional gendered work such as housekeeping (Churchill & Craig, 2019). Galperin finds in his study of Nubelo, now part of Freelancer.com (a geographically untethered platform), that:

gender stereotypes are particularly salient in online hiring because employers typically contract for short-term, relatively low-value jobs based on limited information about job applicants ... female candidates are less likely to be hired for male-typed jobs (e.g., software development) but more likely to be hired for female-typed jobs (e.g., writing and translation) than equally qualified male candidates (2019, p. 1).

What these trends suggest is that gender is influencing the perception of “entrepreneur’s” economic value – with evidence that the “gig economy” is (re)articulating a gendered division of labour. The theoretical implication appears to be close to one of abjection (section 2.6.1) – where the value of gendered subjectivities is being limited in particular ways. As Skeggs (2004a) argues, this type of gendered distinction emerges when characteristics are inscribed into certain bodies and articulated as a (mis)recognition of value – something which occurs both on gendered bodies and on raced bodies.

### 2.8.2 – Race

Many of the studies that have looked at race in the platform economy have focused on AirBnB due to the aspect of choice (in either choosing which host’s property or choosing to accept a guest). An experiment by Edelman et al. (2017) found that requests from AirBnB guests with distinctively African American names were 16 percent less likely to be accepted than identical guests with distinctively white names. In a study that looked at data for AirBnB hosts in San Francisco, Kakar et al. found that:

‘Asian and Hispanic hosts charge 8%-10% lower prices relative to their White counterparts on equivalent rental properties’ (2018, p. 25). Another study by Laouénan and Rathelot (2017) took a wider dataset of 400,000 properties in North America and Europe, consisting of 3,500,000 observations, and found an ethnic price gap within cities of 3.2%. The evidence therefore suggests that racial discrimination is taking place on AirBnB. This suggests that the racial inscription causes realised economic differences for hosts as perceptions of value become tied to bodies.

On the other hand, ‘anecdotal reports about Uber suggest that it may make hiring a cab easier for African Americans’ (Ravenelle, 2019, p. 35). Certainly, in London, private hire driving is a market that is already almost exclusively non-white (Transport for London, 2018) – but research is needed to understand these racial dynamics in greater detail. It is likely that the low barriers to access in Uber driving, especially with the rise in sub-prime lending (discussed earlier), make Uber driving a possible source of income for those excluded from more traditional labour markets due to language and educational barriers. However, it is important to remember the economic limitations and lack of worker rights provided to Uber drivers, which has been discussed throughout this chapter alongside the role of sub-prime lending. Inclusion within this type of labour market does not always equate to empowerment, but rather, as I will argue, to abjection.

## 2.9 – Summation and research questions

In this chapter, I have established links between aspects of the “gig economy” and classed subjectivities. One of the key points I have aimed to highlight is the under-theorised roles that forms of capital and debt might play in the experiences that “entrepreneurs” have. The term “gig economy” seems to reference platforms that focus more on labour (Woodcock & Graham, 2020) while “sharing economy” focuses more on assets and capital which can be rented out for short periods of time (see discussions of “sharing” by Ravenelle (2017, 2019) and others (Frenken & Schor, 2017; Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017; Schor, Fitzmaurice, Carfagna, Attwood-Charles, & Poteat, 2016). But, as I will show, there is an overlap between the two – and there are ambiguities across this terminology. For example, AirBnB hosts may be renting out their property but also do some work cleaning the property and arranging bookings. An Uber driver might be providing labour as their main function, but they also rely upon the capital asset of a car. Are these “entrepreneurs” labouring workers or rentier capitalists? This is complicated further still by the role of debt: what happens when the capital assets are not owned but rented or held through financial products? These are core questions that emerge from a body of literature which appears to talk about vastly different experiences of “entrepreneurs”. Here I address these complexities through the first research question: How do relations of economic capital,

labour and debt present themselves within the platform economy? This question will be addressed predominantly in chapter 4 of this thesis.

After this, I turn attention towards the wider aspects of the model of subjectivity offered by Bourdieu (1986), which accounts for forms of capital outside of immediately convertible economic forms. How do these forms of capital, such as cultural knowledge, skills and symbolically endowed resources allow “entrepreneurs” to set themselves apart? This question places an emphasis on value recognition, on what forms of capital become recognised as “valuable” or “useful” within the platform economy. But what happens when an “entrepreneur” lacks these forms of capital? Or when the platform (or the market) fail to recognise these forms of value? Do the theoretical tools developed elsewhere to understand these phenomena translate to the “gig economy”? Collectively, I address these inquiries through the second research question of this thesis: How are cultural and social capitals put to work in the platform economy? This question is considered across two chapters, 5 and 6. In chapter 5 I discuss instances where cultural and social capitals are valued and can be utilised for economic gain. In chapter 6 I turn attention to cases where value is not economically recognised.

One of the key things to which I have aimed to draw attention in this chapter is the problematic of “gig economy” exceptionalism (or even the notion that the “gig economy” is a clear conceptual category at all) – and through this critique I have aimed to steer the discussion towards existing theoretical understandings that may offer workable understandings of these new platforms. After the forthcoming analysis I will conclude by the end of this thesis that existing theoretical tools do work for helping us understand how inequalities reproduce in the “gig economy” and why some succeed while others fail. What I will do, in particular, is map the theoretical approaches discussed in this chapter onto the empirical examples that I investigate in this project – to show where and how they are useful. Within the “gig economy”, I will argue, there is not only labour exploitation, but also rentier capitalism and value extraction – platforms are pluralistic and inconsistent with any singular theoretical approach to class. By bringing the approaches discussed in this chapter together we can begin to make sense of the broad spectrum of capitalist relations contained within the “gig economy”.

### 3 – Methodology

#### 3.1 – Introduction

This chapter provides justifications for the data collection methods chosen for the study, and further explains the methodological development through piloting to the final implementation. Challenges and shortcomings in the data collection are noted to aid an understanding of the qualitative data validity; indicating what the data can and cannot tell us from an epistemological perspective. Also discussed is the use of thematic analysis in this study and its suitability to the data and the project as a whole – as well as the subsequent limitations.

In the following section, I briefly discuss the logic through which interview data from “entrepreneurs” was chosen as an object of study and pose a justification of the suitability of this approach in answering the research questions. Next, I discuss in more practical terms how the methodology was developed through piloting – including the difficulties and limitations that occurs. I then go on to set out the final practicalities of the research design that were implemented. Ethics of data generation are discussed in some detail. I then turn attention to the thematic approach to analysis that was utilised.

#### 3.2 – Defining the object of study

Some researchers of the sharing economy, such as Sundararajan (2016) and Srnicek (2017) have focused their empirical study on the platforms themselves: their internal organisation, business strategies, the applications, and the potential outcomes that they could deliver. Others such as Zervas et al. (2017) conducted a market analysis, looking at quantitative data. But work by Schor (2015, 2017) and Ravenelle (2017) has highlighted the role of interview data for its value in describing the various experiences share-economy workers face. While direct analysis of the platform and its business model provide vital insights into why and how the platforms become structured as they are, this study makes “entrepreneurs” its primary object of study to put the focus on who is attracted to platforms, for what reason, their experiences with the platform and the outcomes that they experience.

But the platforms are never fully separated from this analysis, as they repeatedly become intertwined with the experiences of workers through their mediating characteristics – and, therefore, become a secondary object of study through reports of lived interaction that come forward within interviews. Likewise, the customers who engage with the services offered by platforms such as AirBnB and Uber also become indirect objects of study. As the data unfolds in analysis, the key focus often becomes the recounts of social and economic relations that constitute the “entrepreneur’s” position. As Wacquant emphasises, the tradition stemming from Marxism sees ‘the basis for heterogeneity and inequality [consisting] of relations. Not individuals or groups ... but webs of material and symbolic ties

[that] constitute the proper object of social analysis' (2013, p. 275). This study, therefore, uses the individual "entrepreneur" as a gateway towards an understanding of these ties; this data provides insights into how the individual becomes situated within social relations. This study is, therefore, looking at individual "entrepreneurs" but also looking at how the "entrepreneur" is socially constituted through their experiences of interaction with the platform, customers, creditors, debtors, employees and so forth.

This study addresses two key research questions:

- 1) How do relations of economic capital, labour and debt present themselves within the platform economy?
- 2) How are cultural and social capitals put to work in the platform economy?

The first of these questions looks at the "entrepreneur's" economic positioning. While in positivist epistemologies this might mean a measurable sense of economic capital and labour time attached to notions of individual possession (something that is indulged as a starting point within this thesis), it more accurately refers to the underlying social relations to which capital, debt and labour refer. A person might, for instance, have debt which places a demand upon their future labour which they "owe" to a creditor - this study aims to not just look at the debt itself as a quantifiable attachment of individuality, in a positivist sense, but rather the social ties that are referenced by the debt and their subsequent impact upon experiences.

The second question places an emphasis on value recognition, on what forms of capital become recognised as "valuable" or "useful" within the platform economy. This means that the object of study is both the capitals possessed by the individual *and* also the social contexts of recognition that the individual experiences. In particular, this research question is answered in this thesis through a consideration of the rating and review mechanisms that serve as mediations of intertwined social relations between the "entrepreneur", the platform and the platforms customers.

Within this section, I have aimed to set out the empirical focus of this thesis from an epistemological perspective – describing the objects of study in abstract and theoretical terms. Over the next two sections I will develop a conceptual approach to explain where I looked for these social relations and how.



### 3.3 – Development and piloting

The pilot set out with four key aims:

- Firstly, testing sites of analysis and their appropriateness (if they are accessible and productive of useful data for the purpose of this research);
- Second, the recruitment methodology for the interview sites and its manageability (productive of participation, suitable for the required sample sizes, and ethically considerate);
- Third, the interview topic guide and its ability to produce the type of data needed to address the research question;
- Finally, the pilot was used to test the possibility of using text from specific Facebook groups for “entrepreneurs” as additional data in the study (this was excluded from the main study for reasons soon to be discussed).

#### 3.3.1 – Choice of London

The majority of qualitative studies looking at workers in the “gig economy” have focused on North America, and in particular the United States (see for example: Rosenblat, 2016; 2018; Ravenelle, 2017, 2019; Schor, 2015, 2017). There is a need to understand how these findings might translate into European socio-economic geographies.

This study looks at geographically tethered platforms where the types of opportunity they offer require ‘workers to be in a particular place’ (Woodcock & Graham, 2020, p. 43). This distinguishes them from other parts of the “gig economy” where platforms such as Fiverr and Freelancer allow for customers to outsource small labour activities to workers anywhere in the world. Platforms which are not geographically tied produce globalised effects whereby ‘employers in advanced economies are likely to gravitate towards countries with large pools of lower-cost white-collar workers’ (Galperin & Greppi, 2017, p. 2). However, geographic biases still exist quite pervasively on these platforms, where customers will choose labourers based on preconceived biases about where they are from, resulting in unequal global distributions (Galperin & Greppi, 2017; Gefen & Carmel, 2008)).

Because the platforms in this study are geographically sticky, they (and their “entrepreneurs”) are tied in more fixed ways to the local economy within London. There are also interesting racial dimensions to this geographic context as in London where the vast majority of private hire drivers are non-white (Transport for London, 2018). It is therefore interesting to consider how locality might impact upon geographically sticky platforms in different locations.

### 3.3.2 – Development of a sampling architecture

The initial sampling architecture for the study was informed by Robinson (2014)'s four-point sampling approach which begins with defining a sample universe. The sample universe for this study can be discussed at two levels: the platform level and individual level. Platform level sampling refers to the logic by which platforms become the focus of the study, whereas individual level sampling refers to which “entrepreneurs” from each platform are interviewed. There is a rationality overlap between both levels of sampling regarding the key conceptual dimension around which the study finds focus, the capital-labour relation. This relation manifests both in terms of platforms, which can be predominantly geared either way towards the marketing of capital or labour, but also at the level of the individual who might outsource labour to put capital to market on a platform - or take on debt (an obligation on future labour), to put current labour to market.

While many studies choose to focus on one particular platform, (for example, studies of AirBnB (Zervas et al., 2017) or Uber (Chen, Chevalier, Rossi, & Oehlsen, 2017)), a four-platform scope has been executed previously and proved manageable, consisting of 80 interviews (Schor et al., 2016), as well as three platform studies with a total of 43 interviews (J. B. Schor, 2017). Other scholars have successfully conducted similarly sized projects with a focus on change over time, such as the longitudinal interviews conducted by Thomson and Holland (2003) who focused on 120 subjects in 5 separate sites of interest.

#### 3.3.2.1 – Platform Choice

Platform level sampling was based around the capital-labour division previously discussed, along with indications of ease of recruitment. Originally 7 platforms were considered: Funding Circle, Property Partner, AirBnB, Uber, Amazon Flex, Deliveroo and Fiverr. These 7 were positioned based upon an estimation of dominance between the requirement placed on capital or labour. For example, AirBnB is largely a capital-based platform in that people are renting the space, but the host must also arrange bookings and cleaning – both of which constitute labour. On balance, AirBnB is considered to be a capital-based platform here because people book primarily based on getting temporary access to the housing (rather than for the cleaning or other surrounding services). On the other hand, Uber is considered a predominantly labour-based platform because the customers pay to be driven somewhere, rather than for simply being able to access a car (however, the driver must have access to a car in order to provide this service).

Type	Name	Capital Elements	Labour Elements	Potential Recruitment Sites
Capital	<b>AirBnB</b>	Housing and digital device for taking bookings	Arranging Bookings and cleaning	London Hosts Facebook Group (623 members); Direct messaging AirBnB hosts.
Capital	<b>Funding Circle</b>	Savings (liquid) and computer	Choosing Investments (no longer true, investments now automated), transferring money into and out of account.	Targeted Facebook advertising at people who 'like' funding circle and live in London; Contacting Funding Circle to request a recruitment paragraph within their email newsletter.
Capital	<b>Property Partner</b>	Savings (liquid) and computer	Choosing Investments, transferring money into and out of account.	Targeted Facebook advertising at people who 'like' Property Partner and live in London
Labour	<b>Uber</b>	Car and Phone	Driving	Uber Drivers London Facebook Group (10,857 members); Providing recruitment flyers to Uber drivers during journeys
Labour	<b>Deliveroo</b>	Bike/Scooter and Phone	Delivering	Targeted Facebook advertising at people who 'like' Deliveroo and live in London; Direct messaging Deliveroo deliverers; Providing recruitment flyers to Deliveroo Deliverers
Labour	<b>Fiverr</b>	Computer (potentially other)	Various Labour Activities	Fiverr online forum
Labour	<b>Amazon Flex</b>	Car or Van and Phone	Delivering	UK Amazon Flex Facebook Group (2,479 members); Providing recruitment flyers to deliverers.

*Table 1 - A Selection of UK Operating For-Profit Digital Platforms*

The seven sites were then narrowed to 3. This decision was based on two considerations: a need to balance mainly capital platforms and mainly labour platforms to look for a conceptual class distinction, alongside a consideration of accessibility for recruitment. Deliveroo, Fiverr and Property Partner were taken out of consideration due to the fact that they have small/undetermined “entrepreneur” population sizes within London or significant access difficulty. Fiverr was omitted from the predominately labour platforms largely because it is geographically unbound, being focused around remote work from anywhere in the world and this makes it distinct from the other platforms where a sample of participants within the greater London area can be drawn. Funding Circle was omitted from the study following recruitment problems noted in the pilot. It became apparent that Funding Circle is a difficult site of study to access, with the recruitment method of targeted Facebook advertising generating no results. It also lacks a Facebook group or any other form of online community, putting community-based recruitment out of reach.

The three case sites that this thesis will draw upon - AirBnB, Uber and Amazon Flex - have individually defined characteristics that problematise any fixed attachment to the preeminent colloquial titles of “gig” or “sharing” economy. In this section, I will discuss the literature around each case study in a bit more detail to provide an academically grounded understanding of the way in which each platform is structured, and to reflect upon their places within wider discussion of the “gig economy”.

Uber is often considered the quintessential “gig economy” app, with new platforms adopting the tag line “the uber of x” (Srnicsek, 2017). Others have referred to an “Uberization” of the economy (Berger et al., 2018). Woodcock and Graham position Uber as the ‘most recognizable geographically tethered platform ... [with] 3.9 million drivers across the world. It holds so much brand recognition that the company is regularly used as a synonym for new platform ideas’ (2020, p. 46). It is also one of the most valuable; By December 2015 it had raised 8.61 billion United States Dollars (USD) in venture capital, putting it far ahead of the often-compared AirBnB corporation (at 2.39 billion USD) (Sundararajan, 2016).

Uber was included in this project not only because it is the most infamous “gig economy” platform – but also because it is predominantly a labour-based platform. While drivers do require a car to work on the platform, as Ravenelle (2019) points out, they often obtain this through financial products and debt. Uber, therefore, provides insights into the labour perspective of the “gig economy”.

In contrast to Uber’s position as a predominantly labour focused platform, AirBnB offers a window into asset and capital-based platforms. Despite claims that the promise of AirBnB’s business model exists with a ‘huge economic efficiency’ (Sundararajan, 2016, p. 8) from utilising temporarily unused living space – an idea that would be in keeping with the more optimistic premises of the “sharing economy” – evidence has shown that AirBnB is much less about sharing than it is about renting: ‘AirBnB hosts typically join the platform because they have space that they are hoping to rent out for a profit’ (Sundararajan, 2016, p. 40). In contrast to Uber drivers who are offering their labour, AirBnB hosts are receiving rents on their capital.

This use of the platform does not necessarily deliver upon the “sharing” economy’s promise of disruption. There is an additional discussion over how different types of platform usage on AirBnB might distinguish individual transactions as being part of the “sharing economy” or not. Ravenelle builds upon a quote from *The Guardian* to clarify a distinction that:

if a person is hosting while on-site or on vacation, it is part of the sharing economy; but “if people live permanently in another house, and continuously rent out their own house, they are actually just running a (often illegal) hotel” (2019, pp. 27–28).

If we are to follow this line of logic, AirBnB is sometimes a facilitating part of the “sharing economy” and at other times, is part of traditional rentier capitalism. This further complicates the problem of terminology if individual platforms can simultaneously exist inside and outside of a conceptual

definition. This might create a question over whether a study of the “sharing economy” that looks at AirBnB should only include certain hosts who meet this definition and exclude others. However, as the terminology and definitions of the “sharing economy” remain extremely ambiguous and contested, there is likely a great deal of scholarly value in trying to understand these edge-cases – as their existence may reflect back with some meaning upon how we define the sector.

Amazon Flex departs from many of the “gig economy” platforms, such as AirBnB or Uber, because the “entrepreneurs” who provide their labour on an on-demand basis through the platform do so exclusively for one client: Amazon. Instead, scholars from business schools have referred to Flex as a form of “crowdsourced logistics” (Castillo, Bell, Rose, & Rodrigues, 2018). The business model of Amazon Flex ‘relies on independent contractors to deliver Amazon Prime Now packages, which have a short delivery deadline, usually 1–2 hours. Those delivery workers enjoy the flexibility of setting their preferred delivery times’ (Ibrahim, 2018, p. 234). While providing a good overview of the image of Flex that Amazon provides, is not clear what empirical data Ibrahim is drawing upon in his use of the word “enjoy” (in either its possible affective or possessive meaning) to describe the experience of Flex workers. In general, there is a lack of empirical research that actually speaks to Flex drivers to understand if they affectively enjoy the flexibility of the job – or indeed if they even have a true experience of setting their *preferred* delivery times. As Ravenelle argues, scholarship on the “gig economy” has been driven by business school professors, and, as seen above, it often problematically borrows the discourse provided by corporations to describe worker experience. In general ‘little is actually known about the actual, lived experience of working in the gig economy’ (Ravenelle, 2019, p. 7). Castillo et al. attempt to categorise Flex within the “sharing economy” based on a definition that it ‘offer[s] multiple users temporary asset ownership benefits at a reduced cost’ (2018, p. 7) – this is not an entirely convincing categorisation as the benefit of asset ownership (in this case the asset would presumably be the car or van that is used by the Flex driver) would only be an ability to fetch/deliver products. Access to this asset would not automatically result in the outcome of having a product delivered to you - this categorisation ignores the actualised labour.

Flex exists as an Uberisation of the logistics sector – with a large corporation (Amazon) borrowing a model of labour management from lean platforms. It is included here because it offers a useful insight into this special case where a “gig economy” platform does not serve as a lean matchmaker between a customer and a labourer – but rather is exclusively designed to meet the needs of one particular company. This highlights how aspects of “gig economy” platforms are being adopted by a wider base of corporations within the economy.

### 3.3.2.2 – Participant recruitment

For the purpose of the pilot Individuals were selected for the interviews based upon a process of the researcher generating interest from which the potential participants self-select to complete the screening questionnaire, and finally, the researcher selecting participants for interview from the responses to the questionnaire.

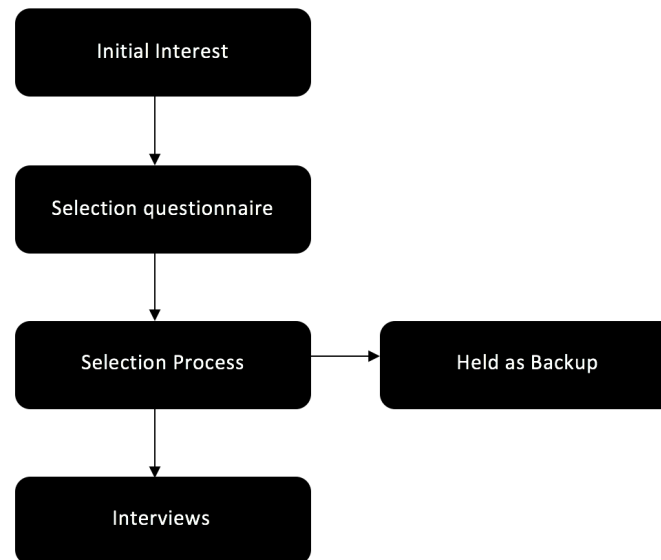


Figure 1 - Participant recruitment flow-chart

Initial interest was generated by advertising in a number of different ways, depending on the platform and its particular recruitment opportunities. In all cases the study was advertised as offering £20 compensation for chosen participants, either in the form of cash for in-person interviews, or as a digital Amazon voucher for online interviews.

Platform	Methods
AirBnB	AirBnB hosts Facebook group
Uber	Offering recruitment leaflets to Uber drivers at the start or end of a journey (when vehicle is stationary and parked) London Uber Drivers' Facebook group
Amazon Flex	Amazon Flex drivers' Facebook group
<b>**All Platforms**</b>	Digital recruitment posters in online community spaces Physical recruitment posters in community spaces

Table 2 - Methods of Access to Share-Economy workers

The most successful method of generating interest for the pilot was posting on Facebook groups for “entrepreneurs” using a particular platform. This method delivered a high number of interested participants but limited the sample to those who use these groups.

The selection questionnaire was designed to ascertain six criteria used for selection purposes:

1. ensure the individual uses the given platform
2. ensure they live/work predominantly within London
3. determine how long they have used the platform for
4. determine how reliant they are upon it as a source of income
5. determine how much they earn
6. obtain their contact information for recruitment.

