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Platform Work in a High-Crime City: Navigating Violence and Gendered Safety Strategies Among Uber Drivers in Johannesburg

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how male and female Uber drivers in Johannesburg navigate safety and violence within a high-crime urban context, highlighting the gendered dimensions of digital platform work. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 30 Uber drivers (15 male and 15 female), the study reveals that while all drivers face threats such as hijackings, assaults, and extortion, often linked to tensions with the minibus taxi industry, female drivers experience heightened vulnerabilities due to gendered perceptions of weakness and societal norms around women's safety. These perceptions lead female drivers to adopt restrictive work strategies such as operating only during daylight hours and in familiar areas, which significantly limit their earning potential and reinforce structural gender inequalities in the gig economy. In contrast, male drivers confront territorial violence and extortion, particularly near taxi ranks, but are less constrained in their spatial and temporal mobility. Despite these risks, drivers perceive Uber as relatively safer than competing platforms due to features like card payments and client identification. In response to pervasive threats, male and female drivers employ safety strategies including spatial avoidance, selective rider acceptance, and participation in WhatsApp safety networks. These findings contribute to debates on precarity and platform capitalism by demonstrating how violence, gender, and urban transport dynamics intersect to shape the lived experiences of digital labour. The study advances understanding of how platform workers negotiate safety, highlighting the gendered, precarious, and relational nature of gig work in a high-crime setting.

1 | Introduction

The rapid growth of ride-hailing services such as Uber has transformed the urban mobility and labour markets, creating new forms of flexible work in contexts of high unemployment (Anwar et al. 2023; Henama and Sifolo 2017; Kute 2017). In Johannesburg, Uber has become a vital source of income and livelihood for many, including those who face systemic barriers to access formal employment (Adebayo 2019; Webster 2020). However, this livelihood and flexibility come with an increased exposure to safety risks, particularly in high-crime urban environments where drivers encounter new forms of insecurity and violence (Anwar and Graham 2022; Fairwork 2021; Geitung 2017; Simpson 2023). Johannesburg has a high crime rate and presents a dangerous context for digital platform workers, with high levels of hijackings, assaults, and robberies shaping the everyday realities of Uber drivers (Giddy 2020; Fokazi 2021; Simpson 2023). While male and female drivers face these threats, their experiences are shaped by gendered perceptions of vulnerability and strength.

Female drivers frequently report heightened concerns about harassment and assault, leading them to adopt more restrictive work patterns such as limiting shifts to daylight hours (Anwar and Graham 2022; Gerber 2022; Palhad et al. 2023). While the adopted strategies are protective, they can also constrain earning potential and reinforce gendered inequalities in digital labour markets (Anwar and Graham 2022; Munoz et al. 2023). At the same time, male drivers are not immune to violence, as many report confrontations with passengers and violent threats from actors in the informal transport economy, particularly the minibus taxi industry – a dominant force in South Africa's transport sector that has been a source of conflict with Uber drivers (Fairwork 2021; Kute 2017; Simpson 2023). Incidents of intimidation, extortion, and even fatal attacks have been documented, highlighting the broader structural risks that platform workers must navigate (Geitung 2017; Jaydarifard et al. 2025; Kute 2017; Simpson 2023). Thus, this study seeks to explore how male and female Uber drivers in Johannesburg negotiate these intersecting threats of crime, gendered insecurity, and competition from the taxi industry. By examining the safety strategies adopted by drivers across gender lines, the paper contributes to scholarship on precarity and platform capitalism, highlighting how violence, gender, and local transport dynamics converge to shape digital labour in South Africa's high-crime urban context.

2 | Literature Review

The expansion of the gig economy and digital platform work has reshaped urban labour markets globally, offering flexible income opportunities while exposing workers to forms of precarity and risk (De Stefano 2016; Geitung 2017; Kalleberg 2013; Kute 2017). In South Africa, Uber and similar ride-hailing platforms have emerged as critical sources of employment amid high unemployment and systemic exclusion from formal labour markets (Anwar et al. 2022; Fairwork 2021; Geitung 2017; Kute 2017; Webster 2020). Webster (2020) highlights that Uber driving has become a livelihood, particularly for migrants, as they lack access to formal employment opportunities. Uber driving is also a source of livelihood for citizens, as South Africa is faced with a high unemployment rate, especially among the youth (Dawson and Castel-Branco 2022; Henama and Sifolo 2017). However, Uber's flexibility is accompanied by significant safety concerns, particularly in high-crime urban contexts such as Johannesburg, where platform workers face threats ranging from hijackings to extortion (Fokazi 2021; Simpson 2023).

