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Institutional complexity across borders: What are the HRM activities that give rise to institutional complexity in an online labour platform operating in India?

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Abstract

Over the past decade, the rapidly changing work environment has been revolutionised after the emergence of online labour platforms (OLPs). These OLPs make use of HRM activities and digital algorithms to fulfil the demand and supply of gig-work. Previous studies have identified the HRM activities these OLPs practice and how these HRM practices reinforce institutional complexity in the ecosystem within the western country framework. However, with this novel business model expanding globally, do their HRM activities vary across different parts of the world? Moreover, does the level of institutional complexity vary across different parts of the world? To answer these questions, the paper investigates the HRM practices carried out by OLPs in India which gives rise to institutional complexity. The study identified the difference between OLPs operating in India when compared to the west with respect to HRM activities and level of institutional complexity. Data for the same is incorporated by conducting semi-structured interviews with OLP workers and managers and labour union representative in India. Our analysis showed that the HRM activities of OLPs in India were similar to those practised in the west. However, our analysis also showed that despite the identical HRM practices, there were differences when it came to the level of institutional complexity in each context, as majority of stakeholders in India did not experience institutional complexity unlike the stakeholders in the west. It was concluded that due to simultaneous presence of conflicting logics, in theory there existed complexity, but, in practice, the business model of these OLPs was not institutionally complex. The prevailing norms and the benefits they provided in form of work and earnings to India as a developing country made them legitimate.

Keywords: Online labour platforms, HRM activities, institutional logics, Indian context, institutional complexity, institutional legitimacy.

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1. Introduction

One of the major transformations in the field of work over the past few years has been the emergence of online labour platforms (OLPs). Recently, online labour platforms in different industries have successfully resulted in heavy competition across the globe in just a few years. The gig economy due to online labour platforms is estimated to grow from \$14 billion in 2014 to \$335 billion by 2025, this estimate is based on the rapid growth of Uber and Airbnb ([Yaraghi & Ravi, 2017](#)). These platforms have enabled individuals to connect and exchange directly, bypassing large corporations and traditional intermediaries ([Frenken et al, 2020](#)). They can be defined as being firms that use technology to fill short-term labour needs of organizations and/or consumers with independent contractors ([Kuhn & Maleki, 2017](#)). Tens of millions of workers are thought to have sought work opportunities through such platforms ([Kuek et al, 2015](#)). The need to research more about these platforms has increased because of the rising tensions between online labour platforms, tax agencies, regulators, and labour unions ([Kenney & Zysman, 2016](#)). These tensions can be attributed to the platforms' use of human resource management (HRM) activities that are seen to be incompatible with the freelance status of gig workers ([Frenken et al, 2020](#); [Meijerink et al, 2021](#)). HRM activities of OLPs are institutionally complex because they simultaneously follow conflicting logics in their HRM practices. For instance, when it comes to their relationship with gig workers, OLPs are faced with an issue of whether to comply with market logic that focuses on profit-making and free competition or to comply with the corporation logic that focuses on market share and revenue growth ([Frenken et al, 2020](#); [Meijerink & Keegan, 2019](#)). The gig-workers are either classified as freelancers with high degree of autonomy and relatively easier recruitment criteria thereby complying with the market logic of free competition, or as employees employed in the platform with lesser autonomy and stricter retention strategies, following the corporation logic of increasing market share ([Frenken et al, 2020](#)). Moreover, they aim at dealing with this complexity by striking a balance rather than compromising any of the logic, as seen in the study by [Meijerink et al, 2021](#). Previous studies conducted on online labour platforms have largely focused on institutional complexity arising from the HRM activities ([Meijerink et al, 2021](#); [Frenken et al, 2020](#)), difference between HRM activities implemented by different OLPs within one country ([Cortjens, 2021](#)), and cross country differences between how OLPs shape institutional environment to achieve legitimacy ([Uzunca et al, 2018](#)). There has not been enough research on institutional complexity arising out of HRM activities of OLPs in the context of developing countries. This is surprising because there exists a difference in degree of institutionalization between developed and developing countries ([Uzunca et al, 2018](#)), which affects the obligation to comply with institutional logics and flexibility with respect to various laws, thus influencing difference in complexity. As an illustration of institutional differences across countries and implications for platform firms, [Uzunca et al, 2018](#) showed that OLPs operating in different institutional contexts accordingly adopt different strategies to shape the institutional environment in their favour, the study also showed how similar strategies can result in different outcomes depending upon the institutional context as degree of institutionalization differs between countries. Also, with different logics dominant across borders, studying the notion of institutional complexity across borders is important because HRM practices that lead to institutional complexity in one country do not necessarily result in institutional complexity in other countries. There is a need to study HRM activities of OLPs in a developing country as there have not been enough studies conducted in the said context and becomes significant because of the difference pertaining to the gig-based work across developed and developing countries. Despite its recent popularity, gig work was prevalent

globally even before the 20th century, as prior to industrialization there existed practices of contract-based work ([Stanford, 2017 & Mehta, 2020](#)). However, with the emergence of standard employment relationship globally and the industrial revolution, gig-based work was slowly rejected in developed countries ([Stanford, 2017 & Mehta, 2020](#)). In contrast, gig-based work remains prevalent in India today, thus reinforcing gig-based work as a legitimate form of labour ([Basu et al, 2020; Chakraborty et al, 2020](#)) Thus, the different history and culture regarding gig-economy likely influences the difference in HRM activities and the institutional complexity associated with them.

Given the above, the current study aims at exploring what are the HRM activities that lead to institutional complexity in online labour platforms operating in a developing country. This will be done by conducting research focusing on OLPs operating in India because OLPs in a developing country like India, operate in a more culturally different and complex environment, thus there exists differences in kinds of legitimacy issues faced by them. Apart from that, differences in labour laws also influence several HRM activities in any OLP, this is because the demands and formation of labour unions differ across borders due to the difference in working conditions and opportunities. Furthermore, according to report published by a digital payment company, PayPal, one in every four freelancers is from India.¹ Also, according to TeamLease services, an HR firm in India, almost 56% of recent employment in India is generated by the gig-economy for both blue-collar and white-collar jobs, making New Delhi, the top destination for migrant workers joining gig-economy.² The structure of the paper is as follows. First, we begin with defining online labour platforms from an institutional complexity perspective. Then we briefly mention the HRM activities that lead to institutional complexity in the western context. Following which, we describe institutional complexity with respect to legitimacy. Lastly, we describe the Indian context in terms of OLPs and their institutionally complex HRM practices. Then we move onto the methodology, where we elaborate how data was collected, based on which we come to the results. From the results, we draw conclusions by discussing the findings of the research. The study can help contribute to the existing literature of institutional theory and online labour platforms by finding out the more dominant institutional logic in India based on the HRM practices followed, and how are the findings different from the previously research done in the context of developed countries, how this difference leads to different degrees of complexity, what causes these differences, and which environment is more institutionally complex for OLPs. Accordingly, this study aims to answer the following question- *What are the HRM activities that give rise to institutional complexity in an OLP operating in India?*