In total, 9 people responded to the screening questionnaire for the pilot. 3 of these used AirBnB for income, 3 used Uber, 4 used Amazon Flex (there was one overlap, as a respondent used both Uber and Amazon Flex). Of these 9, two were dismissed because they did not live within London (one lived in Scotland, another in Italy). The final 3 were selected based upon the practicality of being available to participate within a reasonable amount of time.

### 3.3.3 – Interviews

All three interviews for this pilot were conducted remotely – two via skype and one via a phone call. This was, in all instances, the choice of the participant. Participants commented that by doing the interviews remotely it fits into their day much easier, especially in positions of precarity or while dealing with disability (something I discuss further in relation to the full study). Skype proved a successful platform for interviewing – and the visual link appeared to build trust: One participant noted before the recording started, ‘you look just like your photo!’. For these reasons, I proceeded to the full study with the allowance for interviews to take place over video chat where in-person interviews were not possible.

The instance of a phone call interview was less successful and was a final measure after in-person and skype interviews had been rejected for being too inconvenient for the participant who commented on his lack of time due to his workload for Uber (this ended up being generally true for Uber drivers in the research that followed). In this case, a combination of a poor phone line and the participant having a strong foreign accent meant that the interview did not progress well, and opportunities for follow up questions were missed because at times it was unclear what the participant had said. As a result, I decided on omitting phone call interviews from the final research to ensure that, as an interviewer, I was able to gauge facial reactions to better steer the conversation.

#### **3.3.3.1 – Interview Guide**

An interview guide was produced with an index of questions on the topics of capital, class, sharing economy apps, their barriers, investment, expectations and risks. These questions are largely designed around the logic of capital, they intend to ask the participant to talk about how they accrue capital and manage risks and barriers. If this guide were strictly followed and answers were “to-the-point” then no data on affective value, or debate over values would come forward.

In practice, the questions in this guide were often intended as starting points for discussion. The closed questions still proved too limiting, and during the interviews the guide was used only for reference, instead the interviews followed Guest’s suggestion that ‘the opening questions should be “soft,” inviting, open-ended. Let the participant tell his or her story; encourage a story. Avoid jumping into closed-ended questions’ (2012, p. 24). The discussion progressed naturally into the topics, but rather than being framed in the closed and generalised wordings of the questions within the guide, context-specific questions could be formed. The guide served as a point of reference when a particular topic had ended, and conversation had halted, to refresh on a different starting point. These restarting questions were often adapted from the guide during the interview by taking notes on how something the participant said relates to a theme that occurs elsewhere in the guide, and then applying this context to a pre-given question.

#### **3.3.4 – Methodological findings from the pilot**

Snowball recruitment methods were implemented in the full study following the success of these during the pilot; especially as interviewees noted that their contacts had a range of different experiences. One participant noted a friend who relies completely upon Amazon Flex’s income and another knowing a range of AirBnB hosts with different sizes of portfolio, meeting the need to engage with subjects who have a diverse range of experiences (Pyett, 2003). During the piloting process, details were recorded for four potential participants who were known to the pilot AirBnB host, three of these ended up participating in the final study. However, it is important to keep in mind that snowball sampling generally produces a homogenous sample by relying upon diversity within social networks.

The interview guide will be used as a point of reference, rather than a strict prescription for the interviews, as it became clear during pilots that giving interviewees room to tell their story while gently guiding them towards the topics is a more effective method than reading pre-prepared closed questions. The interviews therefore became much less structured during the main data collection for



this thesis in comparison to the pilot – with the exception of a few less talkative interviewees who were prompted with the questions in a more structured way through necessity.

The pilot also included a second methodological approach: analysis of conversations which took place on closed Facebook groups for platform “entrepreneurs”. I have removed the detailed account of this part of the pilot from this chapter as it was never implemented in the fully study, however, I will discuss briefly why it was removed from consideration: While Facebook group data proved extremely valuable in showing instances of value judgments playing out socially within threads of discussion (the formation of fields, within Bourdieu’s conceptual language) – as well as thematic occurrences of shared experiences and grievances that could allow for a productive analysis - there were deeper ethical considerations needed in relation to this type of data collection. After the pilot had concluded, there was a generalised recommendation given by the London School of Economics to not engage in data collection from the Facebook platform without prior consent from Facebook, as this was in breach of the platforms policy. There were also ethical questions I considered regarding consent. For my pilot I posted on groups to inform members that I would be collecting their data, and to give them an option to opt-out of any of their posts being included. However, in groups with thousands of members it is extremely improbable that more than a small fraction of members saw these posts. As such, I was not satisfied that it would be ethical to include this data collection method in the full study.

### 3.4 – Final sample and limitations

The intention of qualitative research is not to produce generalisable statistics through sampling a representative population, as is the case for much quantitative research, but rather a purposive sampling where the researcher engages with particular groups to understand lived experiences (Higginbottom, 2004). Rather than making generalised claims, qualitative interview research aims to work with specific and detailed lived experiences to develop theoretical understandings. Sim et al. (2018) found that determining qualitative sample sizes *a priori*, while offering benefits to practicality, remains intrinsically problematic for research with an inductive aspect as the purpose is to gain enough data to confidently develop theoretical understandings, rather than to make statistical claims. Nonetheless, qualitative research must reflect upon whose experiences are given voice within a study, and who might not be spoken for. As such, I will briefly discuss the demographics of people I spoke to within the three samples in order to indicate who my work represents.

Platform	n	From Facebook groups (n)	From snowball sampling (n)	From other recruitment methods
<b>AirBnB</b>	18	11	6	0
<b>Uber</b>	8	7	0	1
<b>Amazon Flex</b>	12	12	0	0

*Table 3 - Final Sample Recruitment Methods*

While the AirBnB hosts I spoke to tended to belong to active social groups with high levels of interpersonal interaction and support, such networks are limited or even non-existent in the cases of Uber and Amazon Flex workers. As such, while 6 of the AirBnB hosts were recruited through snowballing tactics, no Uber or Amazon Flex participants were obtained this way. Resultantly, this study speaks strongly to the experiences of Uber and Flex drivers who also participate in Facebook groups.

### 3.4.1 – AirBnB hosts

AirBnB's recent UK Insights Report (2017) revealed that across the UK as a whole 62% of hosts are female, and the average age of hosts is 43 – likewise, I spoke to more women than men who were using the platform. Only 3 of the hosts I spoke to rented out space on AirBnB that was separate to their own home where they live. This sample therefore speaks more to the experiences of hosts who live within the property that they let.

AirBnB does not reveal data on the ethnicity of its hosts, making any overall understanding of the host community in London difficult. However, it was noteworthy that only one of the participants in my study defined as non-white (BAME). It is perhaps worth noting, while not representative in method, that during the recruitment processes and while interacting with many hosts through groups, I encountered only two visibly non-white hosts. This may be backed up by government data on homeownership in the U.K.: Black African households constituting the least likely to be homeowners (just 21%). Chinese (38%), Black Caribbean (37%) and Arab (27%) are also significantly less likely to be homeowners compared to White British (68%). In London specifically, data shows that 63% of White-British households were homeowners, compared with 34% for other groups (Government data (2019)). For the purpose of this qualitative study, I spoke to mainly white hosts who were women in the majority. While this study does not make any generalisable claims about these groups, it is useful to understand the context of how these hosts fit into the broad gender and ethnicity makeup of the platform, to understand how their experiences might be framed by these factors.

### 3.4.2 – Uber drivers

Oversampling of white persons was most apparent among Uber drivers. While data for drivers working with Uber specifically is not available, a report from Transport for London (TfL) has claimed that '[a] majority of PHV drivers (around 94 per cent) are from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds (BAME) and many are from deprived areas' (Transport for London, 2018, p. 20). In contrast to this 94 per cent figure, which would allow for 6 per cent white drivers, around a third of the interviewed sample was white. This is a particular problem because the range of interviews for Uber drivers is already small (2 white and 5 BAME drivers were interviewed). What this means is that the interview data speaks to a whiter experience of Uber drivers than would be common, racial issues might be less prevalent in the data of this study than they are within London's Uber driver community. The reasons why BAME people were less prevalent in this study is likely due to many factors. Less BAME people self-selected for the study, which could be because of a feeling of cultural difference to myself as a white researcher or potential language barriers. It is also likely that the BAME drivers face intersectional challenges that white drivers do not which place extra time and financial burdens upon their shoulders that would make participation increasingly challenging. My own positionality as a white-British researcher may have made recruitment more difficult.

### 3.4.3 – Amazon Flex

Of the three case studies, Amazon Flex workers present a rather unknown demographic. Unlike AirBnB and Uber, there are no publicly available statistics that provide an indication into who is working on the platform. The Flex workers interviewed for this study were entirely male and predominantly white (8 out of 11), which roughly matched the impression of demographic makeup present on the Facebook groups for Flex workers. Amazon Flex workers appeared much more eager to take part in the research than Uber hosts – this could be partly due to the fact that more of the Flex drivers I spoke to were white, meaning that my own positionality may have posed less of a barrier. They also tended to have more flexibility in their schedules compared to Uber drivers.

### 3.5 – Ethics

According to Webster et al. (2013), there are seven ethical considerations for research: Avoiding undue intrusion, informed consent, voluntary consent and pressures of participation, avoiding adverse consequences, confidentiality, enabling participation, protecting researchers from adverse consequences. I will discuss these in turn, focusing on how I attempted to maintain high ethical standards throughout the study.

### 3.5.1 – Avoiding undue intrusion

Participants in this study were self-selecting. A large proportion contacted me after seeing an advertisement posted in Facebook groups for people who earn incomes from the particular apps that were the focus of this study. In these cases, the permission of the group administrators was obtained. A possible recruitment strategy of ordering Ubers and then interviewing the driver during the trip (with consent) was not implemented partly due to the fact it poses a risk of intrusion by being in the driver's car at a time of requesting them to take part in the study. This could be especially problematic as I would be able to review the drivers after the trip, which could also pose a risk to truly voluntary participation. However, it is important to note that this comes with a trade-off in terms of excluding drivers who are not active on social media.

### 3.5.2 – Informed consent

Participants were given basic information about the study before participating, as well as my contact details and an open invitation to get in touch with any questions. This was done through the opening screen on the pre-interview questionnaire. On two occasions I did not proceed to interview a participant because I was not confident that they had the necessary understanding of the study and their participation that would allow for informed consent to be given. On both occasions this related to Uber drivers who had limited literacy skills, at least in English. On one occasion a participant, in email contact prior to completing the pre-interview questionnaire, misunderstood the £20 gift for participating to be a £200 gift. This participant also communicated in broken English to a point where basic understanding was difficult. I therefore considered this to be significant evidence that a truly informed consent would not be possible without the aid of a translator. For the purpose of this study, it would not have been financially feasible to proceed (though it is worth noting that this may limit the range of data from more marginalised Uber drivers).

### 3.5.3 – Voluntary consent

Consent for participation in the study was given by participants before beginning the pre-interview questionnaire and was confirmed verbally at the beginning of each interview. The former of these allowed for consent to be given in a private environment away from the researcher, while the latter allowed for a more thorough confirmation that the purpose of the study and the role of the participant was fully understood. Participants were reminded at several points in the process that participation was voluntary and that they were free to leave the study at any point.

### 3.5.4 – Avoiding adverse consequences

In this study, avoiding adverse consequences was closely linked to confidentiality of participation (the next point that I will discuss). For this reason, I will use this section to talk about adverse consequences

during the interview process itself, and in the latter, adverse consequences which relate specifically to confidentiality.

### 3.5.5 – Confidentiality

I protected the identity of all participants in this study, apart from those who openly identified themselves as participants in public forums (such as publicly responding to calls for participants on Facebook to say that they recommend participation to others, having done it themselves). Even in these cases of self-identification, the data from that individual would be difficult to connect with the participant due to the use of pseudonyms throughout the study and obscuring of identifiable information. For instance, one host is referred to as owning a property that constitutes a London landmark – while narrowing the scope of possibilities, this avoids identifying the host by directly naming the landmark in question.

The ethical tension over confidentiality became most pronounced with AirBnB hosts who told me about openly engaging in racial screening of potential guests, turning away people from particular countries or who have particular skin colours that they do not want to host. These moments during interviews made me feel uncomfortable, especially as I did not want my own beliefs to influence the data that I was receiving, and so I had to avoid showing any disapproval. But it was also an ethical tension in that these hosts are still actively engaging in these practices and racially discriminating against potential guests to this day. My responsibility as a researcher is to protect the anonymity of these hosts but doing so is allowing acts which could be criminal (as they are deciding whether or not to provide accommodation services based on race), but are at least deeply racist, to continue. These racist practices will not only increase the struggle to find accommodation for people of colour visiting London but will likely also increase the cost as they are forced to choose less preferred options (which may also be further away from desired locations and subsequently increase transportation cost or increase risk). My response to this is to ensure that these cases are anonymously highlighted as a general problem on the platform which needs further address (Maier, 2020).

### 3.5.6 – Enabling participation

Participation was made more accessible to volunteers by offering the ability to conduct the interview via video calling software. In particular, this proved effective for AirBnB hosts with disabilities or who were pregnant and could not participate in standard interview conditions – in total this allowed three participants to be included who told me that they could not attend a physical interview.

In other instances, the use of video call interviews allowed Uber drivers who are experiencing financial and time deficits to participate when otherwise the money involved in traveling or the time taken away from work would have limited participation. One Amazon Flex worker chose to take part in a video call interview while simultaneously on duty as a first aid response worker, noting that he might have to end the interview early and continue it another time if an emergency were to arise. For this worker, flexibility was essential in order to allow for equal participation in the context of his work commitments.

### 3.5.7 – Protecting researchers from adverse consequences

In the context of this study the level of risk for the researcher (myself) was relatively low. I was mainly meeting participants in public spaces with other people present, and generally these interviews took place within working hours. Only once did an interview take place at a participant's house, and in this instance, the participant had become well known to me through extensive prior discussion. This host was also known to other participants as she was recruited through snowball sampling.

### 3.6 – Transcript Analysis

Interview transcripts were anonymised through the use of pseudonyms and then imported into the NVivo Software for analysis. Thematic analysis followed – in this section, I intend to justify my decision to conduct thematic analysis and describe how this analysis was conducted.

Broadly speaking thematic analysis was chosen because, as Braun and Clarke describe, 'thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (2006, p. 79). Unlike quantitative data which also allows for the identification of patterns, thematic analysis permits an adaptive and inductive process of building conceptual ideas from the descriptions provided in the text (Guest et al., 2012). The initial intention of this research was to identify the common social experiences that "entrepreneurs" faced, through interactions with forms of capital and debt, customers, platforms and so forth, and then tie these to specific social relations that exist in practice. Because this research project developed with conceptual understandings from existing theoretical literature, some themes were decided prior to analysis and could be engaged with deductively. Thematic analysis allows for deductive reasoning to generate conceptual understanding from within the text. That is not to say that solely deductive reasoning was utilised in analysis, indeed, the benefit of thematic analysis for this study was the ability to approach the data both inductively and deductively.

In particular, the analysis deductively sought out a number of themes that emerged from the theoretical perspective of the study. Firstly, economic capital was sought after, as defined by Piketty to include wealth (2014) – this emerged in relation to income, homeownership, investments and savings. Social and cultural capital based upon the definitions provided by Bourdieu (1986) were also investigated. In practice, the key elements that emerged to fit into these concepts were skills, objectified and institutional cultural capital. Social capital appeared also of some importance – where “entrepreneurs” joined the platform based on a recommendation or found small ways to gain an advantage from discussions online or in person with other users. The other main deductive theme was struggles over value as theorised by Skeggs (2004a, 2004b, 2005) – in practice this consisted of affective feelings of being devalued, or being valued, and links between these and economic exploitation and advantage, respectively. Because the interview questions were designed, in the first instance, to prompt responses that might speak to these themes they emerged systematically across all responses.

However, the interviews also invited less-structured conversations which provided plenty of opportunity for other themes to emerge. The analysis used inductive grounded theory tactics in an attempt to look for emergent patterns in the data which can inform theory production (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Inductive grounded coding took place after I had familiarised myself with the data, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). One aspect that emerged during analysis was the importance of debt (predominantly for Uber drivers). While the pre-interview questionnaire and the interview guide did encourage some discussion of debt, it was only afterwards that the importance of debt became apparent as a critical mechanism underpinning the relationship between the Uber platform and its drivers. While the initial analysis allowed for deductive analysis of rating systems based upon Bourdieu’s (2013) notion of distinction, what emerged inductively was a rather more Foucauldian (2000) theme of surveillance and subject legibility which is often operationalised through rating systems (and ended up being one of the key findings of the study) that is discussed extensively in chapter 6.

### 3.7 – How the analysis is reported

This thesis splits the reporting of the thematic analysis into three chapters. The first of these, chapter 4, deals with economic capital, labour and debt. These concept driven themes unpack divergencies between each of the three platforms and also the individual “entrepreneurs” who utilise them – showing how, in the first instance, labour is positioned by both economic capital and debt. It goes further to deal with the concept of risk in so far as it connects to these economic workings. Then, in chapter 5, I unpack themes related to Bourdieu’s (1986) capital-accruing subjectivity with the

exception of economic capital. In practice this relates to skills, objectified and institutional cultural capital predominantly – as these were the forms that emerged from the analysis. I discuss how these relate to the classed history of the subject and their former labour, and importantly, how these forms of capital might allow “entrepreneurs” to gain economic advantage within certain parts of the “gig economy”. Then in chapter 6, I look at themes that emerged in tandem with a consideration of concepts of abjection and Skeggs’ (2004b) critiques of Bourdieu for the potential of his model to devalue working class subjectivity. Connected to this, the chapter also deals with the theme of disciplinary rating systems. I show how, all-in, these forms of devaluation serve to extract further value from the “entrepreneur”.

As I have set out from the beginning of this thesis, the platforms that this study engages cover a diverse range of experiences. As such, I found that some themes seemed to relate more to particular platforms. Chapter 5, which looks at capital accruing subjectivity will extensively refer to AirBnB because this is a platform where this type of subjectivity seemed prevalent – I connect this to the platform itself as one which enables this by offering a competitive market and allowing hosts to set themselves apart for greater economic advantage. On the other hand, chapter 6 will bring more focus to Uber and Amazon Flex due to the nature of these platforms in denying the possibility for capital accruing subjectivity among their “entrepreneurs”. These differences are theoretically important, as I will proceed to argue – here I wanted to establish the expectation that this thesis will not devote equal attention across the three platforms within each chapter, as the narrative that unfolds is driven by the analysis.

### 3.8 – Methodological summary

The methodological approach taken for this thesis produced interview data that speaks to the experiences of a selection of “gig economy” “entrepreneurs” who use Uber, Amazon Flex and AirBnB as a way to earn an income in London. While this data is limited by the selection of “entrepreneurs” who I spoke to, in particular for the case of Uber where recruitment proved difficult, I will nonetheless explore many thoroughly discussed experiences across all three platforms in the following chapters. This interview data builds upon that collected in previous studies by expanding focus to a more comprehensive discussion of resources available to the “entrepreneur” and debts or other obligations that they may have to service. This conceptual expansion into broader considerations of class is critical to the analysis which follows.



## 4 – Economic capital, labour, and debt

### 4.1 – Introduction

In this chapter I address the research question: how do relations of economic capital, labour and debt present themselves within the platform economy? I do so in a number of steps: Firstly, I talk about the important role of debt for the Uber drivers I spoke to – to understand how this debt positioned their labour and their relationship with the platform more generally. Next, I discuss uncompensated labour on Amazon Flex, specifically the requirement of drivers on the platform to spend long periods of time refreshing the app in hopes of finding a block of work. I then turn attention to the role of economic capital for AirBnB hosts – showing how hosts in this study leveraged their economic resources to utilise the platform as a way to recover rents on their property. I also discuss, towards the end, how these economic relations relate to the concept of personal risk for “entrepreneurs” in this study.

The main argument that I put forward in this chapter is that “entrepreneur” labour is positioned by both debt and capital – where the former produces obligations and removes flexibility, while the latter reduces obligations on labour and increases flexibility. These positionalities of labour then go on to shape risk. If an “entrepreneur” is obliged to provide their labour without flexibility, then this often means taking on riskier work that they would otherwise reject. On the other hand, those who have the privilege of flexibility may choose to avoid riskier income opportunities. Throughout this chapter, I also discuss economic risks and how “entrepreneurs” with greater amounts of capital are able to offset their risk through insurance policies and mitigation strategies which are not available to all. I argue that these unequal distributions of risk are a product of the underlying economic relations that are the main focus of this chapter – in order to understand these outcomes, I present the mechanisms of inequality that shape “entrepreneurs” experiences.

### 4.2 – Debt, financial obligations and Uber

Mike is an Uber driver in London who fits well into the company’s marketed image as a flexible form of work. As described on their website, he sets his own schedule and makes money on his terms (Uber, 2020). Mike owns his car and drives occasionally for Uber as a way to earn a bit of extra money each month. He told me:

*I didn’t need to earn much money, and you don’t... After a while of doing very responsible, very high-pressure jobs, you just want something a little simpler to do in your fifties rather than, you know, having to have lots of stress and working all the hours God gives. So, it’s very appealing from that perspective. And, indeed, I enjoyed it.*

Here there is a clear positioning of the subject within fields of economic (in)dependence. Not only does Mike own his own car, but also his own flat in the city with two spare bedrooms. For Mike, driving for Uber is a retirement activity to earn extra money, rather than an income stream upon which he is dependent – this affords him with a great deal of flexibility on the platform. But Mike’s experiences were not common of the drivers I spoke to. In fact, Mike himself admitted that he doesn’t drive for Uber very often anymore because of the low pay and high degree of risk involved with the work (elements of work on the platform that have been well deliberated in previous work, discussed in chapters 2 and 3). But apart from Mike, none of the other Uber drivers who I spoke to own their car outright; he is also the only driver I spoke to who works less than 38 hours per week on the platform.

As Mike, explained to me: *‘You can come into this with nothing other than a British driving licence. You can rent your Toyota Prius for £200 a week, sign up to Uber and the thing goes ping and off you go.’*

In the literature, discussed in chapter 2, low barriers to access emerges as a general feature seen across many platforms in the “gig economy” – what I argued there is that we should shift away from looking at simply barriers to look more broadly at entry point inequalities. This research is, therefore, interested in the differences that “entrepreneurs” experience based upon their class positioning. While Mike’s experiences were largely positive, he is not typical of Uber drivers in London; data from Transport for London (2018, p. 20) shows that majority of private hire drivers in the city come from socially excluded communities.