Gender plays a central role in shaping experiences of mobility and safety in South Africa's urban transport systems. Females are excessively affected by transport poverty, with limited access to safe, reliable, and affordable mobility options (Jennings et al. 2022). Studies also show that female commuters and transport workers face heightened risks of sexual harassment, assault, and intimidation, particularly in informal transport modes such as minibus taxis (Sonke Gender Justice 2023). These risks often lead females to adopt restrictive mobility strategies such as avoiding night travel or unfamiliar areas, which in turn limit their economic participation and reinforce gendered inequalities (Anwar 2022; Gerber 2022). Similarly, the World Bank's gender mobility assessment highlights the need for inclusive transport planning that addresses females' specific vulnerabilities and travel patterns (Jennings et al. 2022). These findings resonate with research on digital platform work, where female drivers report greater exposure to risk and adopt protective strategies that reduce their earning potential (Anwar and Graham 2022; Fairwork 2023; Munoz et al. 2023).

The informal transport sector, dominated by minibus taxis, plays a central role in South Africa's mobility landscape (Fourie 2003; Fobosi 2021). However, this sector is also characterised by pervasive violence, deregulation, and competition over lucrative routes (Schalekamp et al. 2010). Taxi associations often operate as self-regulating entities, using intimidation and violence to maintain territorial control, particularly in urban centres like Johannesburg (Modipa 2024). This violence is not incidental but structurally embedded in the industry's historical trajectory and institutional arrangements (Fobosi 2021; Schaefer 2024). The deregulation of the taxi industry in the late 1980s created a fragmented and competitive environment where associations compete for dominance, resulting in clashes with the emerging digital transport providers such as Uber (Geitung 2017; Kute 2017; Modipa 2024). These confrontations have led to vehicle impoundments, extortion, and fatal attacks, posing significant risks to platform workers (Kute 2017). Schaefer (2024) also describes this as infrastructural violence, where urban space becomes a contested terrain, and mobility is shaped by power struggles and systemic neglect.

In response to these threats, platform workers in Johannesburg adopt a range of safety strategies that reflect both individual agency and collective resistance (Anwar and Graham 2022; Woodcock and Graham 2020). Spatial avoidance, such as not taking trips near taxi ranks and working only in familiar neighbourhoods, is a common resistance tactic among drivers (Cameron and Rahman 2022; Simpson 2023). These strategies align with broader urban safety practices observed in Johannesburg, where socio-spatial inequalities and legacies of apartheid planning continue to shape access to safe mobility (City of Johannesburg 2024). Digital safety networks such as WhatsApp groups have emerged as informal governance and resistance mechanisms among Uber drivers, enabling real-time sharing of risk information and fostering solidarity in an otherwise competitive platform model (Woodcock 2021). These practices illustrate how platform workers navigate urban precarity through relational and spatial tactics, often in the absence of institutional support (Cameron and Rahman 2022; Fairwork 2021).

Scholars argue that violence is not only interpersonal but also embedded in the design and governance of urban space, where neglect, exclusion, and territorial control produce uneven access to safety and mobility (Fobosi 2021; Schaefer 2024). For platform workers, this means navigating a cityscape where risk is spatially concentrated and intersects with historical legacies of apartheid-era planning. The concept of infrastructural violence thus complements existing analyses of precarity and gendered mobility by foregrounding how urban space itself becomes a site of contestation and vulnerability. Integrating this perspective into the gig economy and digital platform work research allows for a nuanced understanding of how Uber drivers negotiate not just digital labour conditions but also the material geographies of danger and exclusion.

While existing literature has hinted at the gendered precarity and informal transport violence, few studies examine how these dynamics intersect in the context of digital platform work, such as Uber, in Johannesburg. Most research focuses on crowdwork or

remote freelancing, with limited attention to geographically tethered gig work in cities like Johannesburg. Moreover, the role of spatial strategies and informal safety networks remains underexplored, particularly concerning gender and urban violence. This study thus addresses these gaps by investigating how male and female Uber drivers in Johannesburg negotiate safety within a contested urban transport ecosystem. It contributes to scholarship on platform capitalism by foregrounding the relational, gendered, and spatial dimensions of digital labour in the Global South.