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Online Labour Platforms (OLP)

As mentioned previously, OLPs can be defined as firms that use technology to fill short-term labour needs of organizations and/or consumers with independent contractors ([Kuhn & Maleki, 2017](#)). Online labour platforms are profit focused labour market intermediaries (LMI) that make the use of technology to create online, multi-sided marketplaces that combined, form the so-

¹ <https://newsroom.in.paypal-corp.com/>

² <https://www.livemint.com/companies/start-ups/delhi-and-not-bengaluru-is-the-place-to-be-for-gig-economy-workers-1555013405684.html>

called gig economy ([Meijerink et al, 2021](#)). These platforms do not perform the services themselves. Labour platforms, such as Uber or TaskRabbit, connect customers with freelance or contingent workers who perform discrete projects or assignments ([Farrell and Greig, 2016](#)). Over the years, with the emergence of such platforms, a significant share of work previously done by traditional businesses and their employees is now replaced by self-employed workers who with the help of these platforms offer their services directly to customers ([Frenken et al, 2020](#)). The monitoring, supervision, and control of the task in OLPs is done through an algorithmic management technique, rather than market control ([Rani & Furrer, 2020](#)). A result of the rapid growth of the online platform economy is the rise of recent platform-mediated types of work which can be distinguished as crowd work or online work and in-person or on-location work ([Kenney et al, 2019](#); [Collier et al, 2017](#)). Labour platforms may also be distinguished on the basis of skill of the work, such as high-skilled or low-skilled work ([Collier et al, 2017](#)). For instance, *Amazon Mechanical Turk* (AMT) provides low-skilled workers to perform menial tasks ([Stefano, 2015](#)). Apart from that, for high-skilled tasks, *Upwork* is a platform that provides workers for services of designers, accountants etc ([Collier et al, 2017](#)). Thus, based on above-mentioned examples, there exist varieties of work that these OLPs provide.

Platform providing on-location work, such as Uber results in conflicts when it comes to providing flexibility and ensuring job security as seen in the study by ([Meijerink et al, 2021](#)).

Similarly, platform offering online work called cloud-work platforms provide web-based digital labour ([Galpaya et al, 2018](#)). For instance, platforms such as *Upwork* and *Fiverr* both provide freelancers for several services to clients globally. These platforms also provide digital gig-work to several freelancers in developing countries such as India, Sri Lanka etc ([Galpaya et al, 2018](#)). Indians are widely present on OLMs, working as freelancers on both international and national platforms, contributing to the country's large and expanding informal workforce ([D'Cruz et al, 2017](#)). According to the iLabour project by Oxford Internet Institute, different countries are specialised in different types of work where Indian web-based workers mostly focused on software development and technology.³ In India, digital workers worked for local as well as clients from other countries ([Galpaya et al, 2018](#)). Workers from developing countries are attracted to such platforms because it gives them the potential to build connections and a large customer base, with flexible working hours and the freedom to do the task from any remote location ([Galpaya et al, 2018](#)). However, what acts as a barrier for these digital workers is the absence of job security and income stability in their work ([Galpaya et al, 2018](#)). Employment insecurity refers to the shift from the traditional standard contract of employment to more flexible contracts ([Surie & Koduganti, 2016](#)). Therefore, OLPs whether working locally in a country or working globally, having workers and clients in different nations or whether providing online work or on-location work, try to build a balance between providing flexibility to workers, while still ensuring job security and thus deal with institutional complexity.

Online labour platforms are themselves corporations that organize markets, they reconfigure the institutional logics of both the market and the corporation in a new way ([Frenken et al, 2020](#)). They usually follow a business model which is based upon creating dependency ([Wood et al, 2019](#)). Specifically, platforms earn profits from each transaction that takes place between the worker and the customer, and thus they aim at ensuring worker's loyalty towards the platform by restricting worker's ability to individually provide services outside the platform's business for ulterior objectives ([Wood et al, 2019](#)). Labour platforms whose business model requires cultivating strong institutional trust and loyalty have to assume more control and actively manage

³ <https://ilabour.oii.ox.ac.uk/online-labour-index/>

workers and the work process, even if they avoid that terminology and the implementation differs from traditional employment (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017). OLPs exercise control over their workers and steer their behaviour and performance to achieve the objective of increasing market share and revenue growth (Frenken et al, 2020). In order to ensure market share and revenue growth, platforms need to attract, train, retain and control their gig workers with an effort as if they are proper employees who form part of the organizational routines and its hierarchy (Meijerink et al, 2021). For instance, workers are subjected to receive ratings and reviews to ensure better quality standards (Cappelli & Keller, 2013). Alongside reviews, to ensure better services, platforms implement performance appraisals for the workers for satisfaction of the requestors (Rosenblat et al, 2017). Therefore, by exercising control over the gig-workers OLPs comply with the corporation logic that legitimizes market share and revenue growth (Frenken et al, 2020). These digital labour platforms sometimes also provide flexibility to their self-employed workers by giving them freedom and autonomy which results in better work-life balance for the workers (Rani & Furrer, 2020; Lehdonvirta, 2018). Digital platform workers are allegedly attracted to the flexibility and autonomy of freelance work (Wood et al, 2019). OLPs ensure flexibility to their workers and prefer working with freelancers as it reduces the cost associated with several HRM activities in an employer-employee relationship (Meijerink et al, 2021). To illustrate some examples, when it comes to training, gig-workers often have to fund their personal development themselves to stay updated in terms of skills and knowledge (Peel and Inkson, 2004). Furthermore, working with freelancers eliminates the need to comply with labour laws, thereby reducing costs associated with taxes, insurance, etc. (Aloisi, 2016; Rosenblat et al, 2017). Thus, while working with freelancers and offering flexibility, OLPs comply with the market logic which legitimizes profit-making by reducing their costs (Frenken et al, 2020). Along with providing flexibility and autonomy, OLPs also want to simultaneously control their workers because if not for exercising control, the autonomy and flexibility presumed by gig-workers poses an inherent commercial risk for digital platform businesses because in order to align with their financial objectives, they must rely on the consistent availability of clients and new workers willing to use the platform (Williams et al, 2021). Similarly, if focused only on controlling by establishing employee-employer relationship, and not ensuring flexibility it would increase the potential cost by a high amount, for instance, the estimated cost to Uber for paying its drivers as employees is over \$4 billion a year (Rogers, 2016). Therefore, there is some degree of ambiguity associated with the employment status of these workers, as they neither fit in the category of freelancers nor can they be classified as employees (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017). This ambiguity associated with employment status leads to institutional complexity as both corporation logic and market logic are dominant simultaneously (Meijerink et al, 2021), this is further discussed in detail in section 2.3. Although the workers are officially considered independent contractors, the platform firms are tasked with the human resource activities of workers' recruitment, selection, evaluation, and retention, even if some of these traditional activities are performed with the help of automated algorithms (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017).