While it has been noted that Uber requires the capital of a car as a barrier to entry (Ravenelle, 2019), this barrier was often overcome by the Uber drivers that I spoke to through the use of debt or other financial products which place an obligation on the future labour of the driver. While this might reflect a low barrier to entry, as drivers are able to access sub-prime credit options, the obligations that come with this type of entry reduce the income capabilities of the driver while increasing their exposure to risk, which has the potential to increase inequalities. Uber’s credit schemes have two key implications: firstly, it reduces barriers to access significantly as drivers do not need to own a car to earn an income from Uber. Secondly, in accordance with Lazzarato’s (2012, 2015) theorisation of debt, it enters those drivers without their own car into financial obligations that ties their future labour to the company. As Shoaib explains, this is a common “trap” for new drivers who enjoy the low barriers to access but soon find themselves in inescapable cycles of debt:

*So new people, when they come in, the first option they will have is rent [a car]. And to be honest, in the beginning, new drivers might have the energy to do about a year and after that they’ll start feeling the effects on their body, their social life, their personal life. And I went*

*through it several times, and if you don't keep on top of it, it can get out of control because you're making financial investments, huge financial investments, and if you don't keep on top of it you end up with huge debt.*

For Shoaib, debt is not just an economic materiality, but also an affective burden which is *felt*. It is also cyclical as he explains he has been through it a number of times. This is the debt trap of Uber which affects those without capital – wherein value is extracted from the labourer through multiple simultaneous mechanisms. This conditionality is not an accidental side-effect of the platform, Uber now directly profits from the sale of financial products to its drivers by serving (and earning money) as a credit broker. Xuberance (trading as Partner Point), is a subsidiary company of Uber, advertising financial products framed as “vehicle solutions” to drivers. Uber is directly involved in multiple forms of profiteering through vertical integration strategies that seek to profit from their drivers in various ways. Shoaib explains this credit brokering service in his own terms:

*On the Uber website they've got a marketplace aimed at drivers, and they basically advertise car hire companies and what not through there ... they're going to be enslaving drivers for even longer, that's all that's going to happen, they're not encouraging personal freedom.*

Drivers in this study were acutely aware of the “trap” that debt produces. Shoaib’s use of the term ‘enslaving’ is telling of the affect many drivers expressed in relation to their indebtedness – relating to Ravenelle’s (2019) use of the term “indentured servitude”. Drivers who needed to take on car financing complained about an extensive lack of freedom or choice over when or how often they work – and subsequently felt that their time no longer belonged to themselves. Arron explained to me that he now spends the majority of his time servicing his debts:

Arron: *[I filed for] bankruptcy ... I have debts also to look after.*

George: *And you mentioned that your car is on credit? Some sort of financial...*

Arron: *Yes, it is on finance. I mean I pay the small amount of deposit, and then I'm paying monthly, making monthly payments, yes.*

George: *Are you ever able to take a holiday, or anything like that?*

Arron: *Not really, no. No, I couldn't*

For drivers such as Arron, debt is a constant burden that makes his work for Uber a relentless requirement in order to avoid repossession of his car and the subsequent loss of his ability to earn an income. Against the illusion of the gig economy as something that individuals can move freely in and

out of, choosing when and where to work, drivers in my study who did not own a suitable car were often trapped into Uber by debt and had little choice about how much they worked. This relationship with debt places extensive requirements on the labour of indebted Uber drivers, who have to work many more hours than a traditional full-time job in order to both meet all of their repayments and have enough money to support themselves. Drivers such as Lukasz, who obtained his car through finance, told me that they usually work a six- or seven-day week – rarely taking a day off.

While others (cf. Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017) have found the level of dependency on the income that a platform provides to be a key factor in perception of the platform, I argue that the terminology of dependency requires greater specificity. We should bring the focus to more exact underlying socio-economic relations of capital, labour and debt that produce various forms and extents of dependency. Rather than seeing a subject (the Uber driver) as simply *being* dependent on the income that they receive from the platform, I argue we should see how their relationship with the platform *produces dependency* though debt “traps” that extenuate existing inequalities by disproportionately affecting those who enter the gig-economy with the least capital available to them.

Uber’s direct credit brokering is not the only mechanism found to produce dependency. Some of the drivers in this study who had some capital when they began working for Uber soon found themselves in relations of debt-based dependency as a result of low pay and Uber’s transfer of risk to drivers. Sebastian, a driver who is now in considerable debt, told me about how he felt financial pressure while driving for Uber which led him to buy a reduced insurance policy to save money. As a result, he was left financially exposed when his car was stolen:

*Sebastian: I actually used to own my own car, it got stolen last year.*

*George: And did you get an insurance pay out when that was stolen?*

*Sebastian: Unfortunately, the second year of my insurance I decided just to pay less, and not to insure for that. So, I was not lucky.*

Now, like most Uber drivers in this study, Sebastian is in a position where he rents his car. He, therefore, transitioned into a position of increased economic dependency due to the risk-transference business model of Uber, wherein the driver is forced to accept all responsibility for their vehicle. This model of self-employment that Uber employs also leads to workers being dependent on labouring for Uber during times of crisis. A driver named Said, told me about an instance where he had to take time out due to a family illness:

*One time I took three weeks off, purely because I have to go to Bangladesh because my wife's father wasn't well. So, I had to take time off... but that time off, three weeks, I had to take a loan out. Because there was no real cover plan in place for holidays or absences.*

Because Said had no economic protection in place to cover him in case of a family emergency, he ended up having to take out a personal loan, making him further dependent on his income from Uber as a means of covering his debt. Said went on to tell me:

*Say [your car] got damaged or the engine has broken down or it doesn't work. So, you're going to take out a loan to repair that. That loan might not be small, it could be five grand, ten grand. So, to pay that, you're still in this job. You can't just jump out ... But you're paying it back slowly and to pay it back, it takes a long time so you're still in this job. This job has a trap and the trap is that the more you work in it and the more repairs you have to do to it ... It just keeps going around in circles.*

It is easy to see how this evidence fits into the theorisation of debt offered by Lazzarato (2012, pp. 46–47); to quote, debt functions by

subordinating all possibility of choice and decision which the future holds to the reproduction of capitalist power relations ... debt appropriates not only the present labour time of wage-earners ... it also pre-empts non-chronological time, each person's future.

Uber drivers find themselves trapped into cycles of debt because the capitalist power relations that underpin Uber's model of operation (re)produce this type of dependency – a dependency where the driver is compelled to keep driving for Uber.

Indentured servitude refers to a specific contractual relationship between a labourer (who is also a debtor) and a capitalist (who is also a creditor) – the labour of the former becomes tied to the latter (Graeber, 2014). This relationship is distinguished from the more general concept of a labourer who owes money to a creditor – this labourer is still forced to sell their labour power on the market in order to repay their debts (Lazzarato, 2012), but they are free, in the liberal market sense, to sell their labour to any provider of work.

The debt experienced by the Uber drivers in this study is complicated. The fragmented nature of legal relationships means that it does not really fit the definition of indentured servitude. Firstly, the debt itself does not come from Uber – they merely brokered this debt to their drivers (though they do profit from brokerage commissions). Second, contracts with creditors, often for the financing of private hire vehicles, does not limit the driver specifically to the Uber application – they are theoretically welcome

to work elsewhere. Third, the Uber driver is not an employee of Uber, and therefore not legally bound to provide their labour to the platform for any particular length of time into the future. These facts, when considered together, allude to a situation that feels at odds with the lived experiences that drivers described – as Shoaib told me, *‘they’re ... enslaving drivers’*. This type of affect, which was common among the drivers discussed, should not exist in a theoretically free market.

As explored previously, many came to Uber because they had little other choice – the platform attracts those who are often excluded from traditional labour markets. It then encourages them into what some have described as sub-prime lending (Rosenblat, 2018). This sub-prime lending does not, theoretically, limit them to working for Uber – but in practice it often does. Uber is the dominant operator in London’s private hire market; if a driver has established themselves with a private hire vehicle on finance, then their best chance of getting work to make payments on the vehicle is by using Uber’s platform. In this way, the power of Uber’s position in the market limits the free exchange of labour. At the same time, Uber takes advantage of the self-employment relationship to transfer many of the risks and costs that would traditionally be absorbed by an employer to the driver themselves, while also maintaining a relatively low rate of pay (see also Chen et al., 2017). These conditions, at their confluence, put drivers in a situation where it is very difficult to stay out of debt and, in turn, almost impossible to stop working for Uber without encountering extreme financial complications.

The language of the free market, which Uber adopt throughout their public relations, suggests that drivers choose freely to drive for them, and liberally opt to take on debts – in this discourse, drivers are presented as the blameful party for their situation. The reality is that drivers are usually doing everything that they can to avoid destitution, working long hours and taking home little pay. At the same time, the platform benefits from commissions both on their labour and on credit sold to them. By having a pool of drivers bound to debt, the platform maintains a labour force that is always available, on demand, to make their platform appealing to customers who can, at any given moment, order an Uber.

In chapter 6, I discuss how the mechanisms through which Uber delegates managerial authority to riders further extenuates personal risk. But these circumstances of risk, that I will go on to do discuss, are preconditioned by the economic dependency that is produced by Uber. The worker is not always free to exchange their labour, as is implied by liberal models of capitalism, instead, the capitalist relations that Uber enters with its drivers produces many of them as indebted subjects who owe their future labour to the platform. Those who enter with significant amounts of capital are able to escape

these forms of dependency. Those with some capital are at risk of becoming dependent as Uber places operational risk in the hands of its drivers. Those who enter with solely their labour power have little chance of escaping dependency. The theoretical approach that I am suggesting here goes further than many who, while recognising Uber's role in exploiting labour (see 2.3), do not show how the platform actively *produces* dependency in its labourers through mechanisms of debt. While this dependency does not fit into the usual legal frameworks of indentured servitude, the lived outcome is often *de facto* the same. What manifests is a new form of indentured servitude that is born out of market authoritarianism – where Uber's monopoly in the market (discussed further in chapter 6) limits the choices available to those who provide their labour as private hire drivers.

#### 4.3 – Unpaid labour and Amazon Flex

Amazon Flex drivers in this study did not have the same relationship to debt that Uber drivers experienced; all but one of the Flex drivers I spoke to own their car outright. Due to the high number of Flex drivers available to Amazon, the number of blocks offered to any particular driver is often limited – drivers are not able to rely on a full-time equivalent income from Flex in the same way that Uber drivers can. While one Flex driver told me that he worked 22 hours per week using the platform, the majority worked between 5 and 16 hours.

However, because of a scarcity of Flex work, many of the drivers I spoke to engaged in extensive amounts of unpaid labour in an attempt to secure a block of work. The design of the Flex app requires drivers to manually refresh the app on a regular basis on the understanding that, firstly, a block may become available at any time, and also, that they have an extremely limited time to accept a block that appears. This leads to drivers spending hours of time with their phone in their hand, constantly refreshing the app in hopes of a block appearing. As one driver, Andy, told me:

*In my first month [I was refreshing the app for] about four hours every day, from seven to nine I was refreshing it, and then later in the afternoon from four to six, for the next day block I was refreshing. It wasn't nice. It was really bad at the beginning.*

Another, Simon, told me:

*there's nothing regular about it at all. There have been days where I've just got up early and spent most of the morning trying to find blocks on there because I really needed to work that day. But there's no element of guarantee at all really.*

As these examples show, the amount of time that a driver takes refreshing the app in hopes of finding a block can be substantial. In a study of Uber drivers' effective earnings, Chen et al. (2017) defined "working time" as time in which a driver is actively willing to supply labour. If we take this definition, then the hours that Andy and Simon have spent actively refreshing the app in hopes of finding a block

of work would count as uncompensated working time. Concerningly, the drivers in this study who were most dependent on the income from Flex were disproportionately engaging in this unpaid labour, doing so out of desperation.

More experienced Flex drivers developed ways to decrease their unpaid labour and increase their opportunity of getting a block. The first of these methods involved learning the times that blocks are more likely to become available. The second involved utilising pre-existing skillsets. These both constitute forms of cultural capital – which for the most part is dealt with in chapter 5 of this thesis where I show how some “entrepreneurs” are able to set themselves apart on certain platforms. However, as I made clear in the theoretical chapter, cultural capitals are both the product of labour and a way to yield higher returns from labour time. Here I want to talk about these forms of cultural capital specifically in how they relate to this uncompensated form of labour.

Ramesh told me how he manages to avoid some of the unpaid labour associated with acquiring Amazon Flex blocks by learning the patterns in when they become available:

*It's really competitive to find blocks because you have to keep refreshing ... All day, you have to click on the blocks, so it's a bit of a task. There's a bit of competition. But if you know the secret ways ... Like, if early in the morning, you get quite a lot of blocks. And evening, 2 to 3 pm, if you're looking for blocks, then it's easier. Otherwise, the other times, like 5, 6 pm, or 11, 12, it's really hard.*

A few other drivers within the study also noted key times when blocks were more likely to become available at their local depot.

However, it is worth noting that this form of capital (the knowledge of when blocks are most likely to become available) is usually reliant on extensive amounts of unpaid labour that allow the individual to learn such patterns – as Bourdieu (1986) underlines, all forms of capital, including skills and forms of knowledge are accumulated labour. Many drivers reported that the amount of unpaid labour reduced the longer that they had worked through Flex, as they learn such patterns – meaning that the capital translated into more efficient working patterns for the drivers. It is important to remember that this knowledge does not constitute a transferable skill. Knowing the most efficient times to check for Flex delivery blocks does not have value elsewhere in the economy. The investment of labour time that drivers make only benefits their efficiency in working for Amazon Flex.



The second way in which some drivers avoided unpaid labour is not technically permitted by Amazon. Additionally, it requires a relatively high level of technical skill to implement. This involves a method of “hacking” wherein drivers install software on their device that will automatically refresh the Flex app on their behalf and accept any blocks that become available. Only one driver in this study, Ryan, admitted to engaging in this practice. Not only did he manage to obtain blocks automatically, but he also reported a much higher rate of block discovery than those who had to refresh the app manually:

*With Flex, during the lean times, you're going to have to cheat to get blocks. There has been some chatter on the groups, you can buy auto-tapper devices. I have an android simulator on my PC. I have downloaded the app; it sits there on the screen and you add an auto-clicking macro-script. You get up in the morning, switch it on, and by the time you've brushed your teeth it has accepted several blocks for you, and you choose the one you want and forfeit on the rest. It's cheating.*

But Ryan's ability to automatically accept blocks is reliant upon a range of skills, knowledges and understandings that are not available to all Flex drivers. His work for flex sits alongside another income source where he builds and manages websites for a range of clients, work through which he has gained a wide range of technical skills:

*I like tech. I have a small side-line where I construct, manage and host websites for a few people. Nothing terribly big, friends of friends, I've just always liked it. When the internet first started, I got my nose into HTML code, a bit of CSS. I've always liked it.*

No other drivers in this study told me that they use automated systems to avoid the labour of manually accepting blocks. This suggests that many drivers simply do not have access to the same forms of capital required to gain this advantage on the platform. It appears from Ryan's description that this method of algorithmic block acceptance can catch blocks that would never become visible to drivers who manually refresh. Opportunities for work could therefore be hoarded by those with these advanced technical skillsets.

Overall, it appears that the most privileged Flex drivers engage in the least of this unpaid labour both because they are less desperate to find blocks and because they have accrued forms of capital that can, to some extent, avoid such engagement. To reflect back to Bourdieu, in the footnotes of 'The Forms of Capital' he states that cultural capital: 'makes it possible to derive greater profit not only from labour-time, by securing a higher yield from the same time, but also from spare time' (1986, p. 29). Bourdieu recognises that this not only has an immediate impact (less time spent working), but also has a secondary impact as this acquired spare time can be used to gain further advantage through other forms of capital accrual. Flex drivers who are not forced to spend their time refreshing the app

in search of blocks may be able to spend that time earning money in other ways, gaining qualifications or new skills, or simply having more free time to spend doing things that they enjoy. In this study the majority of Flex drivers who I interviewed were doing blocks of work around other work, studying or family commitments.

This is an inequality that appears to be built into Amazon's Flex platform – specifically their choice not to provide a notification system in place of one where the worker is required to constantly refresh. Ryan suggested that Amazon are indifferent to this problematic: 'I don't think they mind because its people clambering over each other for work. What's not to like about it from their perspective?' It is possible that this system provides advantages to Amazon's workflow at the expense of unpaid labour: if users are constantly refreshing then they will likely accept a block within seconds of it becoming available, rather than a potentially delay which might be present in waiting for drivers to check and respond to a push notification. As Ibrahim (2018) found, Flex relies on contractors to deliver packages within extremely short deadlines, sometimes within two hours. This could suggest that Amazon's streamlined workflow comes at the expense of unpaid labour from drivers who consistently refresh the app – these “entrepreneurs” might otherwise spend this uncompensated time on their studies or other work.

#### 4.4 – Capital and AirBnB

AirBnB hosts have a distinct advantage over Uber and Flex workers in that they are not as replaceable. While Uber and Flex rely on low barriers to access in order to saturate their market with anyone who can provide their labour – Uber even providing credit options to those who might be restricted by the lack of a car – AirBnB is reliant on “entrepreneurs” who have accrued sufficient economic capital to have spare sleeping capacity. As Ravenelle (2019) emphasises, AirBnB is about renting out housing based capital, but this is also intersectionally positioned, as discussed earlier (see section 3.3), home ownership in London has high levels of racial inequality. Resultantly, AirBnB's potential pool of “entrepreneurs” is limited by homeownership, but this pool is also dramatically skewed by race. White British households are much more likely than Black African households to have the potential to be legitimate AirBnB hosts due to the fact that they are more likely to own their own home. However, the requirement for AirBnB is not simply home ownership by itself, but *surplus* sleeping space, a higher barrier.

Most AirBnB hosts in this study had long and economically successful professions before starting to use AirBnB, which allowed them to purchase a property with additional living space. In some cases, they were now fully or partially retired from these careers – or shifted to alternative working patterns.

Clara described herself as semi-retired, telling me that when she does work it is geographically flexible: 'I'm a copy editor so I can work anywhere. If I've got the work, it doesn't matter where I am'. Flexible working was a common theme among AirBnB hosts. Another, Tony, tells me:

*I've stopped working full-time for other people, I now do consulting... generally for overseas governments, usually internationally funded for developing their pension systems. So, I worked in Mongolia last year, I've been working in Gambia recently. But the job comes for two or three months and then goes away for six months, so you know, I will go and work there for the time it needs.*

This indicates two things: Firstly, these subjects who use AirBnB are positioned in a different set of economic relations to the Uber and Flex drivers. Hosts usually had specialist skills that make them highly valuable in employment markets – to continue with Bourdieu's (1986) idea of capital exchange. This indicates that hosts, compared to Uber and Flex workers, are more advantaged with a range of capitals that allow them economic stability both inside and outside of the platforms – allowing them, overall, to reduce the labour time that they are required to provide in order to get by. This builds upon a conclusion made by Ravenelle that 'workers who succeed in the sharing economy ... often have significant skills or capital that would also enable them to succeed outside the sharing economy' (2017, p. 13). The majority of hosts in this study already have succeeded economically before using the platform.

Secondly, the data point towards a conceptual realisation of housing, for the purpose of this analysis, as capital – as an economic accrual from a subject's labour that can transfer back into economic gains for the subject. Bourdieu's definition of economic capital has always been extremely broad compared to those utilised by economists, referring to that which is 'immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights' (1986, p. 16). Economists have traditionally distinguished capital (as the means of production) from wealth (a store of value). However, Piketty argues that the two often share overlapping economic functionalities. In particular, he comments that 'residential real estate can be seen as a capital asset that yields "housing services" whose value is measured by their rental equivalent' (2014, p. 48). Here it seems logical to accept this duality as housing is not only serving as a store of wealth, but as a means for AirBnB hosts to earn an income.

In one case, a host had no history of employment at all and got by entirely on the income from capital. The host, James, told me that he is in the process of inheriting a portfolio of properties from his mother,

and currently lives on the income from listing them on AirBnB. This allowed James to go straight from university to a financially secure life that requires very little, if any, labour.

*George: You mentioned it's your mum who owns the properties?*

*James: For the time being. We're trying to put them in my name. I would say HMRC are a horrible organisation and inheritance tax is ridiculously high and they've got all kinds of rules in place to try and stop you even from gifting a property.*

James tells me that he has, at points in time, outsourced aspects of labour in relation to AirBnB hosting – finding gig-economy cleaners on platforms such as TaskRabbit. The AirBnB platform therefore provides an opportunity for some to avoid entering labour markets entirely. As Piketty (2015, p. 27) argues, there is a clear divide between those who inherit capital and those who only inherit their ability to perform labour which is 'not only unjust but also *inefficient*, because it reproduces itself by limiting the ability of the poor to invest and thus close the gap between themselves and the rich'. As with the Amazon Flex drivers, those with capital were able to free up their time and resources which, in turn, allows them the opportunities to pull further ahead. Intriguingly, James' experiences appear to fall outside of the description of the "gig economy" provided by Woodcock and Graham (2020, p. 11) that emphasises 'a relationship in which one person sells their time to another', as in this case James is not selling his time – he is receiving rents on his capital. As discussed in chapter 2, the terminologies of these platforms are highly contested. Some would argue that AirBnB is not part of the "gig economy" because of its focus on renting assets. However, as I discuss in the following paragraph, there is a significant role for labour.

While the majority of AirBnB hosts in this study have, or previously held, long term professional occupations which allowed them to amass sufficient economic capital (in the form of property ownership) to peruse hosting as a source of income, others such as Hannah peruse riskier strategies to earn an income from the sharing economy. Unlike most of the hosts I spoke with, Hannah does not own her own property. Instead, she rents three properties in the long-term rental market and sublets them through AirBnB – making profit from the gap between the long-term and short-term market rents. In some cases, she does this without the landlords' or leaseholders' permissions. In the past this has led to Hannah being evicted from properties and her deposit being kept by the landlord. Despite letting an entire flat, Hannah also intends to bypass London's 90-day short term letting regulation by deleting and relisting properties on AirBnB to avoid the automatic regulatory enforcement of the platform – a necessity as she cannot afford to continue paying rent on properties when they are not

rented out on AirBnB. Overall, this leads to a much riskier experience hosting on AirBnB as she is leveraging significant financial obligations.

Hannah's economic positioning means that the only opportunity for her to earn an income from AirBnB is through illegitimate means. AirBnB has a barrier to access in the form of legitimate ownership or rental of a sleeping space which you can lawfully rent out – and this provides an exclusive opportunity for profit to those with sufficient economic capital. Hosts like Hannah are framed as a threat to the landlords who demand absolute control of their property and the ability to earn money from their capital. As Hannah explained, while she promised to take liability for damage to the property, the landlord still refused based on the idea that *'he didn't want me to profit from his property'*. While a few landlords have allowed their tenants to host on AirBnB, there remains a persistent economic barrier to who can and cannot legitimately profit from housing.