3 | Theoretical Framework

This study draws on precariat theory and intersectionality to understand how male and female Uber drivers in Johannesburg navigate safety and violence in a high-crime urban context. These frameworks provide complementary lenses for analysing the structural vulnerabilities and experiences of platform workers, particularly concerning gender, class, and spatial inequality. Precariat theory, as coined by Standing (2011), conceptualises a new class of workers who exist in conditions of chronic insecurity, lacking stable employment, social protections, and occupational identity. The precariat is marked by unstable income, limited rights, and a sense of alienation from traditional labour structures (Breman 2013; Foti 2017; Fobosi 2021; Wright 2016). In the context of platform work, this theory has been applied to understand how workers, classified as independent contractors, are excluded from labour protections and subjected to algorithmic control, income volatility, and constant surveillance (De Stefano 2016; Graham and Anwar 2019; Kalleberg 2013; Srnicek 2017; Sinicki 2019; Woodcock 2021).

While precariat theory provides valuable insights into the structural insecurity faced by platform workers, it has been critiqued for its universalising tendencies and Northern-centric assumptions. For instance, Munck (2013), Scully (2016) and Wright (2016) argue that Standing's framing obscures the long-standing histories of informal and precarious labour in the Global South, where precarity is not a recent phenomenon but a deeply embedded structural condition. This critique is particularly relevant in the South African context, where informal work, racialised labour exclusions, and spatial violence have long shaped the conditions of employment, making precarity a structural norm rather than a novel development. By acknowledging these critiques, this study uses precariat theory as a lens to explore how digital platforms work in intersection with historical and gendered forms of precarity in Johannesburg. This approach enables a more context-sensitive application of precariat theory, which is deliberately paired with intersectionality to capture the gendered, spatial, and relational dimensions of platform work in Johannesburg.

In Johannesburg, Uber drivers embody many characteristics of the precariat, as they bear the costs of vehicle maintenance, fuel, and insurance, while facing threats of deactivation, safety, and competition from informal transport actors (Kute 2017; Geitung 2017). The absence of institutional protections, such as legal or union representation or safety guarantees, further reinforces their precarious status. Fairwork (2021) also notes that platform workers in South Africa operate in a regulatory vacuum, where digital labour is shaped by market forces and infrastructural neglect. Moreover, the study's findings reveal how precarity is intensified by urban violence and informal sector competition. Drivers face hijackings, extortion, and intimidation, particularly near taxi ranks controlled by minibus associations (Simpson 2023). These risks extend beyond contractual insecurity, illustrating how precarity is spatially and structurally rooted in Johannesburg's transport ecosystem (Modipa 2024; Schaefer 2024). Thus, precariat theory provides a critical framework for understanding the systemic vulnerabilities that shape platform work in high-risk urban environments.

Building on Kuhn and Maleki's (2017) typology of platform workers, micro-entrepreneurs, dependent contractors, and instaserfs, this study critically examines how these categories might apply to Uber drivers in Johannesburg and contribute to their precarity. Firstly, micro-entrepreneurs include workers who exercise high levels of autonomy, control their schedules, pricing, and client base, but significantly bear the financial risks and minimal reward of their labour. Secondly, dependent contractors consist of workers who appear independent but are economically reliant on the platform, with limited control over work conditions, that is, subject to algorithmic management. Lastly, instaserfs are workers with minimal autonomy, often performing low-skill, on-demand tasks under tight algorithmic control, lacking bargaining power or job security (Kuhn and Maleki 2017). In Johannesburg, Uber drivers also often take on financial responsibilities such as fuel and vehicle maintenance, while also navigating limited autonomy, algorithmic surveillance, and threats from informal transport actors like minibus taxi associations and drivers (Kute 2017). These overlapping conditions suggest that drivers may simultaneously reflect aspects of all three categories. As Kuhn and Maleki (2017) highlight, platform workers often occupy fluid positions along a spectrum of autonomy and dependence. Harvey et al. (2025) also emphasise how such hybrid models of platform governance disproportionately impact marginalised groups, reinforcing drivers' precarity and deepening intersectional inequalities. Maffie (2020) further situates Uber within a broader spectrum of platform governance, highlighting its blend of gig work flexibility with control, which contributes to ongoing debates around labour classification and the lived realities of platform workers in the Global South.