2.2 Human Resource Management (HRM) activities

Previous studies have shown that online labour platforms implement HRM activities to manage gig-workers who work as freelancers with the platform (Meijerink et al, 2021). Despite the absence of employment relationships, gig workers are subject to influence by HRM activities conducted by OLPs (Keegan & Meijerink, 2021). Unsuccessful HRM activities can result in loss of clients and/or gig workers to other better platforms, or ultimately going out of business

altogether ([Duggan et al, 2020](#)). Therefore, in order to realize their goals of profit making by providing them autonomy, while simultaneously achieving their goal of market share and revenue growth by subjecting them to control, OLPs make use of HRM activities to strike a balance ([Keegan & Meijerink, 2021](#)).

Human Resource Management (HRM) is a comprehensive, coherent approach to employing and developing people, with a focus on both improving the effectiveness of an organization through people, but also treating those people in a morally sound manner ([Armstrong & Taylor, 2014](#)). HRM encompasses a number of traditional and modern activities such as people resourcing, training and development, compensation and benefits, employee relations, retention, administration, and compliance etc., these HRM activities interrelate to achieve HR goals and ultimately the goal of the organization ([Donovan, 2019](#)). HRM traditionally refers to the managerial activities done to maintain healthy employment relationships ([Tsui et al, 1997](#); [Lepak and Snell, 1999](#); [Nishii and Wright, 2008](#)). But employer-employee relationship is absent when it comes to OLPs, given the employment status of the workers. HRM in this context faces significant challenges as platform workers are symbolically and materially distanced from the business and they are not contractually bound by an employment contract which means that the platform cannot directly regulate the frequency, amount, or quality of work produced ([Williams et al, 2021](#)).

However, despite the absence of an identifiable employee-employer relationship, these platform firms still execute several HRM activities ([Meijerink & Keegan, 2019](#)). To manage gig-worker efforts, labour platform firms implement a range of HRM activities which will be focused on in this paper, including: selection and recruitment of workers according to the needs of the clients ([Williams et al, 2021](#)), performance management and appraisal on the basis of feedback and expectations ([Rosenblat et al, 2017](#)), job design when workers are provided with proscribed ways to work and restricted levels of autonomy ([Kuhn and Maleki, 2017](#)), training and development to ensure high quality services ([Rosenblat et al, 2017](#)) and compensation and benefits to remunerate gig worker efforts and encourage particular desired behaviours ([Lieman, 2018](#)). Specifically, for *recruitment and selection*, based on different types of work involved when work is mainly online and the labour supply is global, workers are subjected to lesser restrictive criteria to access work opportunities, and the selection process presumes greater investment from workers and a willingness to risk performing unpaid work ([Williams et al, 2021](#)). However, when labour is local and 'in person', workers have to go through more traditional methods of recruitment and selection such as selection criteria and interviews ([Williams et al, 2021](#)). The work opportunities available to workers are managed by algorithmic management in which clients have the freedom to select a worker by considering work-related, as well as personal characteristics ([Duggan et al, 2020](#); [Carr et al, 2017](#)) This may lead to bias or discrimination and mitigate person-job fit ([Williams et al, 2021](#)). For the purpose of *performance management* for gig-workers, standards of performance level are set along with reviews and feedback to rate the performance of the worker ([Meijerink & Keegan, 2019](#)). This facilitates the objectives of OLP in two ways: First, performance ratings associated with a worker creates value for them by opening future projects or they form a reason for refusal of further projects to a poorly rated worker ([Rosenblat et al, 2017](#)). Second, these ratings help in developing online reputation for workers in a particular platform, which locks the worker to one platform as they can't carry that online reputation to another platform ([Lee et al, 2015](#)). When it comes to *job design*, digital workforce is comprised of individuals whose unique competencies may influence how work is structured and conducted ([Colbert et al, 2016](#)). In some platforms, gig-workers are in control of selecting their own work tasks and work environment, therefore, it can be said that they practice job crafting techniques which allows them to alter the work according to their personal

characteristics ([Schroeder et al., 2021](#)). However, in many platforms the work design is done by algorithms thereby allowing platforms to influence worker behaviour ([Kuhn & Maleki., 2017](#)). Apart from this, for *training and development*, as mentioned above gig-workers usually need to fund their personal development on their own to remain up to date in terms of skills and knowledge ([Peel and Inkson, 2004](#)). However, that is not always the case as some platforms do provide pre-employment training to project managers ([McKeown, 2016](#)). Apart from that, in some cases, platforms also conduct training sessions for their poor performers, even though these sessions are outsourced to a third party, for instance, Deliveroo, Uber etc ([Meijerink et al., 2021](#); [Meijerink & Keegan, 2019](#)). Conducting training is important because if not trained, poor performing workers would most likely be expelled instead of trained to improve their performance, which would ultimately lead to shortage of supply coupled with high demand ([Meijerink & Keegan, 2019](#)). Lastly, when it comes to *compensation and benefits*, many of these platforms determine compensation rates and control worker behaviour through algorithmic management techniques ([Rosenblat, 2019](#)). Other platforms allow workers some freedom to determine their own rates or to offer differentiated services ([Kuhn & Maleki, 2017](#)). Because labour platforms are not officially employers of gig workers, they do not usually provide benefits such as paid time off or health and workers compensation insurance ([De Stefano, 2015](#)). It is important that gig workers are satisfied with the amount of compensation they receive so that they stay with the platform and there's no shortage of workers ([Breibach and Brodie, 2017](#)). Therefore, certain platforms ensure security of payment and sometimes platforms also outsource the service to provide secondary benefits for workers to a fourth party ([Meijerink & Keegan, 2019](#)).

These HRM activities practiced to manage gig workers and coordinate platform ecosystems lead to institutional complexity ([Keegan & Meijerink, 2021](#)), this is discussed in more detail in Section 2.3.