As with Uber and Amazon Flex, experiences for AirBnB hosts appear to be unequal in ways that circulate the distribution of capital. Beck (1992, p. 35) argues that 'poverty attracts an unfortunate abundance of risks. By contrast, the wealthy (in income, power or education) can purchase safety and freedom from risk' – but the data presented here suggests that risk needs to be integrated into relational understandings of capitalism. In the case of Uber, relief from risk is not purchased, but instead transferred to drivers – and reemphasised through relations of debt that force drivers to continue working. As Ravenelle (2019, p. 102) argues, 'Uber has not entirely ignored worker risks – it's just that any costs associated with protecting drivers are borne by workers'. Likewise, with Flex, drivers feel like the risks have been passed to them by the platform. Tommy told me:

*Apparently, I'm insured for when I'm working as a Flex driver and according to the app there's a thing. But, I mean, I did have an accident the other day ... so I did actually look at the thing yesterday, or two days ago, to see what sort of claim, but it's like a £500 minimum. So, you know, you're slightly on your own.*

Because the platform often fails to provide protection to "entrepreneurs", they are usually required to utilise their own economic resources to accommodate for risk.

In the case of AirBnB, risk still appears to be distributed in ways that relate to capital. This points towards a nuancing of arguments made by Ravenelle (2019): while risks are passed from platforms to "entrepreneurs", the latter group is not equal in its capacity to accommodate and manage these risks. Some "entrepreneurs" are affected more than others. It was common for AirBnB hosts in this study to have some form of specialist insurance to cover them in the case of something going wrong while

they were renting their property through AirBnB. The most extreme example of this came from Peter, who owns a property that is considered a London landmark and who personally works within finance, consulting a range of international governments. Peter tells me about his bespoke insurance:

*I've got special insurance. I've had a policy written at Lloyd's of London for me specially. Had it designed bespoke for me... public liability. The scare story I throw at people is the guest who drops something out of a window that hits a pedestrian in the street below, as it were, are you covered for that? And you would, in most household insurances, be covered if you or your family did something, but if an AirBnB guest did something your insurance company would probably say it was void ... My bespoke insurance covers that.*

Peter's extensive financial capacity allows him to have insurance policies written to meet his individual requirements – something beyond the reach of most hosts. A more common case for hosts in this study was to utilise insurance policies offered by start-ups specifically targeting the host market.

However, working class hosts, who generally participated in AirBnB's market to make ends meet, did not have the same ability to avoid financial risk. A host called Katie who relies on income from AirBnB to pay her mortgage, told me about her flat being destroyed during a flood:

*I actually couldn't do an Airbnb for a while ... I have building insurance, but I had no contents, so all my dry goods... All my white goods, all my brown goods, damaged. Well, everything was damaged... If you saw it, it was just a... I couldn't live there, like I said, for nearly nine months.*

Because of her economic restrictions, Katie had to reduce her insurance coverage to cover just the building, rather than her contents, which resulted in her being financially exposed when her flat flooded. This risk resulted in significant outcomes for Katie, who now sleeps on a camp bed while letting her guests sleep on the one bed she owns. Beyond this, she was unable to rent out her spare room on AirBnB for the duration of repairs on her property – temporarily losing a significant segment of her income. Despite earning a commission on every guest Katie hosts, AirBnB offered no support when Katie experienced disruption. AirBnB's business model protects the company from exposure to these types of risk that hosts have to directly face and manage themselves – and those without sufficient resources end up in the most precarious positions when risks materialise.

#### 4.5 – Economics of personal risk

Throughout the previous three sections of this chapter, I have discussed economic risk on each platform – I integrated economic risk into the previous discussions because it usually directly impacted upon the economic relationship with the platform. That is to say, if an AirBnB host or Uber/Flex driver loses their form of capital (surplus sleeping space or a car, respectively) then they no longer have the means to utilise the platform. Personal risk is separated here because its role, while related, is slightly

more complicated. The main argument I make here is that personal risk can be reduced by capital, and increased by debt – that it corresponds with the requirement to provide in-person labour

In the first instance, the most notable divide emerges in the requirement for physical presence: It is possible for some AirBnB hosts, such as James, to avoid all physical involvement in order to earn an income from the platform. This is made possible through both the platform's nature (which allows possibilities for hosts with sufficient capital to separate themselves) and the economic positioning of an individual host. Among AirBnB hosts, this tends to create a spectrum where different hosts, by having access to different quantities of capital, are able to provide themselves with different amounts of physical separation.

Tanya, a host who rents out a garden house at the bottom of her garden, describes how she would not feel safe if she had to rent a room within her house:

*Yeah... I think I would feel inclined to put a lock on my door... who's to say... I mean, I have an alarm on my house. I was thinking of putting my spare room on AirBnB... but then I think no... I'd have to give them my alarm code and a copy of my key. The garden room is totally separate; the worst thing that they can do is trash that.*

But many hosts in this study were not so fortunate as to be physically separated from the space that they rent out. Hannah, who hosts with her daughter, mentioned how one male guest behaved in ways that made her daughter feel uncomfortable: 'he was staring at her chest when he was talking to her and asking if she wanted to go out'. Another host, Sandra, spoke of a number of different occasions where male guests behaved in ways that she found inappropriate: 'I had one married guy that suggested we went for a drink but in a kind of slightly flirtatious way. That felt a bit uncomfortable.' Both Hannah and Sandra share space with their guests – meaning that they are unable to physically separate themselves from these types of risk.

The type of physical separation that some hosts, like Tanya and James, experience is not possible at all on labour-focused platforms like Uber and Amazon Flex. Wealthy Uber drivers or Amazon Flex deliverers can do little to physically separate themselves from customers – they will always experience this type of bodily exposure because of the platform's requirement for their labour. In chapter 6, I will discuss an Uber driver, here called Sebastian, who is economically dependent on the platform and therefore has tolerated a high degree of personal risk from passengers who sexually assaulted him. Unlike AirBnB hosts who can utilise economic capacity to escape from personal risk, Uber drivers are constantly engaging in intimate situations with customers as a necessity of their role as a driver. These

examples show a platform level divide, as different platforms offer different possibilities for “entrepreneurs” – and those such as AirBnB can be utilised to facilitate an exposure that purely consists of capital. Among Uber and Amazon Flex workers, labour must always be exchanged in ways that require physical presence.

Apart from physical separation with customers, another way in which some risks can be mitigated is through choosing which jobs to accept. However, as with physical separation, the ability to reject jobs is an economic privilege – others are ‘obliged to [work] in order to subsist’ (Huws, 2014, p. 152). There is also evidence that platforms increase potential earnings for drivers who were willing to take on more risk. As Andy explains: *‘when it was snowing it was very risky ... they increased the prices so high. £70 to go and deliver...’* This shows the use of economic power to trade risk onto those most in need of money. Those with more economic resources will have a greater degree of choice for when they work. This highlights that Beck’s (1992) argument that those with resources can buy relief from risk, in this reality, means paying to pass it on to someone who has little choice but to accept it in order to subsist.

Hannah mentioned how, when she first started on AirBnB, the ability to accept only female guests provided her with a degree of comfort: *‘I think for the first year I would only let women stay, or families.’* Likewise, Anna describes the benefits of being able to control the gender of the guest for a member of her local home-sharing club who perceives higher risks:

*[she] is a pensioner, she lives on her own. So, she only accepts women in her flat. She doesn’t want guys in her house because she’s an old lady who lives on her own, you know, so she’s more comfortable.*

While the majority of women who host in this study did accept male guests, they liked having the ability to choose. This choice allows women with sufficient economic resources (who have the ability to turn guests away without substantial consequences) to avoid gendered devaluation in contexts of intimacy.

#### 4.6 – Conceptualising the “gig economy” for economic class analysis

This chapter has addressed the research question of: How do relations of economic capital, labour and debt present themselves within the platform economy? In answering this question, I have attempted to respond to those who have argued that a new theoretical understanding is needed to determine how categories such as labour, profit and rent relate to digital economies (Fuchs, 2017; Huws, 2014; Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017). While others (Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017) have found the level of dependency on the platform to be a key factor in perception of life in the “gig



economy”, I argue that the terminology of dependency requires complicating. As Skeggs argues, we must look beyond labelling and describing differences to, instead, ‘understand the processes of classification: exploitation, domination, dispossession and devaluation, and their legitimisation’ (2015, p. 205). I, therefore, try to shift away from describing those who are dependent – in its place, I bring the focus to more specific underlying socio-economic relations of capital, labour and debt that *produce* various forms and extents of dependency. By shifting the epistemological focus from individuals to these socio-economic *relations* that produce their subjectivities, we can shift from an individualistic concentration to a more contextual understanding of the role that platforms themselves play in determining the experiences of their workers. AirBnB hosts may, for instance, have a privileged relationship to the market because of their capital which significantly reduces their need to sell their labour through their rental profiteering. On the other hand, an Uber driver’s positionality, often having only their labour to sell, puts them into relations of debt which serve to exploit their labour further.

I argue that we can reconceptualise this economy, in the first instance, by looking back to the relations of capital and labour that Marx (1887) put forward. Labour becomes crystallised into capital which can subsequently be utilised to earn further income by replacing requirements for labour. Many works have looked at the role of labour exploitation in the “gig economy” (To name just a few: Hill (2015), Ravenelle (2017, 2019), Schor and Attwood-Charles (2017), Woodcock and Graham (2020)). However, as the Marxist tradition has generally argued: ‘the fundamental source of inequality is ... the unequal ownership of capital’ (Piketty, 2015, p. 26). The “gig economy” is not simply a space in which labour is put to work – but also capital(s). Both labour and economic capital are vitally important for understanding the trajectories that “entrepreneurial” subjects experience on these platforms – those who enter the economy with capital have a decidedly different experience to those who enter without.

I also argue that those without capital often end up in debt, serving as an obligation on their future labour (Lazzarato, 2012) – meaning that the worker not only needs to utilise their labour to earn their income, but also to repay their debt that is often undertaken on in order to gain access to the platform’s market. However, the indebted Uber driver does not exist as an isolated object of study – the indebtedness of the driver is (re)produced through ongoing class relations. As Wacquant (2013) emphasises, the tradition stemming from Marxism sees the basis of inequality being built around relations of power. The connection between debt and class is not a new phenomenon, in fact, Marx points out that ‘the class-struggles of the ancient world took the form chiefly of a contest between debtors and creditors’ (1887, p. 87). In the case of Uber, I have tried to argue that the platform itself

*produces* relationships of dependency through mechanisms of debt which work as an obligation on the future labour of the “entrepreneur” and corrode their ability to leave the platform. This is a class relationship that plays out through mechanisms of debt.

Finally, I reflect back upon the classed nature of risk. Risk has been recognised as a feature of the “gig economy” before (discussed in chapter 2). What I try to underline in my argument is that risk is not equally distributed among “gig economy” “entrepreneurs” – which some theorisations might imply (Ravenelle, 2019). But rather than being distributed in ways which are ‘unfortunate’ (Beck, 1992, p. 35), or built upon ideas of an agentic subject, the experiences of risk are dispersed in ways that reflect underlying class relationships. Those who enter the “gig economy” with the least resources are the most exposed to the greatest risks due to the economic relations that trade risk onto those with the least power in ways that are difficult to refuse.

Overall, I am arguing that a classed conceptualisation of the “gig economy” cannot only look at labour exploitation in isolation. The roles of capital and debt, and how these relate to labour practices, risk and exploitation, are equally as important in trying to understand classed subject trajectories in this type of “entrepreneurship”. This has theoretical implications in that it requires us to go beyond Marxist theories of labour exploitation to also include approaches which account for debt and those which provide further insights into the role that capital can play. Here I am starting to pull apart the idea of a singular class theory that explains the “gig economy” by drawing out the pluralistic nature of platforms and the forms of class relationship that exist. It is precisely because the “gig economy” is such a diverse and imprecise terminology that we require a theoretical toolkit that can account for the diversity that exists both between and within platforms. In this chapter, I have analysed the first axis of differentiation that emerged from the study: the mixture of labour, capital and debt that is utilised on platforms – and showcased how this variety requires an adaptive way of looking at class that goes beyond a straightforward analysis of labour exploitation.

In the following chapter, I will build upon this to show how some “entrepreneurs” on competitive market platforms are able to leverage non-economic forms of capital for economic advantage; before turning attention (in chapter 6) to look at how non-competitive platforms exploit these additional forms of capital by only compensating the “entrepreneur” for their immediate labour time. Across these two chapters, I will build insights into the second axis of differentiation in the “gig economy” that exists around the level of competitiveness within a platform – which helps guide a theoretical analysis of class.

## 5 – Becoming a subject of value

### 5.1 – How different platforms recognise subject value

In the previous chapter I highlighted how some Amazon Flex workers were able to accrue skillsets that allowed them an advantage on the platform (see 4.3). Those who had learned hidden patterns in the platform's operation or utilised their technological knowledge to "cheat" in obtaining blocks, were able to get ahead and have a beneficial outcome (in less labour time expenditure and more access to blocks of work). These skillsets constituted forms of cultural capital that are attached to the subject. While these forms of capital are not strictly economic, they were convertible into economic advantages where the platform allowed – following the logic of a capital accruing subject put forward by Bourdieu (1986). This chapter addresses these occurrences, where cultural and social capitals yield economic returns, more thoroughly by answering the second research question of the project: How are cultural and social capitals put to work in the platform economy?

One of the most significant findings I present across this chapter and the one which follows it is the difference in possibility for cultural and social capitals to be utilised for the "entrepreneur's" economic benefit across platforms. While some have argued that Uber requires minimal skills beyond being able to drive (Ravenelle, 2019), I will take a slightly different stance. While driving for Uber may not require specific skillsets or other forms of cultural and social capital as an access barrier, drivers often still provide these – in the form of dedicated customer service and commitment to the customer experience more generally. However, they do not yield economic rewards from these skills and forms of capital utilisations. The Uber platform does not have a competitive market. A driver with a higher rating is not given more trips than a driver with a lower rating. An Uber customer cannot choose which driver they want. Additionally, unlike AirBnB hosts who can set their nightly rates, 'Uber unilaterally sets and changes the rates at which [drivers] earn their income' (Rosenblat, 2018, p. 87). There is, in other words, a platform differential wherein cultural and social capitals are less easy to convert into economic advantage for an Uber driver than they are, for instance, an AirBnB host.

That is not to say that there are no ways at all for an Uber driver to gain an advantage. Like Amazon Flex drivers who developed the knowledge of when to check for blocks, Uber drivers learned peak times and hotspot areas. On Uber driver, Mike, told me that he could earn '£100 on a weekday, [but] £150 on Fridays and Saturdays. Because there's more work.' Another, Richard, went into further detail, telling me:

*I only work nights, and I work... Usually, I try to work like 6:00 PM to 6:00 AM, and I work kind of like Tuesday to Saturday. So, like, I finish Sunday morning, at 6:00 AM ... I think the return on the investment of the hours I put is much higher.*

Uber drivers did show strategy and were able to put their knowledge to use in gaining some economic advantage, despite the limited opportunities that the platform provides for drivers to set themselves apart.

However, of the three platforms in this study, AirBnB clearly stood out as a platform that provides a multitude of opportunities for a wide range of social and cultural capitals to be put to work. Hosts can put their hospitality skills forward and showcase their house with the right “character” in hopes of setting themselves apart from the crowd, enabling them to gain better reviews and, often, to set a higher price. In some cases, hosts were able to achieve “Superhost” status, a reward given to hosts with sustained high ratings. This status provides ways for hosts to stand out on the platform and gain substantial economic and affective returns. However, differences remain within platforms as well as between them. In this chapter, I also pay attention to hosts who do not have the right forms of capital to be recognised as valuable, and the subsequent outcomes that they experience. I therefore aim to show a complicated realisation of subjectivity in the “gig economy”, where both the potentials of the particular platform and the resources of the subject come to a point of market-value legibility that relates to the outcomes that “entrepreneurs” experienced.

In this chapter, I deal with the competitive platform that AirBnB provides, showing how hosts utilise cultural and social capitals to set themselves apart and market themselves on the platform – a form of subjectivity linked back to Bourdieu (1986), discussed extensively in an earlier section (see 2.6). In the next chapter (6), I will turn attention back to the other platforms within this study (Uber and Amazon Flex), where the lack of a competitive marketplace or price-setting stops “entrepreneurs” from distinguishing themselves in ways that have substantial economic results. As I mentioned in the methodology chapter (see section 3.6), this distinction between subjectivities on competitive and non-competitive platforms ended up being one of the key findings of the study – while the former use rating and review systems to allow “entrepreneurs” to set themselves apart and receive economic rewards, the latter utilise surveillance systems as a disciplinary mechanism without reward. To be clear, AirBnB is far from the only “gig economy” platform with a competitive marketplace (this is also utilised on labour-focused services such as Fiverr), but as it is the only competitive marketplace-based platform analysed within this study.

## 5.2 – Who hosts?

In the previous chapter, I mentioned that hosts had often maintained extensive professional careers that allowed them an economic advantage before they started seeking additional income on AirBnB. Tony, who attended Cambridge University, now runs his own company and consults governments.

Another, Jonathan, designed parts for the space shuttle while doing his degree in electrical and computer engineering in the United States – but since then changed professions and became a business consultant. Katrina and Vanessa, both work at research companies in central London. Eleonora, who gained her master's degree in biomedicine while she was living in Italy, now works at a university hospital in London. These careers would classify as “elite” (in the case of Tony), or “middle class” for most others, according to Savage et al.'s (2015) study of class in the United Kingdom. However, as Savage et al. (2015; 2013) also argue, these types of career pathways often co-exist with a high number of social and cultural capitals. Attendance of elite universities alone provides an extensive range of social and cultural advantages (Wakeling & Savage, 2015). In this study, just 3 of the 18 AirBnB hosts interviewed had a level of education below a complete university degree – while this is not statistically representative of hosts in London, it speaks to the socio-economic circumstance of the hosts that I spoke to.

Evidence of capital-rich hosts emerged even during the recruitment process. In the first instance, posts to AirBnB host Facebook groups requesting participants were met with community members searching my name online and questioning my research agenda. The fact that hosts were able to investigate me in this way speaks to a capability that was not equally present across all of the recruitment sites. After interviews had taken place, some served as unprompted advocates for myself and the study, responding to comments on my behalf to tell other hosts that I was worth talking to. This attests to the significant social capital to which some hosts had access – developed both online and offline through hosting events and meetups. One host told me that she had previously travelled to Paris to meet other hosts at an AirBnB arranged event, showcasing a significant economic investment in the accrual of social and cultural capitals. Hosts trusted each other and utilised their community as a reliable source of information.

Likewise, these AirBnB hosts made clear attempts to network with me. Unlike the participants from Uber and Flex, AirBnB hosts appeared interested in developing a relationship of mutual benefit. They often asked if we could keep in touch after the interview, sending me follow up messages and asking me questions about my life as a PhD researcher. This type of interaction points towards a theorisation of subjectivity that operates with strategies co-ordinated towards a projected future self, who might benefit from being able to exchange and recover value from the development of a social network. In other words, these hosts appeared to embody the capital accruing subjectivity promoted by Bourdieu (1986).

This type of social behaviour that focuses on building a network of contacts can provide hosts with economic rewards. One host, Marjorie, told me about how building connections with guests leads to repeat custom for her:

*Marjorie: I have people come back again, and you know, yes, so that's a lot of fun too, to keep up that connection as well.*

*George: So, in some ways, it's almost an investment - having a good relationship with a guest in the first instance it means that they're going to come back again, do you think?*

*Marjorie: Oh yes, definitely, yes. Or they will send other people, because I've had people from Australia that have sent like one couple sent the sister and brother-in-law when they were coming, yes.*

Building a social network is, therefore, translatable into economic returns, as Bourdieu (1986) theorises - this type of capital accruing subjectivity is beneficial to AirBnB hosts who have the resources to build these connections. The hosts I spoke to, for the most part, possessed the embodied cultural capitals necessary to build social networks wherever possible.

The fact that hosts embody this type of personhood is important because it shows that they have the capitals necessary to be successful elsewhere, not just in the “gig economy”; This affords them a greater agency over their use of the platform. Along with economic capitals, cultural capitals have the capacity to reduce dependency on the platform in addition to providing an economic advantage within the platform. In this way, I go further in my response to the passive notion of dependency provided by Schor and Attwood-Charles (2017) than I did in the previous chapter. In the previous chapter, I argued that my “gig workers” have their dependency produced by the platform. Here, I show how dependency can be reduced by cultural and social capitals and the socio-economic relations that exist around these on competitive market platforms. As I have argued in this section, hosts have access to valuable symbolic resources such as education from elite institutions and experience working on prestigious projects. These forms of capital are valued through the dominant symbolic ordering of society (Skeggs, 2004b) and are, therefore, exchangeable for economic advantage more generally (Bourdieu, 1986) – it is these underlying symbolic power relations that serve to reduce the dependency that hosts experience (on top of their economic power discussed previously in section 4.4) and recognise them in society more generally as subjects of value. Hosts in my study, for the most part, arrived on AirBnB pre-recognised in society as valuable.

However, not all AirBnB hosts in the study were so capital-wealthy. Katie, who was mentioned in the previous chapter in relation to her flooded apartment, works night shifts as a London Underground station attendant. She comes from a Scottish working-class family and, although she has a degree, she obtained it through evening classes over the course of five years while working full time on the railways. Unlike Marjorie, Katie did not profess to using AirBnB as a way to construct a valuable social network. Instead, she told me: *'I'm only doing it for the money, and that's a terrible thing to say. And I don't believe anyone who says, I do this to meet other people. Get stuffed! Join a club then! You don't!'* This suggests that Katie doesn't see the same economic potential in building social networks with her guests – this also demonstrates that AirBnB hosts form a pluralistic group that cannot be simply condensed into a theoretically conceived capital accruing subject.

### 5.3 – Labouring for ratings

On AirBnB's platform, ratings can make a difference to a host's ability to earn an income. Because the guest chooses which property they will stay in, a host with lower ratings will likely have a reduced ability to earn an income from the platform as guests choose higher-rated options. Hosts are able to achieve "Superhost" status on the platform if they sustain an average rating above 4.8, cancel less than 1% of bookings, respond to more than 90% of booking requests within 24 hours and host more than either 10 stays in the past year or 3 stays totalling over 100 nights. Several of the hosts who took part in this study were "Superhosts" and therefore had access to the respective benefit package that AirBnB offers. Paybacks of "Superhost" status include priority placing of your property across the platform (resulting in increased possibility for bookings), the choice of a \$100 voucher for AirBnB accommodation each year or free professional photography for your property, as well as priority support and discounted accountancy. I argue that high ratings on AirBnB, and the associated "Superhost" status that some achieve, are forms of institutional cultural capital. For Bourdieu (1986, p. 20), institutional cultural capital is 'a certificate of cultural competence', a recognition that is tied to an institution and convertible to economic gains. However, like all forms of capital within Bourdieu's frame of reference, ratings on AirBnB are the product of labour or transformation.