While precariat theory highlights structural insecurity, intersectionality provides a lens to examine how these vulnerabilities are experienced differently across gender, race, and other social categories. Intersectionality emphasises that social identities are not additive but interlocking, producing unique forms of oppression and privilege (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2000). In the context of platform work, intersectionality has been used to explore how gendered, racialised, and classed dynamics shape access to work, exposure to risk, and strategies of resistance (Gerber 2022). This study also applies intersectionality to analyse how male and female Uber drivers navigate safety in Johannesburg. Female drivers in this study reported heightened vulnerability to harassment and assault, leading them to adopt restrictive work patterns such as limiting shifts to daylight hours or familiar areas. These strategies, while protective, reduce earning potential and reinforce gendered inequalities in digital labour markets (Anwar and Graham 2022; Fairwork 2023). Male drivers, while also exposed to violence such as threats from taxi associations and passengers, are reflecting different but intersecting forms of risk.

Intersectionality also illuminates how spatial dynamics intersect with gender and precarity. Johannesburg's urban geography, shaped

by apartheid-era planning and socio-spatial inequality, produces uneven access to safe mobility. Female drivers' avoidance of certain areas reflects not only personal safety concerns but broader patterns of gendered exclusion from public space (City of Johannesburg 2024; Sonke Gender Justice 2023). This study thus highlights the complex and relational nature of safety strategies in digital platform work. Therefore, the precariat theory and intersectionality provide an analytical framework for understanding the lived experiences of Uber drivers in Johannesburg. They enable a critical examination of how structural insecurity and social identity converge to shape digital labour in a high-crime urban context, highlighting insights into the gendered, spatial, and relational dimensions of platform capitalism in the Global South.

4 | Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the lived experiences of male and female Uber drivers in Johannesburg, South Africa, with a specific focus on how they navigate safety and risk in a high-crime urban setting. The data referred to in this article were drawn from the author's PhD research project examining the precarious working conditions and navigation of work-life balance among male and female Uber drivers in Johannesburg (Bayane 2024). For this article, the emphasis is placed on data collected from 15 male and 15 female Uber drivers, to provide rich insights into how they navigate safety and violence within a high-crime urban context. The qualitative research design was adopted to capture the depth and complexity of participants' narratives, allowing for an interpretive understanding of their experiences (Babbie 2021; Creswell 2009).

Johannesburg, South Africa's largest metropolitan area and economic centre, served as the research site. Known for its dynamic labour market and high levels of urban crime, the city presents a unique context for studying digital platform work. Uber has operated in Johannesburg since 2013, offering ride-hailing services that attract a diverse workforce, including migrants and individuals excluded from formal employment (Henama and Sifolo 2017; Webster 2020). The city's socioeconomic landscape and transport dynamics made it a suitable research setting for investigating the intersection of digital labour, safety, and gender.

Participants were recruited using a non-probability method and convenience and snowball sampling techniques. The researcher visited mall parking areas across Johannesburg, engaging with car guards to locate Uber drivers' waiting zones. Moreover, male and female drivers were approached and invited to participate in the study, provided they were registered and actively operating on the Uber platform. The convenience sampling technique was used to approach Uber drivers, but the snowball sampling technique specifically assisted with accessing female Uber drivers, as they are scarce to find. While some potential participants declined mentioning issues such as time constraints and loss of income, 15 male and 15 female Uber drivers agreed to participate in the doctoral research project.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for both guided questioning and open-ended exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions. Interviews were conducted in participants' vehicles while they were online and waiting for ride requests, and each session lasted approximately 55 min. Interviews were conducted in a mix of vernacular languages (IsiZulu, Sesotho, Xitsonga) and English, depending on participant preference, and were audio-recorded with consent. All recordings were transcribed verbatim into English.