2.3 Institutional complexity

Institutional complexity refers to a situation when organizations are faced with conflicts that arising due to more than one competing institutional logics, that is, ideal-type, taken-for-granted social notions of what constitute legitimate goals and activities ([Greenwood et al., 2011](#)). According to [Thornton & Ocasio \(1999\)](#) "Institutional logics are the socially constructed historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality" (p.804). [Thornton et al., 2012](#) mentions seven broad institutional logics that guide the interpretation of organizational reality, the logics are namely state logic, market logic, family logic, religious logic, corporate logic, professional logic, and community logic. These are further categorized more specifically by [Thornton \(2004\)](#) and [Thornton et al., \(2005\)](#) (Appendix 1). Institutional complexity can lead to tensions between relevant stakeholders and give rise to legitimacy issues and can eventually lead to organizational failure ([Battilana & Dorado, 2010](#); [Greenwood et al., 2011](#)). Conflicting logics entail legitimacy issues. Institutional legitimacy arises when an action is legitimate under one logic and illegitimate under the other logic ([Smets et al., 2015](#)). As illustrated in the study by [Suchman, 1995](#), legitimacy can be studied under three types: moral legitimacy, pragmatic legitimacy, and cognitive legitimacy where moral legitimacy is achieved when a social entity aligns with the prevailing norms and moral or ethical values, pragmatic legitimacy reflects providing benefits as practical consequence to the evaluating audience, and lastly cognitive legitimacy is achieved when a practice becomes so common that it is taken-for-granted as a social fact ([Lewis et al., 2019](#)).

Previous studies have identified how institutional complexity is processed differently across different types of organization ([Waeger & Weber, 2019](#)), differences in institutional complexity across with difference in institutional context ([Diab & Metwally, 2020](#)). In international settings, institutional complexity is highly salient as the institutional environments will differ drastically from one country to the next ([Lewis et al., 2016](#)). Similarly, when it comes to OLPs, HRM activities practiced to control gig workers lead to institutional complexity ([Keegan & Meijerink, 2021](#)). As mentioned previously, gig-economy platforms are themselves corporations that organize markets, they reconfigure the institutional logics of both the market and the corporation in a new way ([Frenken et al., 2020](#)). Market logic focuses on profit-making through free and unregulated competition by ensuring flexibility whereas corporation logic focuses on increasing of market share and revenue growth by reinforcing control and management through the HRM activities ([Thornton et al., 2012; Meijerink et al., 2021](#)). OLPs reconfigure the market logic by hiring self-employed workers to maximize profits by providing flexibility to the workers as it would help in cutting down several costs associated with standard employee-employer relationship such as formal recruitment and employee benefits etc, however, they also reconfigure the corporation logic because they also want to increase market share and ensure client retention and attract more clients, so they aim at improving the performance of their workers for better service and client satisfaction by enforcing some degree of control over workers as if they are employees with the firm ([Frenken et al., 2020 & Meijerink et al., 2021](#)). They make use of HRM activities to comply with these logics ([Meijerink et al., 2021](#)), which is further discussed below. The use of HRM activities for freelance gig workers, which simultaneous institutes the market and corporation logics, likely creates institutional complexity in the form of tensions that stakeholders draw on to challenge the legitimacy of online labour platforms as some HRM activities map on market logic while some map on corporation logic ([Frenken et al., 2020](#)). There exists some HRM activities conducted by OLPs that induce the corporation logic by enforcing control over workers ([Meijerink et al., 2021](#)). Specifically, some online labour platform use the HRM activity of performance-rating schemes, where requestors are encouraged to give ratings to the workers according to their performance and make comments, this feedback facilitates evaluation and the platform can intervene with poor performers ([Rosenblat et al., 2017](#)). These ratings allow for deactivation of workers who don't meet the standard set for performance, or allows platform to intervene in their work and suggest improvements ([Rosenblat et al., 2017](#)), thereby enforcing control as OLPs influence the workers' behaviour in order to achieve client satisfaction which is seen legitimate under the corporation logic ([Rosenblat et al., 2017, Meijerink et al., 2021](#)). Furthermore, algorithm-based compensation is also an HRM activity used for OLPs that enforce control where surge pricing is used to motivate to entice the worker to take up tasks where demand is high, thus gives higher compensation, this reduces the workers' freedom to select tasks themselves, rather they go for tasks which give more pay according to the algorithm ([Duggan et al., 2020](#)), this restricts autonomy of workers to freely select jobs and go for jobs with more payment and clients, which encourages the goal of achieving revenue growth aligning with the corporation logic ([Meijerink et al., 2021](#)). Apart from that, performance surveillance is another HRM practice that monitors workers' activity under which electronic monitoring of workers' where workers allow periodic screenshots of their desktop along with recording of keystrokes, platform shares these information with the requestors to show time of activity and ratings, although to share this is the workers' own wish, but they will sacrifice on their earnings by choosing not to do so due to the competition ([Kuhn & Maleki, 2017](#)), thus by monitoring their working hours and ratings, OLPs enforce a degree of supervision on performance and work behaviour to induce them to work longer and better to achieve the corporation goal of revenue growth and market share ([Kuhn & Maleki, 2017; Meijerink et al., 2021](#)). Therefore, these activities afford control over

gig worker performance and institute the corporation logic. Similarly, there are some HRM activities that induce the market logic by enforcing autonomy and flexibility ([Meijerink et al, 2021](#)). For instance, some OLPs set very few and simple selection/recruitment criteria for gig-workers to join the platform, so that they are free to join and leave the online marketplace which supports the market logic as it reduces several costs associated with formal recruitment process, retention, and termination of contracts, thereby maximizing profit which legitimizes the market logic ([Meijerink et al, 2021](#)). Apart from this, platforms enforce HRM policies which allow workers the autonomy to select when to work or not, which services to offer, and which orders to accept or reject thereby offering flexibility and aligning with the market logic as it gives workers the flexibility to compete freely in the market and select clients that give them higher price. ([Kuhn & Maleki, 2017](#); [Meijerink et al, 2021](#)). Thus, some activities allow flexibility and autonomy to workers for unregulated competition and profit maximization. Based on the above mentioned examples, it can be said that gig-workers are either classified as freelancers with high degree of autonomy and relatively easier recruitment criteria thereby complying with the market logic of free competition, or as employees employed in the platform with controlled performance management, lesser autonomy, following the corporation logic of increasing market share ([Frenken et al, 2020](#)). Moreover, instead of eliminating any logic, OLPs induce both logics simultaneously, thus creating tension between both the logics ([Meijerink et al, 2021](#)).