Katrina, a host who relies on her "Superhost" status, explained the labour that she and her partner commit in order to maintain their status on the platform:

*I think at one point we dropped off from being Superhosts and had to earn it back again. It's definitely a lot of work. Especially my boyfriend, he puts a lot of work into recommendations and getting them set-up and sending those images, and whatever. We definitely take it seriously; we have a checklist for cleaning when we are getting the place ready. It's a lot of*

*work. A few weeks ago, I was up till two o'clock in the morning, mopping the floors and scrubbing walls and whatever. So yes, we definitely take it seriously.*

Anna, a working-class host who sublets the bed of her one-bed flat while sleeping on the living room sofa, described the experience of getting a four-star rating:

*as a super-host, if I get four-out-of-fives, I take them very seriously - not always personally but very seriously because if I get too many of those I'll lose my Superhost status and I'll be downgraded which means that I won't be as visible, I have the potential to lose customers coming to my place which I rely on for my income.*

For these Superhosts, the status that they have achieved on the platform represents an accumulation of the labour time. Additionally, in the perception of these hosts, it has a clear and tangible link to the economic outcomes that they experience.

But not all hosts felt that they needed Superhost status. Those with a secure income from other sources, or a property in a more prestigious location, often had a more relaxed approach to their ratings. Tony, who makes more money on the platform than any of the other hosts I spoke to (in excess of £4,000 per month), told me that he uses ratings as a tool for assessing his pricing strategy: *'I sometimes get rated four for value, that's good. If you get five every time for value, you're not charging enough, as it were'*. This attitude places significantly less dependency on the rating system – for Tony, the income benefit derived from the rating system is less significant in relation to his overall income. Another host, Sandra, told me that she remains more indifferent to her ratings because she is not dependent on the income from AirBnB, and would rather escape from the labour necessary to uphold Superhost status:

*To some people, the Superhost status is absolutely crucial. Because for a lot of people, this is their livelihood. I don't care about it, but I know my neighbour is obsessed with maintaining it and she does anything she can to keep it. And I just think, you know, you shouldn't have to jump through hoops like that just to try and keep kind of in their good books.*

However, while hosts like Tony remained indifferent to their ratings and Superhost status, openly accepting 4-star reviews, they continued to be fully booked and were able to continue charging high rates. Not all hosts are required to labour to set themselves apart, some are able to do it through transforming their existing capitals as I will discuss in the following section.

#### 5.4 – Transforming capital

Hosts in this study did not simply engage with cultural capital for their own enjoyment. Instead, they explained how it made them better hosts and gave them an advantage on the platform through



intricately designed profiles and listings, professional photography and the rating and review system that recognises their value through transformation of existing forms of capital.

Tanya, the host who rents out her garden room, told me that she feels her Superhost status connects to the vast cultural knowledge that she has built up over her life through living and working in other countries, as well as her more recent involvement in organising charity events:

*I do a lot of social things, I do a lot of charity stuff, I've organised bingo nights and cake sales for a hospice ... I used to be a waitress when I was in New York and France ... and I worked in a ski resort ... you know, you learn how to present things.*

For Tanya, the high ratings and “Superhost” status originate from her accrued development of skills and understandings. These embodied forms of cultural capital allow her the possibility of being a ‘hospitable’ host and reaping the economic rewards that come with a high average rating.

Hosts also engaged in Bourdieuan (2013) distinction, setting themselves apart from the marketplace by utilising unique cultural capital. Nikki, an AirBnB host based in Camden told me that *‘[her] home is very different from most IKEA places’*, referencing her collection of vintage ornaments. Another, Kelly, told me that to be a good host *‘you need to have some sort of decorating and design skill’*. But rather than simply being an internal reflection, these distinctions become recognised through ratings and reviews. Nikki attributed her high ratings in part to her objectified cultural capital, claiming that *‘people say it’s like a museum’*. Nikki’s value has also been recognised by AirBnB directly as they chose her to be one of the faces of their London marketing campaign. AirBnB paid Nikki to photograph and film her house – this footage was used extensively in online, television and physical advertising banners. As she explained *‘I’ve been used by AirBnB quite a bit for publicity, I’ve been part of various committees, and now I’m part of a home sharing club in Camden’*. Another host, Jane, who attended an AirBnB event in Paris told me that *‘there was [a] guy, now on the staff of AirBnB, but he spoke to me about interior design for AirBnB properties to make them look expensive, to appeal to a particular kind of market. And he waved pictures of One Hyde Park, suggesting we do it like that’* – indicating that these forms of objectified “high culture” capital (Savage et al. 2015) are recognised and valued within AirBnB’s market.

Tony, the aforementioned Superhost who welcomes four-star reviews, owns without mortgage an iconic London property. When talking of his property, he told me:

*It’s unique and it’s unusual, it’s a listed building, it’s full of character, you know, it’s a landmark, and as such it attracts an awful lot more interest than something that’s just a bedroom in*

*somebody's house. So, people like the idea of staying somewhere unusual and quirky. It's normally been listed in those sorts of places to stay in Airbnb, so therefore people, quite a lot of people will have seen it in newspaper or magazine articles listing places to go.*

The property that Tony owns exists inside a highly recognisable structure within central London that has received institutional accreditation from Historic England, who provide its listed status. As with ratings, I argue that this listed status constitutes another form of institutional cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). While Bourdieu used institutional cultural capital to talk predominantly of academic institutions bestowing legitimacy through qualification, it is possible to adapt the concept to look at other types of institutions whose qualifications have a similar functionality within the symbolic economy. Like with educational qualification, 'the material and symbolic profits which the ... qualification guarantees ... depend on its scarcity' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). The highly selective nature of the listing process, in recognising properties it believes to be of historic importance, provides a presumed legitimacy to the cultural importance of the structure. The host's use of language also points towards this distinctive cultural scarcity surrounding his property, pointing to its *unique* and *unusual* character. The scarcity here is not a materialistic supply and demand scarcity of London's housing market, indeed, the host makes a clear distinction between his own property and others which are materially identical – '*a bedroom in somebody's house*' – what draws the property apart is its cultural identification. There is also a distinction of the subject taking place within this declaration, as he is not just *somebody* whose house is ordinary – he is recognising not just his property but also himself, as the owner of such a property, as being distinguished and visible against others.

Tony describes his property as being consistently booked 365 days of the year and he is able to demand £150 per night for a room within his property – much higher than the earnings of most Airbnb hosts within London who are renting a room within their property. In the pre-interview survey, he declared his Airbnb specific earnings to be above £4,000 per month (this was the highest category made available to participants and Tony was the only study participant who receives such an income from a platform). This income can be compared to materially similar listings from hosts in the same part of London who are also renting one room within their house. Jannette declared her earnings within the £800-£899 per month category and described her property as being occupied between half and two-thirds of the time - significantly less both in income and occupancy rate compared to what Tony is able to achieve. Another host, Anna, who is also renting one room in the same part of London declared greater occupancy rates, aiming for 90 per cent, but her monthly earnings were less, between £700-£799. These data point towards a cultural value that allows Tony's property to be valued much higher than hosts with materially similar offerings. Hosts like Tony and Nikki utilise their

cultural distinction to separate themselves from the market – rather than being like ‘most IKEA places’ or ‘just ... a bedroom in somebody’s house’ they recognise their properties as being unique due to their cultural endowment – something that is recognised through AirBnB’s systems of legibility and produces economic rewards.

Interestingly, these forms of recognition also had an affective impact on some of the hosts in this study. Those with the right forms of capital, who were able to distinguish themselves on the platform, begin to recognise themselves as subjects of value through the mechanisms of the platform. Alex, a host in Soho, told me:

*I’m a bit smug, I get the ratings that I’m getting and the fees that I’m getting, so I’m doing a pretty good job. So, I’m not sure what I could do better. You know, you can only get five stars. You can’t get six.*

For these hosts, having their value datafied is a positive affective experience because they are being quantified and qualified as valuable, and gaining economic rewards from this judgment. Nikki told me ‘I have to say AirBnB absolutely empowers people, I’m an absolutely classic, average host ... I believe it’s empowering...’ But this feeling of empowerment was not universal among hosts in the study. The recognition of value inherent in AirBnB ratings relies on particular forms of capital which are translatable within the platform. Hosts who don’t present the “right” form of capital experienced a very different relationship to the rating system and platform.

### 5.5 – If you don’t have the right capital

Katie, a previously discussed AirBnB host who describes her background as being ‘very working class’, was eager to tell me how much she disliked being rated by guests:

*I hate it because ... the way they review you is really subjective, and I know it’s going to be. But I’d rather... Airbnb, if they’re going to have ratings at all, they should have questions. Did they have this? Did they have that? Did you find the house was pleasant and friendly? Did you...? You know, really closed answers because people can get really nasty when it’s a personality thing.*

Because of her economic positioning, Katie’s apartment is not adorned with vintage one-of-a-kind furnishings like Nikki’s. Nor is it a place of special historical value, like Tony’s. It’s a basement flat that is missing many basic necessities that were destroyed when it was flooded. If Nikki were to aim for Superhost status, she would not be able to simply transform value from accrued cultural and social capitals. Alternatively, she could use her labour, like Anna and Katrina do, to try and set herself apart by providing the best possible service. But, unlike Katrina, Katie lives alone, and all the labour associated with hosting falls on her shoulders. Anna also lived alone like Katie, but only worked

occasional freelance hours, meaning she was free for extended periods of time to do the labour associated with hosting. Katie, on the other hand, works nightshifts and told me that she regularly signs up to do overtime to help pay the bills.

Like many of the other hosts, Katie saw the rating as a subjective judgment upon herself – but unlike the other hosts in this study, Katie is repeatedly judged negatively by her guests and these judgments are made highly legible by the rating and review system. Without access to the right forms of capital, without embodying the right cultural capital in her person, she feels little agency over her ratings:

*You can't do anything ... I don't like the way it's done, as I say, because it's subjective. I think it should be closed-questioned, really, rather than... You know, because you're giving people an open forum. In a way... I think a lot of them don't realise that you actually see, and there's a bit on the review where it's says, "anything else?" and I don't think they realise. I think they think it's for Airbnb. They don't realise that when they write something here, and the worst thing is they don't say it to your face. They flipping say it to everything but your face, and that annoys me so much because you were there in the house with them.*

Katie's experience is notable for the lack of control that she feels over her ratings and reviews when compared to other hosts in this study. Unlike them, she does not have access to the forms of capital necessary to be valued through the platform. She particularly took issue with the fact that the platform allows guests to rate hosts (and vice versa) without a face-to-face communication – meaning she has little capacity to address judgments made against her before they become publicly visible. While this is true for all hosts, Katie found it particularly difficult because she has little understanding of what she might be doing to get the low ratings (as she describes, it's '*really subjective*'). In my interview with Katie she appeared to embody the working class woman's habitus, as drawn out by Skeggs (1997), being loud, boisterous and lacking in the middle class presentation of embodied capitals.

This reflects a range of findings by other scholars who have shown that the dominant class and gender relations that inform symbolic subject formation devalue women, especially working class women who are seen only as deficit due to their lack of the correct forms of capital (Skeggs, 1997). Additionally, single women, such as Katie, are perceived as being particularly symbolically lacking (Reynolds & Taylor, 2005), fading with age towards invisibility (Sharp & Ganong, 2011). But this remains inherently classed – as middle class white women can engage in strategies of resistance to such devaluation (Zajicek & Koski, 2003). While the middle-class female hosts who participated in this study described being able to utilise their agency to accrue the right skills to fare well against judgement, Katie

describes how she *'can't do anything'* – rather than engaging in practices that attempt to construct a valuable future, Katie is simply trying to secure her present, mirroring a theoretical distinction drawn between middle and working class forms of personhood by Skeggs (2004b).

Katie's experience is important because it showcases the way in which inequality functions through this type of competitive market platform. Hosts like Katie are judged against dominant symbolic values which reflect existing class and gender inequalities and actively reproduce them on the platform. While my study does not account for racial differences among AirBnB hosts (see the sample limitation discussed in 3.4), scholars such as Skeggs (2004a) have noted from the theoretical level how symbolic devaluation of race often functions in a similar way, and evidence from Galperin (2017) appears to show this alongside gender (2019) when looking at other competitive market platforms. This is different to the way in which inequality functions on platforms without a competitive market (see chapter 6). In the following section I develop competitive market inequalities approach further by showing the interactions between economic, cultural and social capitals in the context of the commodified host.

#### 5.6 – Presence and commodification of the subject

Being an AirBnB host often involves a heavy focus on social intimacy (Schoenbaum, 2016) – the host is sometimes sharing a living space with their guests. The economic restrictions on Katie make it impossible to physically separate herself from her guests in ways that many of the other hosts in this study could do. As Huws (2014) argues, commoditisation in digital economies is often based around processes of standardisation. This theme of standardisation is noted by Bourdieu in relation to institutionally endowed capital. Bourdieu describes, in relation to his example of the academic qualification as an institutional cultural capital, that 'by conferring institutional recognition on the cultural capital possessed by any given agent, the academic qualification also makes it possible to compare qualification holders and even to exchange them (by substituting one for another in succession)' (1986, p. 21). So, to follow my line of argument, a Superhost (to some degree) is replaceable with another Superhost. Both have proven themselves as valuable within the AirBnB marketplace through the rating and review system. But what we then have, also, is the process of standardisation that is associated with commodification – as Nikki told me: *'AirBnB are also trying to get us to constantly increase our standards so that we can provide a far more professional experience'*.

Hosts who can separate their own physical presence from that which they rent out often talk about how they have commoditised their AirBnB space through the transformation of capitals. Tony, for instance told me about how he *'put a little studio kitchen in'* his guest room, so that guests would have

the ability to make their breakfast – but this form of separation was not available to all hosts. Those who shared intimate space with guests would not provide a commoditised separate space, but rather, their own space would be commoditised and judged against dominant symbolic value. As Skeggs who argues, ‘all standards of value are expressions of power’ (2015, p. 214) that form conflict and struggle between groups. The dominant symbolic values that present themselves in society have generally reflected middle class taste, building upon Bourdieu (1986, 2013), Skeggs argues claims that ‘capacity to judge which people, activities and objects have value, is ... one of the main ways through which the middle class legitimate their own power’ (2015, p. 215).

Hosts who share intimate space but who embody middle-class values and tastes were less impacted by these pressures – as discussed earlier, they often simply saw it as a recognition of their value. Nikki was pleased when her guests described her home as a museum because of her range of vintage ornaments. They live their lives in ways which are perceived as valuable through the “dominant symbolic” (Skeggs, 2004a, 2004b, 2011). But where does this leave hosts like Katie, who do not have the cultural capitals necessary to be seen as valuable? One particular aspect of my interview with Katie that proved intriguing was her extended interests in talking about her cats. Examine the following quote:

*I have cats... Not that there's like ten or something ridiculous, but there's two photos of my cats on my listing. Then people said, can you move the cats out when we're there? ... And I'm like a stranger in my own home. I'm the one who's literally... No pun intended, pussy-footing around, so that I'm not actually upsetting these people. I'm actually like a stranger in my own home. One girl invited the cats into her room ... She goes, "yes, yes, it's great! They're all here!" ... And then she wrote a review saying, "but the cats leave hairs in the bedroom".*

What Katie is resisting here appears to be a conversion of her cats into rental commodities. Katie feels that her private life and her cats are being packaged and devalued as in terms of a market standardisation imposed through rating and review mechanisms. Her lack of economic capital that means she has an inability to separate her private life from that which is commodified for her guests is combined with a lack of cultural and social capital, resulting in devaluation of her personhood.

Katie's resistance to this devaluation manifests in her displeasure with reviews which she sees as a misrecognition of her value. As Foucault argues, power struggles often take the form of a ‘refusal of a scientific or administrative inquisition that determines who one is’ (2000, p. 331) – a struggle that can be seen in Katie's rejection of her reviews. Instead, Katie was eager to tell me about the ways in which she values herself that exist outside of market mechanisms of exchange: She volunteers at soup

kitchens and has let homeless people stay in her spare room when it's available. One of the key differences that arises with Airbnb, when compared to traditional forms of distinction outlined by Bourdieu (2013) is the visibility of this value judgment: On Airbnb your recognised value is quantified through star ratings, qualified through written comments and made increasingly legible. The 'open forum' that Katie describes is an open debate on her lack of market value, becoming painfully individualised and presented publicly to anyone who comes across her listing.

In the previous chapter, I discussed how hosts with sufficient economic capital could escape from the personal risks associated with hosting by physically separating themselves. But what they can also escape from is the commodification of their personal life. A host like James who rents out multiple properties will never be subjected to the same personal value judgements as Katie. For hosts like James, their Airbnb offerings are something separate to themselves, malleable through economic capital. When I asked him his opinion on the rating system, he told me nonchalantly: *'I don't have a problem with it.'*

#### 5.7 – Capital ties to the platform

In the previous chapter, I mentioned how the knowledge that some flex drivers developed that allowed them to know when blocks would become available was a form of capital that had no realisable value outside of the specific field of the Amazon Flex platform. The same is true for ratings and Superhost status on Airbnb. As James told me: *'I've got 370 reviews on Airbnb, so I'd just have to start all over again on another platform'*. For hosts like Katrina and Anna, who labour over their ratings, their accumulated capital would cease to exist if they lost access to the platform. But does this equate to a dependency on the platform in the same sense that Uber drivers are dependent through debt?

It is also notable that Airbnb is monopolistic. Many hosts in this study had originally started using alternative hosting companies who were subsequently bought out by Airbnb. Clara, Sandra and Katie all originally started using a service called Crashpadder that was subsumed into Airbnb – as Sandra explained: *'they rang me one day and said we're kind of being bought out by a company in the States called Airbnb. I kind of went, "no, no, I don't like the sound of that. Not happy."'* For others, the alternative services to Airbnb didn't seem to deliver what they expected. Tony told me that when he first started to rent through Airbnb he investigated the alternatives:

*There were other platforms, [but] I discovered later, they were all pretty shoddy. And the big thing against Airbnb is the monopoly. So, they've got monopoly power. But you know, it delivers. One of the challenges is really, you know, it would be ideal if there was Airbnb One versus Airbnb Two, if there was some competition there.*

In general, hosts didn't feel that there was a direct competitor to the AirBnB platform in London. The alternatives are considered insufficient as income sources (often due to the monopoly that AirBnB holds on the market) or, were simply bought out as part of AirBnB's expansion into the market. As James told me, *'probably one of the worst things is the dominance of Airbnb in the short-term letting industry. There are other platforms but generally speaking they're just not as good. The money thing just doesn't... It's not as dependable'*. If hosts are tied in by both their accumulated rating (a specific form of capital that is tied to the platform) and the monopoly that AirBnB holds over the market – that it might imply that there is some level of dependency that exists.

But many hosts in this study have economic and cultural capitals which have value outside of AirBnB, as discussed previously in sections 4.4 and 5.2. Tony's iconic London landmark is still a listed and highly desirable property, even without its high rating on AirBnB. And, while he told me that *'there [is] nothing like Airbnb'*, he is nonetheless currently in the process of setting up more channels to take direct bookings. He explained: *'I'm actually building my own website and I'm planning for the future on just having, you know, if I can, running it myself.'* Importantly, he adds that he has *'so many more [guests] coming as repeats or regular visitors.'* Like Marjorie, who invests time in building social connections to her guests to encourage repeat custom, Tony's connections with his guests constitute a form of capital that could be put to work for economic returns without the AirBnB platform.

Many hosts also noted the option of switching to more traditional letting markets – This is an option that James is actively considering as he noticed a fall in AirBnB bookings recently:

*I was thinking of ... just renting the whole flat on short term tenancy, which is a regular tenancy agreement for maybe a period of three months and saying look... Because you do get some people who want to stay for a short period of time, and I would then say just pay me the three months upfront. Because that would be great, and I've got £6000 in the bank.*

Even Katie, who was the most dependent AirBnB host that I spoke to told me that she has considered taking longer-term lodger:

*The mortgage still needs to be paid for another 11 years. And this has got me through so far without having to have somebody else [in the flat] 24/7. But every now and again I still think to myself, uh, maybe I should just get somebody normal to come and lodge.*

While most hosts felt that turning to traditional rental markets would mean a reduction in income, it remains a viable option. Because of this, AirBnB hosts cannot be considered dependent on the platform in the same way as Uber drivers who have obligations of debt and few realisable alternative forms of work – many of them having turned to Uber originally due to the lower barrier to access



compared to traditional labour markets which have excluded them. What is notable is that hosts with the most capitals, such as Tony, have the most flexibility in terms of alternative options – as he is able to establish his own direct booking system.

### 5.8 – Unequal subjects of value

This chapter has dealt with AirBnB as a competitive market case study. Within this competitive environment, mechanisms exist for hosts to distinguish themselves and set themselves apart. For this reason, Bourdieu's (1986) theorisation of capital accruing subjectivity works well to explain many of the divisions and inequalities that exist. AirBnB allows hosts with the right skills and the right property to become recognised through high ratings and Superhost status – these institutional capitals are accrued either through extensive labour or through transforming existing forms of capital, and provide an economic advantage as hosts are able to collect rents not only from the property itself, but also its accrued representation on the platform.

As discussed in the methodology chapter of this thesis (see section 3.6 specifically), I began the research process thinking that Bourdieu's (1986) subject would be a sufficient theoretical tool for understanding how "entrepreneurs" across my platforms diverge in unequal ways. What became apparent was a stark difference between platforms that offer a competitive market and those that do not. It is for this reason I have split my answer to the question "how are cultural and social capitals put to work in the platform economy?" across this chapter and the one which follows it; because the answer is different for these two models of platform operation. On competitive market platforms like AirBnB, Bourdieu's (1986) capital accruing subjectivity allows for richly theoretical insights into why some people succeed and others do not. This responds to the work of others (Frenken & Schor 2017; Ravenelle 2019; Schor 2017) who, while noting that inequalities exist around resources, do not provide a linking to theories of capitalism. This theoretical linking, I argue, adds critical insights into how the resources for success on the platform (here theorised as capitals) come to the subject – either through labour, inheritance, rent seeking or exploitation. By adding this theoretical depth, we have a better understanding of how these competitive platforms fit within our broader cyclical models of capitalism and broader scholarship on inequality. In the next chapter I will show that Bourdieu's theorisation of capital accruing subjectivity begins to fall apart as a way of understanding class difference when attention is turned to non-competitive platforms – for those cases, other theorisations become important for understanding the platform's positioning within capitalism.

A limitation to this study is that I only investigated one competitive market platform. Had I known of the theoretical importance of this division I would have attempted to include a platform that has a

competitive market but also a greater focus on labour (such as Fiverr), to see how cultural and social capitals set “entrepreneurs” apart in those circumstances. This limitation aside, the data I have presented in this chapter shows that, on AirBnB’s competitive market, cultural and social capitals which fall into the dominant symbolic are valued through rating and review systems and appear to provide hosts with a privilege on the platform which can be utilised for economic advantage. However, while this does allow for an economic recognition of skills and experience, it also reproduces inequalities which manifest through symbolic differentiation – leaving working class hosts in a constant struggle against symbolic devaluation on the platform.

## 6 – Subjects without value?

### 6.1 – A different type of platform

In the previous chapter, I began to address the research question of “how are cultural and social capitals put to work in the platform economy?” There I argued that on competitive market platforms like AirBnB, cultural and social capitals provide an opportunity for “entrepreneurs” to distinguish themselves within the market. Most were able to leverage forms of cultural and social capital to gain positive reception on the platform, earn a reliable income or even distinguish themselves by becoming a Superhost. However, hosts without forms of capital which were symbolically recognised found themselves devalued and struggled to get by within these types of competitive markets.