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, following a process of transcription, coding, and developing themes (Braun and Clarke 2021; Rosenthal 2016). Initial familiarisation involved the researcher transcribing by carefully listening to the recordings and reviewing transcripts and field notes to ensure accuracy. Coding was then conducted iteratively to identify recurring themes and patterns, including both explicit content and underlying psychological meanings. Finally, themes were developed and interpreted with an intention to address the primary objective of this paper, which is exploring how male and female Uber drivers navigate safety and violence within a high-crime urban context, Johannesburg. Ethical principles and protocols were strictly followed. Ethical clearance for my PhD study was obtained from University of Johannesburg's Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee. Participants received information sheets and signed consent forms before interviews. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities, and all data were handled confidentially.

5 | Findings: Navigating Violence and Safety in Uber Driving

Safety is consistently described as one of the most pressing concerns of Uber drivers in Johannesburg. This echoes research on the precarity of platform workers (Adebayo 2019; Fairwork 2021; Geitung 2017) but is intensified by the city's extremely high levels of violent crime (Seedat et al. 2009; Simpson 2023). Drivers in this study referred to hijackings, assaults, and extortion, which they linked to ongoing tensions with the minibus taxi industry drivers. The findings of this study highlight how digital platforms work in South Africa intersect with the informal transport economy, producing risks that are beyond the contractual insecurity typically associated with digital labour (Kalleberg 2013; Standing 2011). Several male drivers spoke about being threatened or assaulted near taxi ranks. Nhlamulo, a male Uber driver, said:

> *If a request comes from near a rank, I usually phone the passenger and ask them to walk a bit further, as it is too risky to pick up clients near taxi ranks. We are accused of taking their customers, while these people choose to use Uber rather than taxis.*
>
> (Nhlamulo, male Uber driver)

Nhlamulo describes how operating near taxi ranks as an Uber driver is risky, as they are mostly assaulted or threatened, and accused of stealing customers. Other male Uber drivers described situations in which their vehicles were impounded by taxi associations, with release fees of around R2 500 demanded before cars could be recovered. For instance, James, a male Uber driver, shared:

> *The main challenge of being an Uber driver is that taxi drivers always attack us and at times, when Uber drivers drop clients near taxi ranks, they impound our cars and*

we are required to pay a minimum of R2500 for the car to be released.

(James, male Uber driver)

James's narrative highlights how Uber drivers are caught between trying to earn a living and facing threats from taxi operators who view them as competition. Working near taxi ranks presents serious risks, including the impounding of vehicles, often without any legal basis, which places a financial strain on drivers. These incidents not only reduce their earnings but also create fear and uncertainty in their daily work, reinforcing the precarious nature of platform-based driving.

In contrast, female Uber drivers reported a distinct and compounded layer of vulnerability, shaped by gendered perceptions of weakness and societal norms around women's safety. Although a few female Uber drivers had personally experienced the attacks, they expressed a heightened sense of risk. For instance, Jane, a female Uber driver, said:

Being an Uber driver, especially as a woman, is a very high risk as we can be attacked or hijacked anytime. As a woman, criminals assume you cannot fight back, so we are seen as easy targets.

(Jane, female Uber driver)

This perception of being easy targets reflects broader gendered assumptions that limit women's spatial autonomy and reinforce exclusion from public space. For this reason, many female Uber drivers restricted their shifts to daylight hours and operated only in familiar areas, a decision that reduced exposure to danger but also limited their earning potential. For instance, female Uber drivers mentioned that operating in areas they know affords them a bit of safety, as they can call people they know for assistance in case of hijacking or attacks. Casandra, a female Uber driver, said:

I only work during the day and avoid places I know are dangerous, and I do not want to take that risk. As a woman, I have to be extra careful.

(Casandra, female Uber driver)

Casandra shows how female Uber drivers must navigate a dual burden, the general risks associated with digital platform work in a high-crime city and the gender-specific threats that shape their mobility decisions. Her decision to avoid certain areas is not only a personal preference but a strategic response to systemic urban violence and gendered vulnerability. These limitations reinforce intersectional inequalities, as female drivers are forced to restrict their working hours and locations, which in turn affects their income and independence. This shows how gender and urban geography combine to create unequal experiences of risk and precarity in the gig economy.

Despite the risks associated with platform driving, some male and female Uber drivers expressed a preference for Uber over competing ride-hailing platforms such as Bolt. They valued Uber's stricter registration processes, such as its disclosure of client and driver details, and its reliance on card payments. For instance, one male Uber driver said,

Uber is a bit safer, especially compared to other platforms, because if anything happens, they know exactly who booked the ride.