2.4 Institutional Complexity in the Indian context

Gig economy is reshaping the world of work in developing countries such as India ([Mehta, 2020](#)). As shown in the study by [Uzunca et al 2018](#), there exists a difference in degree of institutionalization between developed and developing countries, based on which it can be proposed that an OLP in a developing country would have lesser issues with legitimacy in terms of their HRM practices. Specifically, when looked at from the moral legitimacy lens, in India, due to the late emergence, the legal development of the gig economy also started late. Individuals who work with platform apps are presumed as “partners”, and not as employees. In contrast, in the UK, France and Netherlands, gig workers are now categorised as “workers” and have access to social security benefits. Additionally, as per December 2021, there were recent developments when European Commission acknowledged the proposal to provide these workers with the status of “employee” and give them further rights and protection of an employee.⁴ Even though in India there have been recent developments that recognises social security of non-standard workers under the act Social Security Code, 2020, it only states that the Union or the State government can frame schemes for providing benefits and securities to these platform and gig-workers, and doesn’t mention its implementation.⁵ There is still no law in India that obligates the employer to provide the treatment to platform workers similar to that of standard employees.⁶ Therefore, considering the prevailing norms in India, OLPs are morally legitimate. Similarly, when it comes to pragmatic legitimacy, gig economy creates great opportunity in Indian employment sector as the Indian economy is facing shortage of jobs resulting in lack of inclusive growth, the gig economy provides gainful employment to the youth and also has the potential create new

⁴ <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/global-hr/pages/eu-proposed-protections-gig-workers.aspx>

⁵ <https://thewire.in/labour/india-gig-workers-protests-pil>

⁶ <https://blog.ipleaders.in/analysis-of-labour-laws-with-respect-to-gig-workers/#:~:text=Thus%2C%20these%20are%20essential%20rights,of%20the%20non%2Dstandard%20worker>

opportunities. (Roy & Srivastava, 2020) making OLPs legitimate when looked at from the pragmatic lens. Focusing on the cognitive legitimacy, when looked historically, contract labour and piece-based work was prevalent in India before the nineteenth and twentieth century and till now, unlike the west, when it was discontinued and re-emerged following the 2008 financial crisis (Stanford, 2017 & Mehta, 2020). Therefore, contract labour was a common practice in the Indian subcontinent and was not discontinued but only evolved and regulated (Ray, 2016). Thus, as gig-work has always been a common practice in India till now that it has become a taken-for-granted socially accepted fact thereby aligning with the cognitive legitimacy. The bigger issue that OLPs in developing country might face is about how most of their jobs are simple, and do not require any enhanced skill, when their workers are highly educated and skilled, thereby their capacities are underutilised which leads to dissatisfaction among the workers (Rani & Furrer, 2020).

Furthermore, despite its recent popularity, gig-work has been in practice since a long time where it goes back prior to industrialization where contract-based work was prevalent (Stanford, 2017 & Mehta, 2020). For instance, contract labour was the predominant form of paid work when capitalism first emerged (Deakin, 2000; Wood, 2002). Specifically, contract labour was there in India even before the eighteenth century in the form of contract farming, manual labour contracts etc (Sukhpal, 2003 & Roy, 2005). Also, similar to the current transport-based gig-work such as Uber, there existed contract-based hiring of boatmen for transportation purposes in India during the late 70s till the mid-80s (Sinha, 2014). Similarly, in the west, the *domestic system* was common in Europe in the early history of merchant capitalism where merchant-employer would put out materials to producers in rural areas on contract basis, with flexibility where producers would do the labour at their home and the output of their labour was owned by the merchant-employer (Stanford, 2017). However, in the west by nineteenth and twentieth century, labour movement came in place which led to a model of standard employment with proper employee-employer relationship which brought stability, better pay, and social protection to workers (Mehta, 2020). This resulted in the rejection of gig-based work in the west (Stanford, 2017 & Mehta, 2020). Until recently, after the recession and economic crisis in 2008 when gig-work re-emerged as employees were laid off and started looking for work opportunities to meet their demands (Mehta, 2020). In contrast, with the industrialisation in India, contract labour wasn't rejected, however several laws to regulate contract labour came into place such as the Contract Labour Regulation and Abolishment act 1970 which assured several rights to the workers (Ray, 2016), but not eliminating contract labour altogether, or recognising the need of proper employee-employer employment, thereby reinforcing gig-based work as a legitimate form of labour in India even today (Basu et al, 2020; Chakraborty et al, 2020).

What makes the difference between the re-emerged gig-based work and the traditional contract labour is the use of technology in the 21st century, the development in technology in the recent years have facilitated these changes and shift to digital labour platforms (Mehta, 2020). This recent emergence of these digital platforms over the years have given rise to several legitimacy issues in the west with respect to the gig-workers as they are neither categorized as employees of the platform, nor they are exactly freelancers working for themselves, as seen in the study by Meijerink et al, 2021, but based on the different forms of legitimacy mentioned above, it can be proposed that gig-work is still considered legitimate in a developing country like India. Even though there has been some light upon the issues pertaining to social security and income stability of workers in OLP in India,⁷ but as shown by D'Cruz & Noronha, 2016, the several negatives are outweighed by the positives of employment opportunities, flexibility, and career

⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uber-ola-strike-idUSKCN1MW1WZ>

progression which would imply that the opportunities that OLPs provide are prioritized over the problems that are associated with it in the Indian context. Thereby questioning the applicability of legitimacy issues seen in the context of parallel studies in the west.

Thus, when compared with the western countries, the difference in degree legitimacy associated with gig-work coupled with historically different response and development of gig-work potentially influences the degree of institutional complexity in OLPs and their HRM activities.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Type

The author conducted in-depth analysis of case studies of workers working with two of the major location-based online labour platforms operating in India, *Uber* and *Ola* to identify any underlying pattern in their opinions about their jobs as gig-workers as these platforms falls into the definition of OLPs according to the Indian law. We focus on driving services based OLP because unlike other OLPs functioning in India where gig-workers have multiple jobs, with drivers, working with Uber or Ola is their sole job. A qualitative approach was selected due to the study's focus on subjective experiences. These platforms have the potential to create institutional complexity by integrating both, market logic and corporation logic through their HRM activities like it does in the west but are considered legitimate in the Indian context. This allows us to explore the different institutional complexity they face due to other potential dominant logics. We focused on these platforms specifically that deals in only on-location tasks, as with workers working with OLPs focusing on web-based tasks, they generally work with them as a side job with their main source of income being from somewhere else. Furthermore, selecting one globally recognised and established platform like *Uber* and a similar local platform like *Ola*, would give rise to potential difference with respect to worker treatment and complexities faced.