In this chapter, I turn attention to Uber and Amazon Flex, platforms without a competitive marketplace, where work is distributed more randomly among locally active drivers (Uber) or to the first driver who accepts a block of work (Amazon Flex). As I have discussed earlier in this thesis, there are some ways in which “entrepreneurs” with particular forms of cultural and social capital can gain some advantage in obtaining jobs – for instance Flex drivers can learn when blocks are usually posted or game the system using technological “cheats” and Uber drivers may develop knowledge of popular times and places to make themselves available on the app. These are ways in which drivers are able to utilise forms of capital to set themselves apart, but these exist outside of the usual operative mechanics of the platforms. Unlike AirBnB which utilises property descriptions and photos alongside its rating and review systems specifically as opportunities for hosts to set themselves apart and showcase their capitals, Uber and Amazon Flex start with an assumption of equality between “entrepreneurs” on the platform. The Uber driver who is almost randomly assigned, or the Flex driver who chooses the block, will be as good as any other who might have otherwise ended up with the work. This supposes that the labour that the “entrepreneur” is immediately replaceable. While Bourdieu’s (1986) model of subjectivity helped to explain the experiences of “entrepreneurs” on AirBnB’s competitive marketplace, it does little to help us understand how subjectivity works on a platform that, from a technological perspective, offers no distinction or differentiation between subjects – they are grouped and exploited as a collective – theoretically closer to the model of class put forward by Marx (1887).

On first sight, this may sound like a more equal system that produces less inequality between “entrepreneurs”; after all, it does not immediately appear (from a technological perspective) to support dominant symbolic differentiations between those seen as valuable and those seen as valueless. But this is not the case, inequality remains a significant part of these platforms. Throughout this chapter, I will show how inequality functions differently on these platforms, often creating more

of a power imbalance between the “entrepreneur” and the platform itself, rather than between “entrepreneurs” as was notable among AirBnB hosts. I will do this in four parts. First (in section 6.2), I build upon the arguments of chapter 4 to discuss how the people I spoke to who utilise these platforms tended to have less capacity to put their cultural and social capitals to work elsewhere in the economy, as well as being economically disadvantaged, compared to the AirBnB sample. They therefore had less choice about working for the platform than AirBnB hosts did. Second, I will show (in section 6.3) that ratings and review systems on these platforms function as disciplinary mechanisms – rather than being able to set themselves apart through ratings as AirBnB hosts could, their only notable function appears to be to deactivate drivers who make mistakes or fall behind. Third, I subsequently analyse this rating system further (in section 6.4) to show how it functions in relation to subject value: rather than being valueless, drivers on these platforms often bring forward a wide range of skills and other capitals that provide a better customer experience and make their work more efficient; but they do not get any economic benefit from these. The value provided by these capitals is extracted by the platform who are able to turn high levels of customer service into repeat custom. I show how this relates to the rating and surveillance systems that forces drivers to go beyond a simple provision of labour in fear of being deactivated. Collectively, these platform systems present the “entrepreneur” as a subject without value by positioning them as instantly replaceable, while simultaneously pressuring them to put additional capitals to work without the economic recognition that is usually related to capitals. I theorise this in terms of a subjectivity that is prevented from becoming Bourdieu’s (1986) capital accruing subject. Finally, (in section 6.5) I delve into the ramifications of this type of platform upon subjectivity and inequality, discussing how these “entrepreneurs” become abject through the fact that the platform inhibits them from accruing value to themselves, reproducing them as replaceable labour. I reflect here also upon how the disciplinary surveillance systems on these platforms can, in some instances, lead to increased risk and discrimination.

## 6.2 – Who drives?

All but one of the AirBnB hosts I spoke to were white – those who grew up outside of the UK had emigrated from relatively wealthy countries such as the United States, Canada and Italy. Almost all were highly educated and had prosperous careers. But the Uber and Amazon Flex drivers that I spoke to tended to have a different story. In this section I will detail the capital profile of the “entrepreneurs” I spoke to in order to show a wider positioning of these workers within the economy – which helps to explain why they end up utilising platforms such as Uber and Amazon Flex.

A common occurrence for Uber drivers in this study was a history of working for other taxi companies in comparable positions. Richard and Lukasz, for instance, worked for a local mini-cab companies

before coming to Uber; Darnell had worked as a driver for Addison Lee; Shoaib told me that he has been a private-hire driver since he was 18. But there were also Uber drivers who did not previously work for other private hire companies. Sebastian used to do sports massage before turning to Uber and Aaron previously ran a business in Turkey that went bankrupt – he started using Uber as a way to help pay off some of his debts. As discussed in chapter 4, Mike told me that Uber was part of his transition into retirement. However, overall, Uber drivers in this study had less of the cultural and social capitals that AirBnB hosts had access to. They tended to be less educated, the majority of the Uber drivers that I spoke to did not have university level education. Sebastian, for instance told me that he had started a foundation degree but dropped out before qualifying. Said had a similar experience to Sebastian, telling me *‘we had some family issues where I had to be the breadwinner for my mum and my brother, so I just left [school] and then went into work.’*

Something I noticed during recruitment of Uber drivers in this study was the issue of a language barrier. Many of the drivers who initially were interested in taking part spoke English as a second language and had only received little, if any, formal training in the language. Similar to Ravenelle’s (2019) study of Uber drivers in New York, around half of my Uber interviewees were immigrants. One driver appeared to misunderstand the nature of the interview, and rather than considering his participation voluntary and the £20 a gift, appeared to understand the £20 as direct payment for his labour time in participation, and that if the interview took a longer or shorter amount of time, that his payment would vary – this was not rectified by subsequent discussion and the driver’s understanding seemed to be limited. As the ethics of this project required a consensual voluntary participation, I did not proceed to interview this driver as I could not be sure he had a clear understanding of the proposed agreement. This same type of misunderstanding could also exclude such a worker from traditional labour markets or make them more vulnerable to exploitative conditions. Overall, as a result of limited capitals, Uber drivers often had relatively restricted labour-market access – having to accept work that came along with lower barriers to access in order to subsist.

During the interview process, I noticed further differences in the approaches of drivers when compared to AirBnB hosts. AirBnB hosts often arranged the interview at a locally owned artisan café, their favourite local restaurant (where they occasionally knew the owners and interacted with them in front of me) or in their own home which they were excited to show me. These all point towards ideas of valuable cultural capital as defined by Sava ge et al. (2015) – ranging from “emergent cultural capital” (noted as a valorising of specific types of urban engagement (Mike Savage, Hanquinet, Cunningham, & Hjellbrekke, 2018)), seen in the case of artisan cafés, to a more traditional “highbrow

cultural capital” in the case of one host who invited me to speak to him in the bar of a famous five-star hotel in central London. However, Uber drivers were more practically minded choosing to do the interview in the nearest chain coffee shop, at my office, but overall: much preferring to do the interview remotely over a video call. This was partly indicated to be a financial pressure (participants noting that coming out to a café or restaurant would mean that they lose money beyond the £20 that they are compensated), but it also became apparent that these workers tended not to engage with urban spaces in the same ways that AirBnB hosts did. Only two of the Flex interviews took place in a café – and in both cases it was a chain café that was recommended by me after the participants mentioned uncertainty towards their knowledge of anywhere suitable. One Amazon Flex worker, Andy, spent the entirety of our Skype interview locked out of his parents’ house, sat on a bench in the front garden while he waited for his parents to return. Another Flex worker, Simon, took part in the interview over Skype while on duty as an event paramedic. While Uber and Amazon Flex workers treated the interviews as something to be completed in a utilitarian sense, AirBnB hosts had the resources necessary to be more playful and indulgent with the process. As a result, hosts engaged in capital reinforcing practices, reaffirming their cultural and social advantages.

However, Amazon Flex participants tended to have a slightly different relationship with the platform when compared to Uber drivers - partly because Flex cannot constitute a full-time job in the same way that Uber can. Working blocks are limited and a driver can go days without work. For this reason, it tends to attract “entrepreneurs” like Jake who are *‘in-between jobs’* and have been using it to provide some sustenance during a few months of unemployment. As Barney claimed, it is *‘not really a main source of income’*. For this reason, many of the drivers I spoke to were more highly educated or come from white collar careers – wanting to utilise the platform as a way to cover a financial gap. Andy is a clear example of this, as he explained: *‘I did my aerospace engineering degree, and then after that I was kind of struggling to get work, so I was in desperate need to find a way to pay my bills and the student loan.’* What this indicates is that the Amazon Flex drivers I spoke to are not all capital-poor, but rather, had difficulty transforming their capital into economic returns in traditional labour markets (even if it is temporary).

It is well noted throughout the literature that the low barriers to entry allow for these platforms to draw upon a stream of “entrepreneurs” who struggle to find work within traditional labour markets (Ravenelle 2019; Woodcock & Graham 2020). To put it in the words of an Uber driver I spoke to named Darnell: *‘[we are] disposable units in their business plan. Their thinking is that they can churn through drivers and there will always be drivers coming’*. In this section, I have attempted to link this

replaceability to an assessment of their cultural and social capitals, such as their education and professional work experience, adopting a theoretical approach built upon Bourdieu's (1986) – whereby those without the right forms of capital fail to succeed in the economy. In the rest of this chapter, I switch from this approach of seeing these workers as simply lacking the right forms of capital to instead see how value is extracted from them and how they are misrecognised as valueless by the platform – theoretical approaches that draw on the work of Skeggs (2004b), Mazzucato (2019).

### 6.3 – Disciplinary ratings

When recruitment began, Uber and Flex drivers noted suspicion at being offered a £20 financial gift for participating; Some directly accused me of working for Uber or Amazon, simply disguising myself as an academic. This may appear like far-fetched conspiracy on behalf of the drivers, but soon after posting my call for participants on a private group organised by Amazon drivers, I received emails from Amazon's public relations staff enquiring about my research and my need to recruit drivers. This was a clear indication that Amazon staff were monitoring a group that was supposedly just for drivers. What I discovered was a justified sense of suspicion from a pool of workers who are familiar with the idea of being monitored and tracked both inside and outside of the platform. As Rosenblat has argued, platforms provide 'the impression that driver behaviour is being monitored within the driver's own car ... Uber's access to phone data also gives the company a remarkable opportunity to proactively intervene in driver behaviour' (2018, p. 142). In this section, I argue that ratings and digital surveillance systems on Uber and Amazon Flex function as a disciplinary system where, rather than recognising a driver's value to allow them to stand out in a crowded market, it reaffirms an economic limit to their subjectivity.

While AirBnB hosts with the right forms of capital often saw their ratings to be a recognition of their value on the platform (often aspiring to become a Superhost), Uber drivers generally spoke of the rating system as a disciplinary mechanism. Darnell, an Uber driver and trade union representative, told me:

*They never said "well, if you maintain, say, 4.8 then we're going to bump your earnings up." So, it strikes me that this is only a stick - there is no carrot. The carrot is with them you work as normal. Really? Thank you!*

The lack of an economic reward mechanism for highly rated drivers means that providing a good service is simply a requirement to avoid deactivation, rather than an opportunity to set themselves apart in any meaningful way within the market. This poses a form of subjectivity that diverges from Bourdieu's (1986) capital accruing subject – within the Uber market, subjects are unable to set themselves apart and gain advantage so there is little value to the subject from the accrual of capital.

Instead, Issam, who has been driving with Uber since 2013, told me about pressure on drivers to go above and beyond in order to avoid the potential risks of deactivation:

*They've taken on too many drivers ... If you drop below 4.5, I think they start having a word with you. Anything below 4.3, then they go into certain actions, of course, and some education and then I think if you go below 4.1 or 3 something, you're deactivated. So, you have a tendency of high expectation to keep the ratings up, otherwise, what happens is you start getting warnings from Uber and then, obviously, without warning, you get deactivated.*

Many drivers in this study spoke of the rating system as a constant overhanging threat to their future ability to earn money – rather than rewarding drivers for providing a good service.

It is worth noting that since much of this empirical research was conducted, Uber has introduced a system for tipping that may allow some users to gain economic benefit from providing a good service. But tipping remains a voluntary action on the part of the rider, rather than something the driver is allowed to request or build into the pricing to reflect their experience. More research is needed to establish the role of Uber tipping in this regard. It does not, however, change the fact that the rating system has no mechanical relationship to earnings.

Amazon Flex does not have a rating system, as such, but does have an automated disciplinary system that works in a similar way. Flex drivers can be disciplined if they fail to deliver packages or if customers who are scheduled to receive a package file a complaint that the package was never received. When such a complaint is raised the system generates an automated email to the driver to inform them that they are at risk of deactivation from the service if further packages are reported missing. Drivers frequently complained that it was their word against the customer's – that they might not be responsible for a package going missing (if it were stolen, for instance). Some also worried that customers might be lying about a package not being received in order to get a refund from Amazon. As with Uber ratings, the overall response appears to be based on an average. As Andy told me:

*I left the package in a safe place, I left a note, but I got an email that they didn't receive it. I think I got – like, they penalise you for a bit, but if you deliver an extra, I think, 500 packages successfully, the penalty points get removed*

It is, therefore, possible for a driver to recover from a disciplinary notification by, on average, realising the platforms expectations (even if some of these expectations may be beyond the realistic control of the driver).



Across both platforms there was also a notable inability for the drivers to issue a response to a bad rating or a disciplinary measure. In Andy's case of the missing package, he told me that he had no real opportunity to respond: *'I didn't bother challenging it. It is just a bot that responds to you, you never get close to a human person, it's just an automatic computer thing.'* Despite drivers sometimes choosing to take photos of packages that they had delivered as a form of proof, drivers reported being unable to discuss disciplinary emails with anyone from Amazon, meaning they had no opportunity to present their defence. Peter, who had his Amazon Flex account suspended after failing to complete a route, told me that he was terminated by an automated email. He attempted to respond to the accusation on which his termination was based, but suspects the subsequent response that he received was also automated:

*I sent an email explaining about the stops and if you looked at the route you could see it wasn't physically possible, and the amount of miles; and they said, "sorry, your response has been declined, good luck for the future", and that's it. So, I don't think people read it, I just think it's an automatically generated thing.*

Neal, another Flex worker, expresses the frustration in simple terms: *'It's like talking to yourself'*. While Airbnb hosts can provide written responses to negative reviews and ratings, which are subsequently made public on their listing page, Flex drivers did not have the same opportunities.

Uber drivers also complained about the inability to respond to low ratings and complaints; Darnell, an Uber driver, told me:

*Whilst Uber may say here is the comment from the passenger, you know, so and so and so, you haven't given me my chance to respond. And my response in this case was that the passenger was extremely rude about me in my own space, my workspace, and I'm not having it. And that is perfectly reasonable to me, you know.*

The Uber drivers in this study reported few opportunities to challenge bad reviews or comments. This is important because it addresses the issue of who gets a say in the data that is available about you – are you able to contribute to that which is legible about you (as on Airbnb), or is your legibility constructed by others? In the case of Uber and Amazon Flex, the voice of the market supersedes the voice of the labourer; the latter is legible only through the expression of the market and never through their own response. In the previous chapter, I discussed (using the example of Katie) how struggles over a subject's ability to define their value is one of the main struggles under capitalism. In chapter 2, I connected this theoretical idea, which builds upon work of Skeggs (2004b), to that of Foucault's (1984) more general argument that struggles over self-definition constitute the majority of power struggles. Here, I make the argument that Marxist strands of theory (such as those advanced by Skeggs

(2004b)) are not incompatible with post-structuralist theories of Foucault (1984) – the two appear to be intertwined: On Uber and Amazon Flex, unlike AirBnB, there is no capacity for self-definition or defence of value in the face of low ratings or disciplinary measures. This struggle over self-definition, which often fits into post-structuralist theoretical understandings, is here structurally reinforced by the platform.

Scholars have provided insights into the links between an increasingly datafied society and the subsequent impacts upon subjectivity. Bollmer (2016) argues that networks are shaping a new form of nodal citizenship, and likewise Mejias (2015, p. 55) argues that ‘to theorize the networked subject is also to theorize the ways in which the digital network has become a universalizing logic for ordering the social and providing certain types of agency’. Additional links have been drawn between this datafied subject and the dominant relations of capital, showing how datafication as a new form of colonialism wherein globalised entrenched inequalities are reaffirmed (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). What I show here is not only that subjects from different class positions experience different results from this datafication – that is to say: it’s not just that AirBnB hosts like Katie get devalued through being rated negatively if they lack the right capitals. In addition, the very way in which datafication happens is different based on which platforms an “entrepreneur” has access to. While AirBnB hosts are datafied in ways which can recognise and reward their accrual of capitals as well as providing them with opportunities to respond, those who use labour-based non-competitive platforms (often coming from a different class position) are datafied through disciplinary mechanisms. This is one of the key differences between the competitive market and non-competitive market platforms that I studied; and it has implications by setting a fixed limit to their subjectivity – they can never be economically recognised on the platform as anything more than their immediate ability to provide labour. In the following section, I discuss how this is utilised as a tool for value extraction.

#### 6.4 – Ratings as a tool for value extraction

How do Uber drivers navigate a rating system that puts them under disciplinary surveillance? One driver, Issam told me of the pressure that drivers are under to provide additional services in order to maintain their rating:

*Drivers have to go way beyond the customers’ expectations to get that five-star rating. I’ve had a couple of customers who I’ve spoken to and I said, “how do you rate the review system? If I picked you up from A and I dropped you to B, which is your destination, how would you rate me?” They said, “I’ll rate you a three-star like everyone else”. I said, “from A to B is three stars. How would you get five stars?” That’s when he said, basically, “I would expect them to come out, open the door, so on and so on”. I said, “okay, so let me put it in this perspective for you.*

*You give every driver a three-star and if everyone follows your logical reasoning, that driver will be deactivated within six months”.*

Because (as Rosenblat and Stark (2016) argue) customers are made into managers, drivers feel pressure to please their customers in order to maintain their rating and avoid deactivation. One driver, Arron, gave me insights into the ways in which he maintained his rating:

Arron: *I'm one of the top-rated drivers, I'm 4.99. ... I do lots of things for my passengers. In my car there's Wi-Fi, chargers, water and snacks...*

George: *So, you actually do things specifically to try and get a higher rating?*

Arron: *Yes. ... It's a couple of things. My ability to interact with people. The service that I provide.*

It is clear that Arron's commitment to customer service comes partly from his own cost in providing water, snacks and Wi-Fi facilities within his car - forms of capital. He is reducing his earnings in order to attain a higher rating and provide a higher value service. He is also putting his people-skills to work for the platform, a performance of labour which builds out of a developed cultural capital. But he is not accruing capital from doing any of these things. I want to argue that what is happening here a transference of value. If an AirBnB host provides a good customer service, it adds value in the capital that they accrue – high ratings and Superhost status – from which they can individually extract income. Where does the value go when a driver like Arron provides a highly valuable service? The individual driver does not seem to accrue any tangible capital from these activities that can be utilised within the platform to earn a better income. But that is not to say that Arron is not producing value - merely that it is being transferred to Uber.

As Mazzucato and Shipman (2014, p. 1063) define 'value transfer is the realization of the income made possible by value creation, and/or its redistribution from one organization or individual to another'. Arron's commitment of labour in the form of additional customer service, therefore, has an impact in that it helps to develop Uber's brand and promote repeat custom and produce realised income for Uber overall. However, individually, he accrues nothing beyond a performative 5-star rating and an ability (for now) to continue driving on the platform. As Arron himself states '*I'm doing a job that suits me for the time being, not for the future*' – there is no aspiration of a future within Uber – no accrual of capitals that Bourdieu's (1986) subject can utilise to advance further in the market. As Skeggs (2004a, p. 71) argues, we need to understand 'how some people can only be exploited. They are forced to enter the labour market with little value that offers minuscule possibilities for accrual over time. In fact, their value may depreciate' – by showing how value is transferred from drivers in the Uber market

to the platform, I aim to do that. What is particularly important, is the fact that this form of value extraction is built into the structural model of these non-competitive platforms.

This finding is important because it shows that these subjects do produce value that goes beyond simply driving, they put additional forms of capital to work and provide exceptional customer service. But they are unable to be economically rewarded for these additional provisions because the platform continues to recognise them as simply providing their immediate and replaceable labour time. Ravenelle (2019) argues that Uber has a low skill barrier, but drivers in my sample seemed to have an expertise for customer service that was equivalent to those of many AirBnB hosts that I spoke to. I want to recognise that Uber drivers do have a range of capitals that are utilised to produce a great deal of value in the economy – but this value is stripped away from the drivers by the platform.

#### 6.5 – Abjection, discrimination and increase risk

In chapter 4, I argued that drivers were already exposed to high levels of risk because of their lack of capital and, in many cases, high amounts of debt. This effect is further compounded by the rating and review system that seeks to extract value from workers through disciplinary mechanisms.

Darnell, who is an Uber driver and a trade union representative for other drivers, told me about a case he represented where another driver was unexpectedly terminated from the platform and notified that because of a passenger complaint a report has been passed to the police. The incident that caused this termination, it later turned out, was the driver refusing to let a drunk passenger connect his phone to the car's radio to play music. But originally, Uber did not release details of the complaint. As Darnell told me:

*I contacted the police officer – a week later they came back to me and they said: “well, we’ve investigated, we’ve finally contacted the passenger. The passenger said yes, they could remember doing something and reporting the driver to Uber, but they were so drunk they couldn’t remember what it was about!” ... We’ve gone back to Uber and said the police have said no further action; who is going to pay for all these expenses through the time that he was suspended from your system? ... Uber have said well we’re switching him off our system, we’re cancelling this contract.*

This case highlights the precarity of an Uber driver. One customer report, even if proven to be inaccurate or misleading, can cause a driver to lose all income possibilities. Not only does Uber produce forms of subjectivity where the accrual of value is not possible because it is transferred to the platform – but the platform reemphasises drivers as valueless and disposable, asserting a

disciplinary power (cf. Foucault 1984). These workers, I argue, are abjected – denied the possibilities of personhood that are afforded to the majority. What I want to argue is that, by exploiting drivers and denying them their capacity to accrue value and become subjects (in Bourdieu's (1986) sense), they are also abjecting them. This is a form of conditionality which allows for capitalist exploitation through the disposability and replaceability of the labourer.

Because drivers in this study were fearful of bad feedback from customers (and the subsequent loss of income that could follow), they accepted situations that made them uncomfortable or put them at high risk. The platform design which positions the customer as a manager has wide ranging implications.

#### 6.5.1 – Racial Intersections

While all of the drivers on Uber that I spoke to have their value misrecognised on the platform, this appeared to be a particular issue for BAME “entrepreneurs”. As Bourdieu's (1986) theorisation of subjectivity falls short of explaining how value extraction works through misrecognition of value (some argue his work goes so far as to reinforces this (Skeggs 2004b). It also falls short of providing insights into how misrecognition of value in the market is also often a racialised process – a key intersectionality between class and race. As Crenshaw (1991) suggests, intersectionality results in a different, or more severe outcome, for those who exist are subject to multiple forms of disadvantage. In this case, class and racial disadvantage come together to strengthen the process of value misrecognition on the platform.