(Solomon, male Uber driver)

Some female Uber drivers also agreed that avoiding cash transactions was crucial:

I only accept card trips, carrying cash makes you a target.

(Naledi, female Uber driver)

These perspectives suggest that while Uber drivers operate within a precarious and high-risk environment, platform design and operational policies can significantly influence drivers' perceptions of safety. The ability to trace bookings and avoid cash handling provides a layer of protection in a context marked by high crime and limited institutional support. For female drivers in particular, these features are essential strategies for reducing exposure to gendered violence. This highlights how platform-specific features can mediate risk, and how drivers actively assess and navigate these differences to protect themselves, revealing a nuanced form of agency within constrained working conditions.

Nevertheless, in response to the safety risks, male and female Uber drivers adopted a range of proactive safety strategies. These tactics, which can be understood as everyday acts of resistance, enable drivers to mitigate structural vulnerabilities in the absence of institutional protections (Cameron and Rahman 2022). The most common strategy was spatial avoidance. As Jackson, a male Uber driver, said:

I never stop close to a taxi rank; I would rather lose the trip than take that chance because it is not safe. I have seen many Uber drivers violently attacked by taxi drivers.

(Jackson, Male Uber driver)

Jackson's strategy reflects spatial avoidance as a form of resistance to infrastructural violence (Schaefer 2024). This strategy reflects how Uber drivers internalise risk and navigate contested urban spaces shaped by informal transport power dynamics. This aligns with precariat theory, where workers must self-manage safety in the absence of protection and representation (Standing 2011). Other Uber drivers in this study relied on digital cues, such as rejecting requests from passengers with poor ratings or limited app history, as it is questionable.

Female drivers emphasised selective engagement with known areas. This reflects not only personal safety concerns but also structural exclusion from urban mobility, shaped by gender and geography. When asked a follow-up question relating to safety and what she does to protect herself, Joy, a female Uber driver, said:

I stay around Midrand and operate in the same area, where I can call for help if something happens. At night, I

do not work at all because it is not safe, especially for me as a female Uber driver.

(Joy, Female Uber driver)

Joy's selective spatial engagement highlights intersectional constraints shaped by gender and urban geography. Her avoidance of night shifts reflects both personal safety concerns and broader patterns of exclusion from public space. This supports intersectionality theory, which emphasises how overlapping identities shape access and risk (Crenshaw 1991). The idea of operating in known areas was also echoed by other female Uber drivers in this study. For instance, Martha said:

I know some women who stopped driving completely because they were hijacked. I stay in areas I know and never drive after 6 PM.

(Martha, female Uber driver)

Martha's account reinforces the gendered impact of crime on platform workers and highlights how safety concerns translate into constrained mobility and economic participation. Her decision to avoid working after 6 PM and to operate only in familiar areas reflects a structural reality where female drivers must navigate urban spaces that are not designed with their safety in mind. This selective engagement with space highlights how gender intersects with urban geography to produce differentiated vulnerabilities.

Collective strategies also emerged, as many participants in this study were members of WhatsApp groups where drivers shared alerts about hijackings, hotspots, and taxi-related attacks. As Joe explained,

The WhatsApp groups help us warn each other, as we share locations where it is not safe to pick up or places where Uber drivers are attacked.

(Joe, Male Uber driver)

These digital networks functioned as informal governance mechanisms, fostering solidarity and collective resilience and agency in a fragmented platform model (Woodcock 2021). These WhatsApp groups counteract the isolation typical of platform work and reflect everyday resistance strategies (Cameron and Rahman 2022; Woodcock 2021). This sentiment was echoed by female Uber drivers, who emphasised the importance of WhatsApp groups in staying informed and safeguarding themselves. Teboho, a female Uber driver, said:

I have also joined a WhatsApp group that helps us decide where it's safe to operate. For example, if someone gets hijacked or robbed, the group immediately shares the location, and we all avoid that area. It's the only way we stay safe.