3.2 Data Collection

Data is collected using primary method by the author. For collecting primary data regarding the HRM activities and associated complexities in *Uber* and *Ola*, the author conducted interviews of stakeholders to acquire knowledge about how the HRM activities are conducted focusing on recruitment and selection, job design, performance management, training and development, and compensation and benefits as the study was conducted to compare differences between developed and developing nations, therefore, previously used framework for studies in the west focusing on these activities were also applied in the Indian context ([Meijerink et al, 2021](#)). Conversations with stakeholders in form of interviews give rise to potential findings outside of the framework by allowing to engage in conversation and further investigate the responses. The interviews were semi structured due to the explorative, open-ended, and subjective nature of the topics being studied. Interviews were conducted of various gig-workers who are associated with these platforms to know about the HRM activities of the OLP and the workers' opinions on it. Apart from that, interviews of employers at these platform firms were conducted to gain knowledge of potential institutional complexity faced by the platform. Furthermore, labour union representative for these workers was also interviewed to find out the institutional legitimacy of these platforms with respect to the HRM activities. The author residing in the Netherlands executed with the interviews of *Uber* and *Ola* drivers with the help of students of University of

Delhi. They were interviewed about the HRM activities they complied to, rights they get and stability they have as gig-workers, the degree of control over them, and the autonomy they have in decisions. Furthermore, with the help of LinkedIn, the author reached out to employers working at management level with these platforms and described the study in detail and then based on their replies, and interest, interviews were scheduled with two management representatives, one from Uber and one from Ola. Following which, online video interviews using Zoom were conducted focusing on HRM activities they conduct, the dominant institutional logics they enforce, and the institutional complexity they induce. Apart from that, the labour union representatives were contacted from the website of an active labour union, and was described the study in detail, following which, video interview were scheduled with one representative about their aim, and how they experience the institutional complexity. The interview questions asked to these stakeholders can be found in Appendix 2. When it came to the gig workers, out of the 10 number of participants, 5 worked for Uber and 5 worked for Ola. The interviews with drivers took place in Hindi, the local language and were recorded with the consent of the participants. The interviews with the managers in these platforms and the labour union representatives took place in English. Following which the interviews were accordingly translated and transcribed.

Table 1: Overview of Stakeholders' Interview

Interviewees	Sample (N)
Uber	
Interview with Uber Drivers	5
Interview with Uber Manager	1
Ola	
Interview with Ola Drivers	5
Interview with Ola Manager	1
Labour Union Representative	
Interview with Labour Union Secretary	1
<i>Total Interviews</i>	13

3.2.1 Operationalization of key-concepts

Concept	Definition of Variable	Participants	Interview Questions
HRM Activities	Different approaches implemented by an organisation for accomplishment of goals through human capital. For example, recruitment and selection, performance management, training and development, and compensation and benefits.	Gig workers at Uber & Ola, Managers at Uber & Ola	Questions for Drivers: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How does bad or good rating/feedback influence your work with the OLP? 2. How do you feel about the ride fare being decided by the Platform and not by the driver itself? 3. How did you learn about Uber/Ola?

			<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. What steps did you need to take before you could start driving via Uber/Ola? 5. Which criteria did you need to meet before you could start driving via Uber/Ola? 6. Which possibilities does Uber/Ola offer for you to develop your knowledge and skills? 7. How is your pay determined? 8. To which extent are you free to decide on working times, fees and how you perform your work? 9. What does Uber/Ola do to retain/commit you to their platform? <p>Questions for Managers:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How does the platform attract more drivers? 2. What steps does the platform asks a worker to take before they could start driving via Uber/Ola? 3. Which criteria do the workers need to meet before they could start driving via Uber/Ola? 4. Which possibilities does Uber/Ola offer for the development of workers' knowledge and skills? 5. To which extent are the workers free to decide on working times, fees and how they perform their work? 6. What does Uber/Ola do to retain/commit workers to their platform?
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Institutional logics	The socially constructed historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality. (Thornton & Ocasio (1999))	Gig workers at Uber & Ola, Managers at Uber & Ola, and Labour Union Representatives.	<p>Questions for Drivers:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why do you choose to work with a platform and be controlled instead of working individually? 2. What motivates you to work with an OLP/ Why did you join the platform? <p>Questions for Managers:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why does the platform impose control on the workers (in form of rating, supervision)? <p>Questions for Labour Union Representatives:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is your stance on flexibility, given the absence of minimum wages, along with no restriction on working hours results in a worker doing overtime daily? (Flexibility leading to over exploitation)
Institutional complexity	Institutional complexity refers to a situation when organizations are faced with conflicts that arising due to more than one competing institutional logics. (Greenwood et al., 2011)	Gig workers at Uber & Ola, Managers at Uber & Ola, and Labour Union Representatives.	<p>Questions for Drivers:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Despite having flexibility, do the bonus levels defined by the OLP, controls your actions? <p>Questions for Managers:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How does the company make sure to have both quality and quantity of work? i.e., have constant source of workers coming, while also ensure every worker provide quality service? 2. Which target group does the company prioritize., to ensure more workers associated with the

			platform or more requestors?
Institutional Legitimacy	Institutional legitimacy arises when an action is legitimate under one logic and illegitimate under the other logic and can lead to tension between stakeholders (Smets et al., 2015).	Gig workers at Uber & Ola, and Labour Union Representatives.	<p>Questions for Drivers:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Despite having flexibility, do the bonus levels defined by the OLP, controls your actions? <p>Questions for Labour Union Representatives:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Various studies have found out that OLPs in a developing country such as India, does more good than bad by providing flexibility, how do you feel about these findings in practical life?

3.3 Data Analysis

After the transcription, thematic analysis was conducted to present the findings. Under this, based on the answers, data was collated together to form groups by closely examining the data. These groups were identified as codes identify broad themes and patterns. Each theme was examined to gain understanding of participants' perception and motivation. First, a deductive analysis approach was applied with preconceived themes based on existing theory about online labour platforms, their HRM activities, institutional complexity, and legitimacy issues. ([Azungah, 2018](#)). After that, the author conducted inductive analysis through the Gioia methodology observation of data and identification of patterns where themes were determined after novel codes of first order themes, followed by and sub-codes or second order themes, and lastly overarching categories were formed ([Gioia et al., 2013](#)). Thus, the analysis included both the approaches of deductive analysis and inductive analysis. After the coding, for reliability and validity purposes, the Data structure formed after coding were shared with the interviewees to reassure adequacy of the categories.

4. Results

4.1 Interviews

In the following section, the responses from the interviews of the gig workers, OLP Managers, and labour union representatives are described with respect to the HRM activities implemented in the OLP that the workers are subjected to. From their responses, the activities were categorised based on the logics they comply with, i.e., market logic and corporation logic.

Following which, how these activities complying with different logic led to institutional complexity is discussed. As mentioned earlier, the questions revolved around the HRM activities of recruitment and selection, job design, performance management, training and development, and compensation and benefits.

4.1.1. HRM Activities that reinforce the Market Logic

4.1.1.1 Recruitment and Selection

Based on the responses from the interview, for recruitment and selection, the procedures were rather easy and open where anyone could apply for working with the platform with some basic requirements. The platform required the workers to be of the minimum driving age of 18 which was set by the government. Apart from this, the workers should possess a driving licence, which should be a commercial drivers' licence as platform work is for commercial purposes and not private, and a valid ID proof to be selected as a worker with the platform. While applying, workers should submit these documents with the platform app. These were all government mandated formalities and not platform-driven requirements. Following this, the platform will run a basic background check (BGC) and then approve the applicants' request to work with the platform based on the result of the BGC. Prior to COVID-19, the applicants were requested to physically visit the nearest service centre for registration, however post COVID-19, everything is done online via the app.