Mike, a white-British driver spoke of how customers would tell him that they enjoyed being driven by a white-British driver; he believes that being white has given him a distinct privilege (a misrecognition of value) in his ratings:

*People used to compliment me on my high rating, they'd say, “you've got a very high rating. They say, why is that?” And I say, “well, because I'm White and English, basically!” Unfortunately, it was the truth. When working people would, obviously, chat to me and everything like that because I was English. And they'd say, “oh, it was nice to be driven round by an English person”.*

Mike goes further to suggest that the low ratings he has received from customers have occurred in instances when he has called out customers for racism:

*I rather cockily sort of went into that thinking, well, I'm just going to have a five-star rating, ha, ha, ha. And then basically sort of discovered that, actually, quite a lot of customers are just arseholes, anyway. They don't say that they're going to give you a bad rating because you don't agree with their racist comments and things like that. But what are you going to do?*

Mike's experiences with his customers raise important issues with regards to the rating system.

Mike's deductions appear to match the experiences of Issam, a British Asian driver who has experienced racist conversations with guests on a number of occasions while driving:

*This guy, he was a very English, typical English guy, very elderly. We were having a great conversation on the way to his son's house. He was telling me he was something like 70 years old or something and then he became very arrogant in his conversation saying that, there are no more English-speaking people in this country. I was like, "I'm speaking English to you". He was like, "no, not you. Going to a bus stop, there are no English people; I've gone to this retail shop, there are no English people". Then, he turned the tables around to type of skin colour, then I said to him, "look, my great grandfathers came and supported the country. Where do you want me to go?"*

These experiences showcase the extra pressures that face BAME drivers. Racism and xenophobia around "speaking English" is well documented in the literature that looks at London (Lisiak, Back, & Jackson, 2019). When customers connect value to racial identity (as they appear to do in both Mike and Issam's examples), they show the potential of rating systems to reaffirm racial bias and misrecognise value in the subject; constituting a racialised class process.

#### 6.5.2 – Sexual assault

This dynamic of devaluing the replicable driver, while privileging the customer as a manager, comes together to provide a significant power relationship between the driver and any customer they serve. One Uber driver, Sebastian, described a troubling incident that occurred while driving two women home:

*It was probably 11 pm, or 12, or something like that ... they get in and then they start flirting with me, and they start touching me, and then they start requesting: "please, I know you have a nice part in there ... so please show me, show us, show us, please come on, just a little tiny bit or something like that", and they keep continuing, saying sexual things ... I know they were high, or they were drunk ... But then they start touching me, and that's where I start feeling really uncomfortable ... I got scared because I didn't know what's going to happen.*

While Sebastian was able to get the women to leave his car, he remained anxious about potential implications that might emerge from dropping off a customer early and getting into a disagreement with a customer. Uber's record for taking the side of the customer and for suspending drivers without any space for appeal leaves drivers in a vulnerable position where any action that upsets a customer could lead to a loss of their primary income source. This leads to drivers simply accepting verbal, racial and sexual abuse as part of the job in order to avoid low ratings or complaints.

## 6.6 – Unequal subjects “without value”

In the previous chapter, I started answering the research question of how cultural and social capitals are put to work by looking at AirBnB as a competitive market platform. I found that, within that platform environment, cultural and social capitals allow “entrepreneurs” to set themselves apart by accruing the types of capital that are seen as valuable – I pointed out that Bourdieu’s (1986) form of capital accruing subjectivity is able to explain many of the experiences that occur on the platform. I also noted how this has the potential to increase inequalities by reaffirming dominant symbolic judgement, which can leave those disadvantaged by their class position behind, along with those from minority groups who frequently get misrecognised as lacking in value. It is through these mechanisms that symbolic inequalities play out on AirBnB as a competitive market platform.

In this chapter, I switched attention from the competitive platform of AirBnB, to the non-competitive platforms within my study, Uber and Amazon Flex, where inequalities function differently. These platforms, I have argued, attract those who have had some difficulty putting their cultural and social capitals to work for economic gain elsewhere in the economy. Unlike AirBnB, where there is a clear potential for hosts (with the right forms of cultural capital) to set themselves apart as being valuable, these non-competitive platforms start from a position where every “entrepreneur’s” position is limited to a provision of their labour – and, therefore, they are replaceable. On these platforms, every worker is misrecognised as lacking any economically recognisable value beyond that attributed to their immediate provision of (what is seen to be) unskilled labour. The companies implement a disciplinary surveillance system that, rather than recognising value economically, puts “entrepreneurs” under a constant threat of deactivation. While “entrepreneurs” on these platforms struggle to provide a high level of customer service, putting forward a range of capitals, they do not receive any economic reward for doing so beyond being allowed to continue working. The value that drivers provide in their customer service skills and learned efficiency, built upon layers of capital, is therefore extracted by the platform. Uber and Amazon Flex benefit from the cultural capitals of their workers without compensating this or recognising it economically. For this reason, I argue, we need to go back to the understandings of class as relations of exploitation put forward by Marx (1887) and built upon by Skeggs (2004b). Rather than an analytical perspective that sees how forms of capital produce differences in income, the need here is for a focus on how “entrepreneurs” are collectively devalued and exploited. The “entrepreneurs” I spoke to often tolerate this misrecognition and value extraction because they are used to it – they are misrecognised and have value stripped from them elsewhere in the economy, in their previous jobs, in periods of unemployment and through mechanisms of debt

which erode their futures. Once again, I point to a need to shift from “gig economy” exceptionalism – these processes of value extraction exist more widely in the neoliberal economy (Crouch, 2019).

I have argued further that these platforms create significant risk for the “entrepreneurs”, not only from their lack of economic alternatives and dependency (discussed both earlier in this chapter and in chapter 4), but also from the fact that they remain disposable labourers – misrecognised as being unskilled and valueless. This misrecognition produces vulnerability to risk through abjection – by producing the “entrepreneur” as something less than human who is exposed, in the examples discussed here, to racist hate speech and sexual assault. That is to say, the classed relationships combine with racial and sexual inequalities to produce additional vulnerabilities. As discussed in relation to Skeggs (2019) intersectional approach to class in section 2.7, capitalism produces a complex intersection of forces that make and unmake value as they materialise upon bodies.

While much of the theory on the “gig economy” talks about capitals in relation to access barriers and chances of success (Ravenelle, 2019; J. B. Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017), I have taken a more specific approach that emerges from seeing the platforms as playing a more active role in the production of “entrepreneur” subjectivity in relation to cultural and social capitals. Whether this is a competitive platform that produces competitive economic agents, or a non-competitive platform which symbolically strips value from the “entrepreneur” as a way of extracting economic profit from their labour and capitals, I have aimed to show the importance of the platform in producing the subject – in positioning, shaping and representing their value. Importantly, I have now shown a clear division between platforms based upon the level of competitiveness afforded between “entrepreneurs”. Overall, I am arguing that this division is theoretically important for understanding how class works in the “gig economy”. While competitive platforms offer an environment where Bourdieu’s (1986) theorised subject has a great deal of explanatory power for understanding inequalities, this largely falls apart on non-competitive platforms. I have therefore argued that these platforms require a different theoretical toolkit for understanding class inequality – one which looks at devaluation as a means to prime subjects for value extraction. Overall, I have aimed to establish a theoretically important distinction between platforms based on their level of competitiveness as a means of understanding how classed inequalities shape experiences.



## 7 – Conclusions

The terminology of the “gig” and “sharing” economy has found a great deal of public attention in recent years. While scholars have been attempting to define it within meaningful conceptual and theoretical scopes, there remain many unanswered questions. Scholars such as Schor (2017) have pointed out that research is needed to determine if people with differing economic or educational resources generate different outcomes from the use of “gig economy” platforms. It is in response to these unknowns that this project emerged. This thesis began by approaching the “gig economy” using the theoretical framework proposed by Bourdieu (1986) to look at how inequalities are (re)produced – why some succeed while others fall behind because of pre-existing class difference. It did this by breaking the approach down into economic, cultural and social forms of capital across the two research questions:

- How do relations of economic capital, labour and debt present themselves within the platform economy?
- How are cultural and social capitals put to work in the platform economy?

From these two questions, five key findings emerged. First, the analysis of the economic relations of capital, labour and debt revealed that debt plays an important role in producing a high level of dependency among some “entrepreneurs”, and this is sometimes actively produced by the platform itself. Second, economic capital appears to have a particular value among these platforms, allowing some “entrepreneurs” to earn money without offering much, if any, of their labour. Third, my analysis also shows that cultural and social capitals have a similar impact compared to economic capitals, increasing income and reducing labour time requirements, but only on competitive market platforms (such as AirBnB) which recognise and reward them. Fourth, non-competitive market platforms (such as Uber and Amazon Flex) in this study did not provide substantial opportunities for “entrepreneurs” to receive a personal economic benefit from their cultural and social capitals, instead the value of these capitals appeared to be extracted by the platform itself. Finally, emerging from a combination of these four findings, there is a strong mechanistic potential within the “gig economy” for existing inequalities between those with and those without forms of capital to pull further apart, as those with capital are able to get ahead while those without fall towards greater indebtedness. As a result of this, I argue that we need to be much more precise in terms of defining how the platforms that fall under the title of the “gig economy” not only exploit labour, but also extract value from capitals, as well as indebt “entrepreneurs” and therefore gaining control over their future labour.

In this chapter, I will begin by expanding upon each of these five findings in more detail, relating them to their theoretical implications as well as more broader considerations that arise. I then draw these

findings together and offer a conceptual model of how existing theoretical understandings of class map onto the “gig economy” based on the different types of capitalist relations which appear throughout the platforms addressed in this study. Afterwards, I offer three policy recommendations which have emerged from this thesis, all of which offer some form of a practical solution to one or more of the problems raised by “entrepreneurs”. Finally, then, I summarise with some of the limitations and notes for further research that emerge from the project.

### 7.1 – The importance of economic capital

Platforms in this study can be divided by either a predominant marketing of labour or capital. An Uber driver, for instance, can never escape the requirement of labour to utilise the platform – but they can escape the requirement of up-front capital by utilising debt and financial products to obtain a car. On the other hand, an AirBnB host generally requires some form of surplus sleeping space – but they are able to escape the labour requirement of the platform through outsourcing if they have sufficient economic capital.

Across all platforms, forms of risk and labour requirements could be reduced in some way with economic capital. Uber drivers who own an eligible car would not need to get into the debt traps discussed previously, for instance; and while some AirBnB hosts avoided the capital requirements of the platform by sub-letting sleeping space (either with or without permission), this generally came with a higher degree of risk. In these ways, a lack of economic capital led to a riskier and more labour-intensive experience for “entrepreneurs” in this study. Another way in which hosts could theoretically avoid some of this capital barrier is through mortgaging. However, none of the hosts in this study had obtained a property through a mortgage for the specific purpose of hosting. It is also important to remember that a mortgage, as an asset backed debt, does not necessarily produce the same types of risks and obligations on labour as other types of debt (such as those many Uber drivers I spoke to faced, discussed later). Nor does a mortgage tie an “entrepreneur” to the platform, as a property can be marketed without any intermediary platform on the long-term lettings market.

In this thesis, I have noted that those who have access to the type of capital needed to use AirBnB are predominantly White-British (see 3.4.1), constituting an intersectional complication which could be studied further in the future. Gendered divisions also emerged quite prominently among AirBnB hosts in this study (see Maier, 2019b, 2019a and Maier and Gilchrist 2020) – specifically it was found that the vast majority of AirBnB labour in my sample was conducted by women, who often faced gendered risks when hosting. Those who made use of cleaners or hired property management often realised a devaluation of labour against the capital share of income. That is to say: property owners considered

their property to be the source of income, rather than the labour required to maintain it on the market (this is expanded upon elsewhere Maier (2019b)) - Labour was devalued in relation to capital. This labour was, in my sample, gendered – with women doing the majority of the work.

The majority of AirBnB hosts in this study already have succeeded economically before, using the platform because of their access to capitals. However, there is evidence that economic capital is particularly privileged on AirBnB compared to traditional markets. As discussed in 4.4, hosts described AirBnB as a monopoly with a distinct economic advantage in the short-term lettings market, hosts in this study discussed how this allowed them to earn more from their capital than they would be able to on other platforms or in traditional rental markets (where rates tend to be lower) – but at the same time it meant that leaving AirBnB would result in a reduced income, tying them into the platform.

While other scholars have talked about an importance of resources for determining different experiences in the “gig economy” (Ravenelle, 2017, 2019; J. B. Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017), what I have offered here is a more specific understanding of the mechanisms that appear to be behind these differences. In particular, differences between labour and capital focused platforms, where economic resources are utilised differently; as well as within platforms where economic resources work in a range of ways to change the “entrepreneur’s” relationship to risk and how they exchange their labour.

## 7.2 – The importance of debt

Going beyond the literature which has discussed the precarity of “gig economy” work, I argue that this precarity is often structured by debt. In my thesis, I show how most of the Uber drivers I spoke to are connected to the platform through debt traps which serve as obligations on their future labour. While others (Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017) have found the level of dependency on the income that a platform provides to be a key factor in perception of the platform, I argue that the terminology of dependency requires greater specificity. We should bring the focus to more specific underlying socio-economic relations of capital, labour and debt that produce various forms and extents of dependency. Rather than seeing a subject (the Uber driver) as simply *being* dependent on the income that they receive from the platform, I argue we should see how their relationship with the platform *produces dependency* though debt “traps” that extenuate existing inequalities by disproportionately affecting those who enter the gig-economy with the least capital available to them – these “entrepreneurs” see a reduced income from their labour due to the debt repayments that they are required to service.

I have theorised this relationship through Lazzarato's (2012) conceptualisation of indebted subjectivity, which shows how debt works as a means to control the future labour of the worker. In this case, debt works as a means to tie the "entrepreneur" to the platform, reducing the risk for the latter while increasing it for the former. Lazzarato's (2012) theorisation here expands upon Marx's (1887) theories of debt as a mechanism of class struggle, building upon the idea that labour exploitation can expand outside of the immediate moment as the subject becomes a subject of debt. This perspective adds a meaningful dimension to understandings of exploitation in the "gig economy" by showing how the balance of power in the labour relations underpinning the platform is shaped unequally.

The digital platform economy has been widely recognised for its trajectory, expanding into unmapped regulatory space faster than policy is able to react (Katz, 2015). The relationship between Uber and its drivers explored in this paper appear to constitute a new and unrecognised form of indentured servitude. The notion of indentured servitude, where workers are bound through debt to their employer, is not new. Graeber (2014) traces a thorough history of debt and notes indentured servitude emerging at many points in time, though it is often now illegal. But this recognition of indentured servitude relies upon an employer who is simultaneously a creditor, and an employee who is simultaneously a debtor – a specific relationship that has been avoided by the type of corporate structure that Uber have utilised.

Many came to Uber because they had little other choice – the platform attracts those who are often excluded from traditional labour markets. It then encourages them into sub-prime lending (Rosenblat, 2018). While this sub-prime lending does not, theoretically, limit them to working for Uber – in practice it often does because Uber is the dominant operator in London's private hire market; if a driver has established themselves with a private hire vehicle on finance, then their best chance of getting work to make payments on the vehicle is by using Uber's platform. In this way, the power of Uber's position in the market limits the free exchange of labour. This, I argue, constitutes a new form of indentured labour that operates through complex legal distinctions and free-market ideology. What is signalled as a move towards liberalisation (the free "entrepreneur" who chooses how and when they work), is for these Uber drivers instead a move towards market authoritarianism – as they become trapped through mechanisms of debt.

As Graeber argues, 'there's no better way to justify relations founded by violence, to make such relations seem moral, than by reframing them in the language of debt – above all, because it immediately makes it seem that it's the victim who's doing something wrong' (2014, p. 5). The

language of the free market, which Uber adopt throughout their public relations, suggests that drivers choose freely to drive for them, and liberally opt to take on debts – in this discourse, drivers are presented as the blameful party for their situation. The reality is that drivers are usually doing everything that they can to avoid destitution, working long hours and taking home little pay. At the same time, the platform benefits from commissions both on their labour and on credit sold to them. By having a pool of drivers bound to debt, the platform maintains a labour force that is always available, on demand, to make their platform appealing to customers who can, at any given moment, order an Uber.

### 7.3 – The importance of cultural capitals

Bourdieu (1986) proposed a form of subjectivity based around the accrual of capitals which result in economic advantage, the unequal distribution of these forms of capital is a key mechanism that drives inequality. I have argued throughout chapter 5 that AirBnB's platform provides a marketplace within which hosts accrue capitals that become recognised through ratings and "Superhost" status, in turn these provide an economic advantage on the platform. Both Uber and Flex drivers found some ways to increase their earnings through the attainment of particular forms of knowledge and skill (forms of embodied cultural capital) – but in comparison to AirBnB this was limited. The role of the platform is important here – for providing different framings of the "entrepreneur's" subjectivity. A competitive market platform like AirBnB allows "entrepreneurs" to utilise their forms of cultural and social capital to set themselves apart, while, as discussed in the following section, non-competitive platforms limit the utilisation of cultural and social capitals as a means to enhance their income.

As with the distinction found between capital and labour leaning platforms, the distinction between types of platform (competitive vs non-competitive) appears to be a key contribution here. While others have made general connections between resources and success on "gig economy" platforms (Ravenelle, 2017, 2019; J. B. Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017), I have attempted to go a step further by understanding how these mechanisms for resource utilisation relate to different platform designs. I, therefore, argue we have to be more specific about where and how these types of resource have value within the "gig economy". Here they are found to have value on competitive market platforms, like AirBnB, where "entrepreneurs" with the right forms of capital and symbolic power are able to distinguish themselves within the market.

### 7.4 – Platforms that limit capital accruing subjectivity

The inability for some to distinguish themselves utilising capitals is not a new phenomenon. As Skeggs (2004b) has argued, this can be traced back historically to points of imperialism and class differences

where some were able to be seen as possessive individuals who own objects of exchange value and control the qualities embedded into their bodies, against others who did not have the same capacity given in their subjectivity – who would often be reduced to their labour. Building upon Skeggs’ work which shows that not all people are able to “play the game” of capital accruing subjectivity that Bourdieu proposed, I addressed the role of “gig economy” platforms in the shaping of this subjectivity.

The platforms of Amazon Flex and Uber limited capital accruing subjectivity by denying opportunities for economic returns from cultural and social capitals. While some Flex workers were able to use certain skillsets to set themselves apart, and uber drivers targeted their hours and location of activity for those they found to be most profitable, these had only a limited impact and agency on the overall economic gain they were able to receive. Overall, the platform structures their “entrepreneurs” as replaceable subjects who are maintained by a disciplinary rating system that serves to extract additional value from them. While scholars (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016) have talked about the role of the Uber rating system in controlling and altering driver behaviour, I link this to the underlying economic relations that utilise this control to extract value while maintaining the driver as a disposable labourer – misrecognising them as valueless through the given incapacity that stops them from accruing value. This stops them from accruing power within the platform-driver relationship, and within the economy more generally.

It is important to note that majority of Uber drivers come from minority groups. There appears to be an intersectional link where class and race combine to compound inequalities in that racialised minorities are disproportionately exposed to these forms of exploitative labour relationship. I also noted instances where Uber drivers faced direct racial discrimination while driving, and that the platform itself often increases the risk of racial discrimination through its classed positioning of drivers.

#### **7.5 – Platforms will widen economic inequalities in both directions**

In the previous 4 sections I outlined how, within the “gig economy”, those without economic capital often end up in debt, whereas those with substantial economic capital are able to get higher returns than they would in traditional markets, those with valued resources are able to pull ahead further on competitive market platforms and, finally, those restricted to non-competitive labour platforms are unable to accrue value in themselves. Together, these arguments present an image of growing inequalities in the “gig economy”, precisely because those with capitals pull ahead and those without fall further behind, in line with the well-known “Matthew Effect”, where the rich get richer while the poor become increasingly destitute. Marx (1887) and Bourdieu’s (1986) work offers insights into the underlying class processes that drive this effect; the former by showing how the owners of capital

extract value from the labour of other workers, the latter showing how those with the most forms of capital are able to get the best economic returns from markets.

Piketty's work, that reached prominence in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014), highlighted the growing importance of capital inequalities in the present era. Piketty argues that the rate of return on capital regularly exceeds the rate of growth in an economy, and when this occurs, capital accumulates among a wealthy few. Earlier in this thesis I presented a counter argument by Sundararajan (2016) wherein he claims that the "sharing economy" may allow more people to see return on their capital – citing the example of Funding Circle as an opportunity for people to invest smaller amounts of money. My thesis has highlighted that this type of opportunity does not seem well represented among the case studies I investigated. While it is true that some AirBnB hosts use the platform to rent a room in their property as a way to get by, it is seldom the case that this wouldn't be replaceable with traditional lodging. The "entrepreneurs" I spoke to who are excluded from traditional ways of utilising capital for income (predominantly Uber and Flex drivers in this study) remained excluded from this type of economic activity. Further, they seemed to be exposed to increased obligations of debt. Therefore, Sundararajan's optimism for these platforms seems to have not been realised. Piketty's argument, that the benefits of economic growth disproportionately go to those with capital, appears hold in relation to the findings of this study.

Overall, my thesis has shown the division between capital and labour growing on AirBnB, Uber and Amazon Flex. While AirBnB offers increased possibilities for return on capital, Uber and Amazon Flex showcase value extraction and subjects where are not able to accrue value in themselves. The platforms I have investigated have a detrimental effect on inequality– by providing more opportunities for capital return to be increased while simultaneously pushing down possibilities for labour. As the "gig economy" grows and expands, without substantial policy interventions, it is highly likely that these types of inequality will increase.

## 7.6 – Theoretical implications

This thesis offers a theorisation of class in the "gig economy" that brings a number of approaches into a point of confluence. Labour exploitation is at the core of many theoretical inquiries into the "gig economy" (Hill, 2015; Rosenblat, 2018; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Woodcock & Graham, 2020), often building directly upon Marx's approach to productive capitalism. This approach is particularly useful for understanding how platform owners exploit the labour of those who use the platforms as a way to earn money. In this thesis, I have also drawn on theorists who have developed outwards from Marxist conceptualisations of class to produce a range of insights into classed subjectivity. Bourdieu

(1986) expands from Marx by offering a theory of capital accruing subjectivity – in this context the concept of capital is expanded beyond what Marx envisioned, complicating also the binary between the owner of capital and the labourer noted in Marx’s model of productivity. In Bourdieu’s conceptualisation, any product of labour which can be realised for some return within markets of exchange can count as capital. This approach has been highly influential in sociological study over recent years for explaining gradations of class inequality that exist across a population, rather than the distinct positionalities of class noted by Marx – it is particularly useful for understanding how the middle class and working class come to be economically separate, despite neither usually having access to the types of capital that Marx was referring to. Further to this, I draw insights from Skeggs (2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2015) and Tyler (2013, 2015) for their theorisations of working class subjectivity, abjection and symbolic violence as a means of exploitation. Unlike Bourdieu, Skeggs and Tyler retain a focus on Marx’s interest in class difference as a means of exploitation, rather than as an explanation of how people end up in different positions in society. They investigate this difference by looking at how cultural and social differences are utilised as a means of exploitation, by symbolically presenting the abjected working class as lacking in value and therefore legitimising low pay and exploitative conditions. Finally, I draw upon Lazzarato (2012, 2015) for his insights into indebted subjectivity. Lazzarato builds upon Marx’s (1887) insights into debtor relations as a form of class relations, to show debt as a claim upon future labour that produces subjectivities. These strands, while all building upon Marxist ideas, offer somewhat divergent ways of approaching class. What this thesis shows is that these strands must be pulled back together in order to derive a full theoretical understanding of class in the “gig economy”.