(Teboho, female Uber driver)

Teboho also highlights the critical role that informal digital networks play in ensuring driver safety, particularly in the absence of formal support from ride-hailing platforms or public authorities. These WhatsApp groups function as real-time, peer-to-peer alert systems, enabling drivers to collectively navigate urban risks and avoid high-risk areas. Far from operating in isolation, gig workers such as Uber drivers build networks of solidarity and shared knowledge. These grassroots safety practices challenge the notion of gig work as atomised and individualistic, as drivers actively cultivate community-based strategies to manage the dangers inherent in platform work. Finally, male and female drivers in this study maintained business vehicle insurance, a prerequisite for activation on digital ride-hailing platform accounts. Participants regarded this insurance as a critical safeguard for themselves and their passengers in the event of an accident. Enoch, a male Uber driver, explained:

Yes, I pay business insurance for my car to cover clients. If ever I am involved in an accident and a client is hurt, I can call my insurance provider and explain that I have an injured client who is hurt, and they will cover all the costs, including fixing my car. But insurance is expensive, but without it, you cannot even go online.

(Enoch, Male Uber driver)

Enoch's account highlights the financial strain placed on Uber drivers, who must self-finance their own safety infrastructure to remain operational. This reflects a broader dynamic within platform capitalism, where risk is systematically transferred from corporations to individual workers (Kalleberg 2013; Standing 2011). The requirement to purchase business insurance, despite its high cost and infrequent use, illustrates how Uber drivers are compelled to absorb the financial and legal responsibilities traditionally borne by employers. This commodification of risk not only reinforces the precarity of gig work but also exemplifies the erosion of labour protections in digitally mediated employment (Fairwork 2021; Kalleberg 2013; Standing 2011).

Thus, these findings reveal how male and female Uber drivers in Johannesburg navigate a landscape of intersecting risks shaped by urban violence, gendered vulnerability, and informal transport competition. The strategies they adopt, ranging from spatial avoidance and digital filtering to collective safety networks and self-funded protections, are not reactive but constitute everyday acts of resistance within a structurally precarious system. These practices reflect the lived realities of the precariat, where workers must internalise and manage risk in the absence of institutional safeguards (Standing 2011). Moreover, the differentiated experiences of male and female drivers highlight the importance of intersectionality in understanding how social identities mediate exposure to danger and access to protective strategies (Crenshaw 1991; Gerber 2022).

6 | Discussion: Safety, Gender, and Resistance in the Gig Economy

This study reveals how male and female Uber drivers in Johannesburg operate within a landscape of structural precarity shaped by high crime, informal transport competition, and platform governance. Drawing on precariat theory, the findings show that drivers classified as independent contractors must self-finance safety measures, absorb operational costs, and navigate risks without support from the ride-hailing companies. These conditions reflect the commodification of labour under platform capitalism, where flexibility is exchanged for vulnerability (Fairwork 2021; Standing 2011). The requirement to

purchase business insurance, avoid high-risk areas, and rely on informal safety networks illustrates how risk is systematically transferred from platforms to workers. This aligns with broader critiques of gig work, which highlight the erosion of labour protections and the emergence of a new class of precarious workers (Kalleberg 2013; Woodcock 2021).

Intersectionality provides a critical lens to understand how gender shapes experiences of risk and mobility. Female Uber drivers in Johannesburg face intensified vulnerabilities due to societal perceptions of weakness and exclusion from public space. Their strategies, such as avoiding night shifts and operating only in familiar areas, are not personal choices but responses to systemic gendered insecurity (Crenshaw 1991; Gerber 2022). These spatial restrictions reduce earning potential and reinforce gendered inequalities within the gig economy. In contrast, male drivers confront territorial violence linked to the minibus taxi industry, highlighting how informal transport dynamics intersect with platform work to produce differentiated risks.

The safety strategies adopted by drivers, such as spatial avoidance, digital filtering of trip requests, and participation in WhatsApp safety networks, can be understood as everyday acts of resistance (Cameron and Rahman 2022). These tactics reflect agency within constraint, as drivers navigate urban precarity through relational and spatial practices (Cameron and Rahman 2022). WhatsApp groups, in particular, function as informal governance mechanisms, enabling real-time sharing of risk information and fostering solidarity. These networks counteract the isolation typical of platform work and illustrate how collective resilience emerges in the absence of formal protections.