“There were not any special formalities required to join with the platform, it was very easy also, I just needed to have a commercial driving licence and not a private licence, and I should have my own car, apart from that there were not any investments as well.” (Ola Driver 1)

“There are not any major requirements for joining, you should show basic KYC documents and the DL you possess should be for a commercial vehicle and not a private vehicle and nor do we have a requirement for the years of driving experience.” (Uber Driver 1)

The representative at Uber Management who worked in strategy development with the platform, when asked about the recruitment procedure and the requirements of the platform highlighted how the criteria set by the platform are very basic and are the ones that are mandated by law and not something that the platform has set-

“So, I would say there is like a BGC which happens which is like a background check on that, someone needs to submit all the proofs which starts from your Aadhaar card (ID Proof), driving licence, vehicle registration certificate and I think bank accounts. So, all the details, which sort of legitimises that person is required and also from the vehicle side, the documents of their vehicle if they have their own are also required, once that has been submitted, then our team sort of approves it. So once our driver has submitted all this detail, which is government mandated, then only he will be able to drive for Uber. And there are no criteria that Uber wants the drivers to meet rather, these are all government based, but there are no specific criteria that Uber has implied.” (Uber Manager)

This open selection and recruitment practice of the OLPs with lesser criteria and basic government mandated requirements from applicants facilitates larger pool of workers applying with the platform and lowers the rejection rate. It provides workers with the flexibility to join and

leave according to their freedom without the fear of dismissal, thus incorporating the market logic of autonomy and free competition. Apart from this, OLPs also save their cost and time by not having to spend on resources for complex selection procedures with severe guidelines and long durations, thereby increasing profit, which aligns with the market logic of profit maximisation.

4.1.1.2 Job Design

The workers shared that they had authority over how they organise their job. When it came to job design, workers had the perception that they have flexibility and freedom about their working conditions. Specifically, workers had the freedom to select their own working hours, accept or reject any ride, their preferred location, use of resources etc. They were able to customize the job features according to their own comfort. This provided them opportunity to maximize their earnings and work as per their own terms. To work with the platform, the workers just had to login and be online on the app, which would then provide them with rides requested by customers, which they can reject or accept accordingly and when they wish to not be active on the platform, they could just log-out and be offline from the platform. This way, the platform had provided them with the opportunity to practice autonomy over their work to make their decisions independently. According to some of the drivers, they enjoy having the ability to work only when they want, especially if someone is already working somewhere else and joined the platform to work part-time, this flexible way of earning helps them a lot. There also does not exist a minimum number of hours to work to be still associated with the platform, the driver can work for just one hour in an entire month, and still be a part of the platform without the fear of dismissal.

“Ola does not say anything to me about how much should I drive, the app gives me only two options- to be off duty or on duty, so it is entirely up to me when I want to stay on duty and when I want to go off duty. The more duty you do, the more money you will fetch.” (Ola Driver 3)

“Drivers only decide how much they want to work, there is no compulsion. It’s just that, the more you drive the more you earn. I am able to decide when to work and where to work. In the daytime, I work near the railway station to get more rides, and in the evening, if I feel like driving with Uber, only then I work and stay online, otherwise I don’t work. So, really, I am free to decide.” (Uber Driver 1)

Additionally, according to the management representatives at Ola and Uber both strongly highlighted how the workers have their freedom to work according to their own terms.

So, I would say the ecosystem right now is like that apart from fare, they have 100% freedom over when and how they wish to work, because they are not wage workers, right? Whenever they’re looking for a ride, they can just be online, and whenever they don’t want a ride, they can just turn off the app, there is nothing much about it” (Ola Manager)

“Okay, so with time and how they perform their work, I would say their flexibility is 10 out of 10. They can choose timing basis, like what they want to optimise for. The hours they work at depend on their goals like how much they want to make from the system. And the most important part of this transparency is that it's not required for them to be online every single day, they can take off whenever they want. It's not like Saturday and Sunday for them, right? If they have some work, they can take off on Wednesday. Also, days they don't drive on, also be offline. So that's the part which they love the most, that they are not working for someone. And they are not like forced to be working six days, and then taking off on seventh day.” (Uber Manager)

Apart from that, it was noticed that there also existed an overlap as there are drivers who worked with both the platforms, Uber and Ola. It was very common for a driver to be registered with both the platforms in order to ensure constant number of rides. This highlighted how workers were free to decide about whom they work for, based on their preferences of higher compensation, more rides etc. The platforms did not restrict their drivers from working with the competitor platform in the same capacity.

“The number of drivers is so huge, at least in the metro cities that to be frank Ola is really indifferent to how often a driver signs off or decides to drive with the platform or not. Because we do understand that there is also a crossover, right? People who are driving for Ola are also driving for Uber, so the attrition rate is very low” (Ola Manager)

The freedom provided by the platform to the workers allows them the autonomy to work as per their preferred time and location, while also working simultaneously with another platform, without any interference or demands from the platform. Thus, reinforcing the market logic of autonomy and free competition.

4.1.2 HRM Activities that reinforce the Corporation Logic

4.1.2.1 Recruitment and Selection

When it comes to finding the pool of applicants for working, the platform ensures a constant supply of applicants by identifying a target audience and attracting them to join the platform. They do it by collaborating with various driving schools where they promote the platform, and then collect data of those who passed the tests to drive commercially.

“The onus is on us to sort of reach the known target group. So, you would know like, there are so many regional and city level training institutes, which, basically educates, trains about driving. Someone who is not aware about wants to learn how to drive he goes into those kind of training institutes, where you learn driving. So, we have tied up with those institutes and we get data from them about who has passed the training, and then we target those driver partners in the same way.” (Uber Manager)

Apart from this, there exists a large number of drivers who do not possess their own car and were provided one from the platform, those workers had to make an initial investment of 5000 INR for the car, then they had to sign a lease agreement, and after that they were registered with the platforms. The lease agreement states the number of weeks a driver is supposed to drive the car with the platform to be able to pay all the instalments.

“Yes, there were some investments from my end since this is not my own car. I had to pay INR 4000/- as registration fee and INR 25000/- as security deposit. Ola deducts 600-700 from my earnings daily as rent. I have to pay this rent for 157 weeks as mentioned in the lease contract.” (Ola Driver 2)

The platforms institute control over the type of people that join the work by indirectly focusing on a specific target group with the help of driving schools and attracting them to join the platform to increase the market share. Apart from that, the onboarding procedure for someone who doesn't own a car requires expenditure in the form of investments and deposit, thereby making their recruitment procedure rigid, and reducing their autonomy to work as much as they want by

stating on number of weeks on the contract. The platform increases market share by getting more workers to join with the platform but uses control to facilitate that, thereby reinforcing the corporation logic.