One of the inherent challenges that emerges in trying to conceptualise the “gig economy” for class analysis is the diversity of platforms. As I found in this thesis: Lazzarato’s (2012) theories of indebted subjectivity provide crucial insights into Uber drivers, but not so much for AirBnB hosts who do not always have any requirements placed on their labour. For the latter case, Bourdieu’s (1986) theories of capital accruing subjectivity allow an understanding of how certain hosts set themselves apart using the cultural and social capitals on the platform and achieve economic success when these are symbolically recognised. Where workers cannot set themselves apart in the market, on non-competitive market platforms, the explanatory power of Bourdieu’s theorisation of subjectivity starts to fall apart; but the work of Skeggs (2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2015) and Tyler (2013, 2015) become more valuable because they show how workers can become collectively portrayed as lacking in value and, subsequently, how this is utilised as a means of legitimising exploitation.



I began this research project believing that “gig economy” platforms could largely be divided between those which are focused on putting forms of capital to work (such as AirBnB) and those which were more about labour (such as Uber and Amazon Flex). This division between capital and labour platforms hasn’t really been explored in any detail – but I was hopeful that it could offer interesting theoretical insights into how class operates in the “gig economy”, in particular with regards to growing gaps between capital and labour in our economy that Piketty notes (2014). What I discovered was that some labour platforms, such as Uber, complicate this division between capital and labour further by making drivers promise their future labour to the platform. In many ways, this constitutes the theoretical opposite to capital: rather than being accumulated past labour, debt works as a claim on future labour. In attempting to make sense of these theoretical complexities, I came to conceptualise the “gig economy” as broadly putting to work various amounts of debt, labour and capital. Platforms occupy a range of conceptual possibilities along these three axes that clarify what economic mechanisms are taking place. An Uber driver, for instance, can never escape from the requirement to provide their labour while using the platform to seek an income. They have some forms of capital, including the skills required to be a driver, but often they also have high amounts of debt. By examining each of these three axes we can begin to unpick a range classed processes at work. An AirBnB host can escape all labour requirements, if they have sufficient capital to outsource the managing of their properties; but a host with less capital will have to perform much more labour. In this way there is a double articulation taking place: the platform provides a range of possible positions across these three axes, and an individual “entrepreneur” will sit somewhere within that range.

However, these divisions alone do not explain all of the class processes that emerged from my interview data. In trying to understand the symbolic nature of class, why some are valued and rewarded while others are devalued and exploited based on their forms of capital, I came to understand a difference in how power operates across platforms based upon variation in the level of competitiveness. In chapter 5 and 6, I drew out the distinction between competitive and non-competitive platforms, showing how forms of capital, as well as labour, appear to work differently across these contexts and require different theoretical tools based on this difference. The lack of a competitive market between drivers on Amazon Flex or Uber means that they cannot (to any great extent) utilise skill development as a way to increase their income potential; on the other hand AirBnB hosts may accrue hospitality skillsets as a means to increase their ability to earn money through the platform. This difference brings back the theoretical discussions from chapter 2 in terms of how symbolic power operates. There was, for instance, evidence of distinction taking place among hosts on AirBnB’s competitive market, indicating an articulation of power between “entrepreneurs” trying

to set themselves apart (fitting in to Bourdieu's (2013) theorisation of symbolic capital). But for those utilising non-competitive platforms, like Uber and Amazon Flex, symbolic capital explains very little in terms of how "entrepreneurs" get systematically devalued as a collective. For these examples, insights into broader power relationships become important. Here more understanding can be gained by utilising Skeggs (2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2015) approach to class which allows for a less individualised idea of symbolic positioning, in many ways staying closer to the ideas of classed groups put forward by Marx (2008). Here the symbolic violence takes place not between individuals in acts of distinction, but rather on industrial scale through the design of a platform that strips value from its "entrepreneurs". Bourdieu's (1986, 2013) approach to class is focused a subject who can accrue capitals to set themselves apart in a market to gain opportunities – whereas the approach that Skeggs puts forward (2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2015) is more about understanding those who have value extracted away from them, who are unable to compete and set themselves apart because of a positioning within material and symbolic class relations that makes this an impossibility.

This way of seeing the "gig economy" highlights the need for a more nuanced theoretical approach to class in the "gig economy". A more traditional Marxist approach to labour exploitation would look only at labour exploitation, without looking at how an individual's forms of cultural and social capital might position them within labour markets, without looking at the role of debt, without understanding the symbolic nature of class. Instead, the complexity of the "gig economy" crosses multiple aspects of capitalism and, in the same way, multiple theoretical approaches to understanding classed relations. The output of this thesis is, therefore, not one overarching theory of class in the "gig economy", but rather a conceptual model which renders the "gig economy" theoretically tangible, that points towards the types of theoretical interpretation which might be most useful for understanding experiences that sit at different ends of a complex and dynamic object of study. This conceptual map of the "gig economy" allows for a nuanced and contextualised analysis, that breaks away from the idea of the "gig economy" being a clear conceptual category with one form of theoretical analysis and instead embraces the ambiguity of platforms that have come to be known by the colloquial title.

## 7.7 – Policy Recommendations

Following on from the findings of this study, I highlight three specific practical measures which could be implemented to benefit those most negatively impacted by the "gig economy" and bring about a more equal range of outcomes.

### 7.7.1 – Uber driver debt

Uber driver protests are becoming more commonplace in London as drivers have begun to form unions and be more vocal about the rights that they expect. As the BBC reported, these protests often make reference to commission rates: ‘The IWGB in the UK said it would like Uber's commissions to be reduced from 25% to 15% and for fares to be increased to £2 a mile from about £1.25’ (2019). This desire for drivers to have less of their labour value extracted by the platform is understandable, as many drivers in this study had to work excessive hours in order to get by each week. But one aspect that is rarely dealt with by these protests is that of the debt trap that Uber brings to its drivers. This may be because the problem is a more complex one to address.

Simply stopping lines of credit for drivers will mean that many of them are unable to work (see 4.2), many of the drivers in this study would not be able to earn an income at all without access to this form of capital. If we are to accept that Uber drivers are self-employed, as the platform argues, then Uber could work to provide cars at preferred rates by underwriting some of the risks themselves (so that less of a driver's income goes to servicing debts). This could also be accompanied by terms which allow for drivers to exit the contract more immediately – to avoid the debt trap that drivers told me about (see 4.2).

If drivers are recognised as workers, as The Supreme Court has argued some are, then the situation changes due to their rights to a national minimum wage after allowable expenses. The liability for the car payments could therefore fall onto Uber themselves. At the time of writing (March 2021), Uber is arguing that the Supreme Court ruling applies only to a limited number of drivers who used the platform in the past, and that current drivers are still self-employed. It is currently unclear how matters will unfold over the coming months – but if recognition of Uber drivers as workers were to be achieved more broadly, the issue of Uber driver debt may change.

### 7.7.2 – Being valued on non-competitive labour platforms

As mentioned earlier in this thesis, one of the main weakness of non-competitive platforms (from the stance of their “entrepreneurs”) is the lack of recognition that “entrepreneurs” obtain for their continued service. Drivers who worked on these platforms for years remain ephemeral and atomised units in a business model that continues to threaten them with deactivation. This disposability, also fed by a steady supply of labour, is heavily felt by drivers and it maintains their precarity and vulnerability. Platforms could go beyond this by taking further steps to offer drivers increased levels of job security – especially for those who have used the platform for some time and have come to depend on the income that it provides.

While many labour movements around the “gig economy” have focused on the wish for drivers to become recognised as employees – and therefore eligible for basic labour rights – not all of the drivers who I spoke to seemed to support this idea at face value. There appeared to be a concern that if they became employees or recognised workers for Uber then they would no longer be able to choose when and where they work to the same extent that they do now. But this does not have to be the case – employees or workers may still benefit from flexible working and the ability to choose which hours they work. Labour movements that wish to put forward the idea of bringing driver labour in-house may have to focus on overcoming this knowledge gap in order to gain wider support from the driver base.

There needs to be a clear picture of what in-house driver jobs would look like, and both the flexibility and rights that would accompany such a position. As the majority of drivers in this study had only experienced low-paid and precarious jobs in the past, they often had little experience of the rights, flexibility and benefits that white-collar workers are more accustomed to – this led many to accept that, while their conditions are exploitative, they would not be able to achieve anything better. This pessimism is understandable, Uber has done very little to improve the conditions of its drivers in the past. However, we should ensure that a better working condition that allows for flexibility, labour rights and job security does not escape the imagination of drivers – that it is never deemed an impossibility. The precarity that drivers experience is a choice made by Uber that passes liabilities and risks from themselves to the drivers; this choice can, with the right motivations, be changed. This should be a key focus of labour movements for “gig economy” workers.

#### **7.7.3 – Unpaid waiting time**

Amazon Flex workers in this study spent extensive amounts of their labour time refreshing the app in hopes of obtaining a block of work – in some cases this constituted hours per day. Unlike waiting time on Uber, where the driver would usually be strategically positioned in a zone where they expect jobs to occur in order to respond rapidly to requests, Flex blocks are usually made available well in advance and do not require the same readiness. This problem could have a relatively straightforward technological fix if drivers were able, on a daily basis, to provide their availability in the app, and then were sent a push notification if a block became available during a time that they said they would be happy to work. They could then be given reasonable time (perhaps five minutes) to respond before the offer is sent to another driver. This change could lead to substantial increases in the time available to Flex drivers to pursue other activities, be that productive, educational or personal.

#### 7.7.4 – Policies for a diverse host community

Ravenelle (2019) argues that AirBnB hosts are renting their property, rather than “sharing” anything. This is true, in that the transaction is strictly economic. However, the empirical findings within this study found a high degree of diversity among AirBnB hosts based upon the mixture of labour, capital and debt that gets put to work. While hosts with large amounts of capital did adhere to rentier capitalist models of income seeking, there were also hosts who relied on AirBnB as a means to get by and pay their mortgage each month and contributed large amounts of labour to the platform. AirBnB hosts are a pluralistic group with a wide range of capitals and financial obligations. Rather than taking an overall stance on the platform being good or bad for the local economy and housing inequalities – a better approach might be to understand the different ways in which AirBnB is used by different stakeholders. Hosts in this study who rented out their spare room on the platform as a means to support themselves were keen to separate themselves from the image of the corporate host – an image which they felt dominated press coverage around the platform.

Many corporate hosts already operate outside of the law. Renting out of an entire property (such as a whole apartment) on a short-term basis for more than 90 days per year constitutes a violation of planning regulations in London. However, this rule appears to be seldom enforced in the city. Despite AirBnB putting in place an automatic limitation on entire-property listings that have been booked for 90 days per year in London, hosts in this study admitted to re-listing the property as if it were a different unit to get around this rule. It is also unclear if the underlying regulation is being enforced by the relevant authorities – hosts in this study told me that it was not. A first step in approaching AirBnB regulation would be to enforce pre-existing rules.

There also needs to be a discussion on the use of AirBnB as an alternative to taking in a longer-term lodger for homeowners with spare space within their house. If a host is using AirBnB because their situation would not be suitable for a long-term lodger (for example, if a family member uses the room occasionally, or if they use it as a home office for some of the year etc.) then AirBnB may be a useful way of utilising the space. But if the host is fully booked with short term guests throughout the year, then it may be that AirBnB is reducing the available housing opportunities for people living and working in London. One way to address this divide could be to place a limit similar to the 90 day per year rule for entire property listings – but with a higher allowance. This study does not produce data that could serve as guidance on what such a limit might be specifically, this would require further investigation.

## 7.8 – Limitations and Future Research

This research was limited by a number of factors – largely related to the sampling. By looking at just three platforms, this study cannot claim to speak for the entirety of what might be called the “gig economy” (even if I do somewhat dismiss the notion of this being a clear conceptual category in itself). There were also more specific limitations in the people who I interviewed for this project, especially when the question of intersectionality arises. I did not, for instance, interview a sample of BAME AirBnB hosts, who might have more complex and nuanced class experiences than those which this project discusses. While most Uber drivers in London are male, women also drive for the platform – but were not interviewed for this study. Two were approached, but neither ended up participating in the study. There is a particular need to research how women might be more vulnerable to the risks of the classed positionality that Uber drivers face.

In the decision matrix for choosing the platforms that this study addresses, I considered them all to be what Woodcock and Graham (2020, p. 43) would refer to as ‘geographically tethered’ – that is to say, they don’t provide opportunities for globalised outsourcing of labour in the same way that a platform such as Fiverr might. The labour requirements of Uber, Amazon Flex and AirBnB must be met by workers who live within a commutable distance of where they work, and therefore foreign labour outsourcing, which benefits the consumer with lower rates of pay by attracting workers in “developing” economies, is not a predominant mechanism in itself here. However, this is not an entirely clear division.

The fact that a majority of Uber drivers that I spoke to were first- or second-generation immigrants does somewhat complicate this picture; while I do not discuss this matter in detail within this thesis, more than one Uber driver informed me that they came to London specifically to earn a higher wage than they could in the country where they were born – suggesting that globalised labour disparities may still play a part in the makeup of geographically tethered platforms, especially those with lower capital barriers to entry. AirBnB constitutes a more confusing case study in this regard, and once again the economic division between capital and labour appears to play a part. While the platform does require at least some labour to be geographically tethered, the platform does not require the owner of the property to be the person who provides this labour. Hosts with substantial economic capital may live elsewhere in the world and simply hire local property management to deal with the geographically fixed labour requirements – freeing themselves to be globally mobile (hosts in this study such as Tony mentioned working overseas while still earning money from their AirBnB property in London). For these reasons, I argue that we need to think further about the role of geographic tethering in the “gig economy” and how this is linked to economic inequalities. A more interesting

question might be: who gets tethered? Uber drivers may be tethered in a country that they do not particularly wish to live in (as was the case for Lukasz), becoming separated from family members - but they are economically pressured into doing so. I believe that there is an interesting research project in more closely examining these questions.

#### 7.9 – A class perspective of the “gig economy”

This thesis set out with the aim of examining class in the proverbial “gig economy” in way that goes beyond theories of labour exploitation alone. Class is a broad concept which looks not only at material exploitation, but also the mechanisms of legitimisation and symbolic framing that work on a broader scale to produce classed subjects. I have argued that class analysis of the “gig economy” must adopt a broader scope in order to understand the inequalities that platforms are built upon. This means understanding that debt is utilised by some platforms as a way of producing dependency. It also means that outcomes from the “gig economy” are often unequal, as those with more resources can avoid riskier work, and on competitive market platforms, receive the highest economic return. Platforms pass risk and low payed opportunities onto those with the least capacity to refuse work. Finally, we cannot ignore the underlying structures of many “gig economy” platforms which serve to symbolically devalue “entrepreneurs” as means to exploit profit from their labour and forms of capital. This symbolic aspect is powerful in that it legitimises exploitation on a broad scale; In this study it produced hopelessness among drivers and facilitated not only an economically difficult existence, but also instances of sexual and racial abuse. These perspectives allow a clear view that class in the “gig economy” is not just about exploiting pay, but about producing classed subjects more broadly and entrenching complex inequalities.

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## Appendix

### Interview Participant Details

<i>Platform</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Recruitment Site</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Year of Birth</i>	<i>Age in 2018</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Homeowner Status</i>
<b>AirBnB</b>	Alex	Facebook	M	1965	53	White	Secondary School	I have a mortgage on the house in which I live
<b>AirBnB</b>	Anna	Snowball	F	1968	50	American Indian or Alaska Native	Undergraduate Degree	I am a private tenant
<b>AirBnB</b>	Clara	Facebook	F	1956	62	White	6th form/College	I own the house in which I live (no mortgage)
<b>AirBnB</b>	Eleonora	Facebook	F	1981	37	White	Master's Degree	I have a mortgage on the house in which I live
<b>AirBnB</b>	Hannah	Facebook	F	1966	52	White	Undergraduate Degree	I am a private tenant
<b>AirBnB</b>	James	Facebook	M	1986	32	White	Undergraduate Degree	I own the house in which I live (no mortgage)
<b>AirBnB</b>	Jane	Facebook	F	1963	55	White	Master's Degree	I own the house in which I live (no mortgage)
<b>AirBnB</b>	Jonathan	Snowball	M	1977	41	White	Undergraduate Degree	I am a private tenant
<b>AirBnB</b>	Katie	Facebook	F	1971	47	White	Undergraduate Degree	I have a mortgage on the house in which I live
<b>AirBnB</b>	Katrina	Snowball	F	1988	30	White	Undergraduate Degree	I am a private tenant
<b>AirBnB</b>	Kelly	Facebook	F	1960	58	White	Undergraduate Degree	I have a mortgage on the house in which I live
<b>AirBnB</b>	Marjorie	Snowball	F	1943	75	White	PhD	I own the house in which I live (no mortgage)
<b>AirBnB</b>	Nikki	Facebook	F	1952	66	White	Undergraduate Degree	I own the house in which I live (no mortgage)
<b>AirBnB</b>	Sandra	Facebook	F	1976	42	White	Master's Degree	I have a mortgage on the house in which I live
<b>AirBnB</b>	Lisa	Snowball	F	1962	56	White	Master's Degree	I have a mortgage on the house in which I live
<b>AirBnB</b>	Tanya	Facebook	F	1971	47	White	6th form/College	I have a mortgage on the house in which I live
<b>AirBnB</b>	Tony	Snowball	M	1959	59	White	Master's Degree	I own the house in which I live (no mortgage)

<b>AirBnB</b>	Vanessa	Local Facebook Group	F	1984	34	White	Master's Degree	I have a mortgage on the house in which I live
<b>Uber</b>	Arron	Facebook	M	1966	52	Other	Master's Degree	I have a mortgage on the house in which I live
<b>Uber</b>	Darnell*	GMB Meeting	M			Black		
<b>Uber</b>	Lukasz	Facebook	M	1975	43	White	6th form/College	I am a private tenant
<b>Uber</b>	Mike	Facebook	M	1964	54	White	Master's Degree	I have a mortgage on the house in which I live
<b>Uber</b>	Richard	Facebook	M	1991	27	White	6th form/College	I am a private tenant
<b>Uber</b>	Said	Facebook	M	1977	41	Asian	6th form/College	I have a mortgage on the house in which I live
<b>Uber</b>	Sebastian	Facebook	M	1984	34	Other	Secondary School	I am a private tenant
<b>Uber</b>	Shoaib	Facebook	M	1977	41	Asian	6th form/College	I am a social tenant
<b>Amazon Flex</b>	Andre	Facebook	M	1970	48	Black or African American	Undergraduate Degree	I am a social tenant
<b>Amazon Flex</b>	Andy	Facebook	M	1989	29	Black or African American	Master's Degree	I am living with family
<b>Amazon Flex</b>	Barney	Facebook	M	1975	43	White	Master's Degree	I am a private tenant
<b>Amazon Flex</b>	Cory	Facebook	M	1974	44	White	Undergraduate Degree	I have a mortgage on the house in which I live
<b>Amazon Flex</b>	Jake	Facebook	M	1961	57	White	Secondary School	I am a private tenant
<b>Amazon Flex</b>	Neal	Facebook	M	1973	45	Other	Secondary School	I own the house in which I live (no mortgage)
<b>Amazon Flex</b>	Peter	Facebook	M	1970	48	White	Undergraduate Degree	I have a mortgage on the house in which I live
<b>Amazon Flex</b>	Ramesh	Facebook	M	1998	20	Asian	6th form/College	I am living with family
<b>Amazon Flex</b>	Ryan	Facebook	M	1966	52	White	6th form/College	I have a mortgage on the house in which I live
<b>Amazon Flex</b>	Simon	Facebook	M	1987	31	White	6th form/College	I am a private tenant
<b>Amazon Flex</b>	Terry	Facebook	M	1996	22	White	6th form/College	I am living with family
<b>Amazon Flex</b>	Tommy	Facebook	M	1979	39	White	Undergraduate Degree	I am a private tenant

\*Most of the data in this table is drawn from pre-interview surveys, with the exception of one participant who did not fill in the pre-interview survey.

## Thematic Codebook

### Economic Capitals

#### Background

*Related to the economic background of the participant – for example: previous jobs and inheritance.*

#### Competition

*Related to economic competition. For example, an AirBnB host who is competing with a neighbour who offers the same service. Also includes competition between platforms, i.e. an Uber driver who might also work for Lyft.*

#### Debt

*Discussion on debt. Multiple forms may include credit, mortgages, family borrowing.*

#### Expenses

*Ongoing or one-time financial expenses; generally coded in relation to the “gig economy” work being conducted.*

#### Income

*Income from the platform or from other forms of employment. May include income from a partner/parents/other where relevant.*

#### Income use

*How is the income spent? On basic necessities or on luxuries?*

#### Labour

*Related to labour time expended, usually for the platform. Includes uncompensated labour.*

#### Monopoly

*Monopoly, either at the level of the income seeker or of the platform itself.*

#### Opportunities

*Economic opportunities. Often presented as possible future plans, i.e. an AirBnB host may be looking to buy a second property to rent out.*

#### Risk

*Economic risk, e.g. risk of assets being lost, stolen or damaged. Also includes insurance and strategies to mitigate risk.*

#### Tax

*Discussion of taxation, paying of tax, registering as a tax paying entity and tax strategies.*

#### Wealth / Capital

*Wealth is given a dual meaning in accordance with Piketty’s conflation of capital and wealth. Can include housing, savings, ownership of tools and vehicles. E.g. An Uber driver who owns their own car.*

### Non-Economic Forms of Capital

#### Cultural – Institutional

*Persons or objects given a perceived value from an institutional affiliation.*

#### Cultural – Objects

*Objects perceived as having an exchange value beyond their immediate utility.*



Cultural – Skills/Embodied

*The skills which an individual might be able to draw upon. Also, embodiment, for instance: the right attitude, way of being.*

Social Capital

*Social ties that can be drawn upon.*

Contestation of Value and Values

Devalued

*The individual, their skills, attributes or their property is devalued symbolically.*

Distinction

*An entity distinguishes themselves/their taste/their property as being better or more worthy than another (more valuable).*

Personal Risk

*Related to valued/devalued, does the individual experience personal risk? Assumes that exposure to personal risk is a reflection of how a person is valued.*

Resistance (to judgments of value)

*Resistance or affect in response to judgments of value.*

Valued

*The individual, their skills, attributes or their property is valued symbolically.*