While drivers have developed informal mechanisms to manage risk, these strategies emerge in response to systemic neglect. Ride-hailing platforms must take greater responsibility for driver safety by implementing geo-fencing around high-risk areas, providing real-time emergency support, and collaborating with local authorities to address transport-related violence. Urban transport planning must also integrate gender-sensitive safety measures, ensuring that infrastructure reflects the lived realities of female drivers and commuters. Regulatory frameworks should be expanded to include gig workers, providing access to legal protections, insurance subsidies, and grievance mechanisms. Without such interventions, the burden of safety will continue to fall disproportionately on workers. Beyond individual and collective safety strategies, the structural classification of Uber drivers also plays a critical role in shaping their vulnerability.

The findings also provide a nuanced lens through which to apply Kuhn and Maleki's (2017) typology of platform workers. Rather than fitting into one category, Uber drivers in Johannesburg occupy a fluid position across the spectrum of micro-entrepreneurs, dependent contractors, and instaserfs. Uber drivers bear financial risks such as fuel, maintenance, and insurance, aligning with the micro-entrepreneur model. However, their limited control over pricing, algorithmic management, and vulnerability to account deactivation reflect characteristics of dependent contractors. Furthermore, the lack of bargaining power and exposure to coercive external actors, such as taxi associations, echoes the instaserf condition. This hybridity demonstrates how digital platform work in the Global South is shaped by overlapping and intensified forms of precarity. Unlike their counterparts in the Global North, who may operate within more regulated environments, Johannesburg drivers contend with a volatile and violent ecosystem that amplifies their structural vulnerability.

The classification of Uber drivers as independent contractors has significant implications for their access to legal protections and social benefits. According to Harvey et al. (2025), the independent contractor status leaves digital platform workers, especially those from marginalised groups, without legal representation and protection in cases of violence, exploitation, or deactivation of accounts. In Johannesburg, where those in informal transport exert territorial control, Uber drivers are exposed to platform precarity and urban violence. This reinforces their position within the precariat and highlights the need for legal reform that acknowledges the hybrid nature of platform work. Maffie (2020) further suggests that platforms such as Uber occupy a unique space between gig and employment models, complicating efforts to regulate them effectively. Hence, recognising this complexity is significant for possibly developing inclusive labour policies that protect digital platform workers operating in high-risk environments.

However, it is significant to note that Uber's reliance on digital payments and user verification has been perceived by drivers as providing a degree of protection not found in traditional taxi operations or informal transport modes. The ability to screen passengers and avoid cash transactions empowers drivers to exercise agency in managing risk. This finding invites a more nuanced understanding of platform governance, where certain design features can reduce exposure to violence and enhance driver safety, even within structurally precarious conditions. This study thus contributes to scholarship on platform capitalism by foregrounding the relational, gendered, and spatial dimensions of gig work in the Global South. It challenges dominant narratives that frame platform work as universally flexible or empowering, showing instead how local contexts, marked by violence, inequality, and informal competition, reshape the contours of digital labour.

7 | Conclusion

This study highlights the multifaceted challenges of platform work in Johannesburg, shaped by pervasive urban violence, informal transport dynamics, and rooted gender inequalities. The lived experiences of Uber drivers reveal that safety is a central axis of digital labour, not a peripheral concern. Drivers navigate insecurity through adaptive, community-driven, and gender-responsive strategies in the absence of institutional support. Using the precariat theory, the study shows how platform workers bear the costs of their own safety and survival, representing a class of labourers excluded from traditional protections. Intersectionality extends this analysis by highlighting how gender, space, and social identity intersect to produce differentiated vulnerabilities and responses. Female drivers, in particular, face heightened risks that restrict their mobility and earning potential, reinforcing structural inequalities within the gig economy. The findings challenge dominant narratives of platform work as flexible or empowering. The study shows that not all digital platforms work the same way. For example, Uber's digital payment system and transparent client information help reduce some risks and give drivers more control over their safety. This advantage highlights how important the digital platform

is in shaping worker experiences. It suggests that in cities with high crime rates, the way a platform is run can help protect workers. Future research should look into how the design of these platforms affects risk and find ways to improve worker safety in different urban areas.

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Ethics Statement

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Johannesburg's Faculty of Humanities Ethics Committee. All participants signed consent forms.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data can be made available upon request, but cannot be shared with the public due to confidentiality purposes, and I plan to use the data for academic writing further.

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