4.1.2.2 Training and Development

After their registration, drivers with the platform were expected to complete some mandatory training before they can start working. The training was a part of their on-boarding process where they had to watch some videos on the platform's app which were basically tutorials and instructions focused on basic development about how to operate the system, to keep the hygiene in check, what steps to take, what not to do etc. The platform keeps track for the completion of the tutorials on the app and allows a driver to take-up rides only after they have finished the required trainings.

“So, there are people who've never even use the phone, who've never had access to a smartphone. For somebody like you and me, that's not a big thing to navigate an app. But to these drivers, it's a huge thing that, you know, somebody has come forward, and somebody has taught them, 'hey, this is an app, and this is how you're supposed to use it'. Within that there's a different app for the driver partner and there are in depth tutorials, pre-recorded tutorials, obviously, which tell the driver the ethical aspects, how you can use the app and like, you know, this is how you're supposed to accept the ride or decline, right, and all of that. So, in that sense, the upscaling is there, but it's not very major for somebody like you or me.” (Ola Manager)

“We have a separate Uber driver app, where all the tutorials are given which, we have to watch when we join the platform about what to do, how to operate the app etc.” (Uber Driver 3)

Apart from that, every now and then to deal with a specific issue, platform also gave opportunities for workers to develop their skills and knowledge through some workshop-based trainings by tying up with third parties.

“So apart from video-based training, we have tied up with multiple partners. For example, the one serious issue which we wanted to address was gender and culture sensitivity, and for that we partnered with the third party which was a government backed NGO, which educated the drivers about gender and culture sensitivity, and why it is important and raise more awareness.” (Uber Manager)

The initial tutorials are mandatory whereas the later trainings are more voluntarily or are compulsory if need based. For example, there exists additional trainings which are required for a driver when their ratings and feedback from the requestors have been below average consistently. In such scenarios, they have to complete some additional trainings by the managers present at nearest service centre or are compelled to rewatch the initial tutorials to help them improve their ratings which will ultimately optimise the quality of work.

“So, the initial trainings are compulsory based, because like, once the driver has done training, then only he will be able to go online. And that is something which we track, but the trainings after those are not mandatory and are for quality actioning purposes.” (Uber Manager)

“So, whenever a ride happens, we know that, if a rider has complained about the quality of driving, we know that this driver is like in the bottom 10 percentile, bottom 25 percentile or bottom 50 percentile. And based on that we speak to the drivers, and we asked them to sort of improve

their quality and we send them more video training and all those things to him so that they can improve their experience. But then again, that is very rare.” (Uber Manager)

If a driver constantly gets bad ratings, so they've got these benchmark or thresholds, I think five complaints or more. So, we have this entire team sitting in the head office, who deals with driver partner with such issues. So, from there, they will contact the driver, he'll be thrown off the system, then he'll have to come to the office, do the training again, and then be on-boarded onto the system back again. (Ola Manager)

Therefore, the platform makes it mandatory for its workers to complete training to be associated with the platform to make sure that they possess desired skills for the job for achieving maximum market share. The platform this way, reinforces control on its workers by managing skills and development through the trainings, thereby corresponding the corporation logic.

4.1.2.3 Job Design

Workers seemed to be indirectly bound by the algorithm in such a way that to maximise their earnings, they had to follow a working pattern where they would work at times which would give them, or work at location which would give them rides at the higher fares. To be specific, during peak hours, or in a crowded location with huge traffic where there is high demand from requestors but low supply of cabs, the algorithm will be in such a way that the fare will rise-up. In order to get better fare for same service and maximise their earnings, workers tend to choose such a location where there are higher chances of better fare, or work during peak hours when demand is again high. Therefore, their actions were restricted in order for them to earn more.

“Basically see, if you are in any business or like if you are in any service, there will be like for example, in our case, there is peak hour and non-peak hour car that's because how the industry is. So, in peak hour are when the offices are closed, and people come out on roads so there will be higher demand and lesser supply and then there will be surge then there will be an opportunity for you to maximise your earning right? And that's just like the type of business you are in, that you will have to sort of be online at this specific time there to maximise your earning.”

Therefore, this algorithm due to surge pricing influences decisions of workers and incline them to work towards peak hours with high demand so as to earn more. The high fare decided by platform act as an attracting factor for workers to deliberately work during peak hours and in crowded location, thereby controlling their actions. Thus, reinforcing the corporation logic.

4.1.2.4 Performance Management

Drivers seemed to be subjected to some degree of supervision in the form of performance management. The platform has a rating system for every driver which allows the requestor to give rating to a driver from 1-5 where 5 is the best rating, and 1 is the lowest based on a requestors' experience based on the drivers' behaviour, his driving skills, punctuality, vehicle hygiene and condition etc. Apart from that, requestors can also give additional feedback along with the rating if they want to mention something additional. Ratings and feedback play a huge role in regulating driver as before a requester accepts a cab ride, they are shown the rating of the driver which influences their behaviour if they wish to ride with the driver or not. It is a way of providing transparency to the parties as even requestors have ratings that are given by driver; however, the bad rating of a requestor doesn't influence a driver's decision as much. This system of manages their performance with the help of the algorithm. To illustrate further, ratings work in

such a way that if a driver has a record of good rating of 4 or above and positive feedback, they get rides more frequently and with higher fare whereas someone with bad records of rating will get lesser ride requests, despite being online on the platform and will only get the ones with low fare. The driver with good rating is given more opportunities to maximise their earnings. This system is believed to promote good performance among drivers and keep them motivated.

“Based on the drivers’ ratings, that the customer gives, the driver is accordingly allotted with a ride with higher size of fare. So, for example, a driver has a 4.95 or 4.9 rating, well like a five-star rating, so the odds of him getting a ride with a higher ticket size are more than, you know, somebody let’s say with a four-star rating or a three-star rating. The algorithm is like that, so in that way Ola incentivizes its drivers that if you perform well, you’re good to the passenger, your car is clean, and all those metrics you check all your boxes, you will get rides with better fare, you will earn more, you’ll make more money. Ola will always prefer to give a ride to you before it gives the ride to somebody with the lesser rating. So, this is the order to keep the quality in check. When you have a platform, you cannot keep individual performances in check, therefore rating system is important to keep the quality in check. Otherwise, there is no way Ola can know which driver partner is performing badly. Also, so you also need to have a way to incentivize good behaviour, otherwise, nobody would go that extra mile. So that is where you know, the ratings part comes into picture” (Ola Manager)

Apart from promotional practices, there also exists consequential practices. In extreme cases, if a driver has had consistently bad ratings, then the platform locks them out of the app for 24-48 hours that they cannot login and accept rides. Additionally, after repetitive negative feedbacks, the drivers are also laid off the system and are subjected to go through some mandated trainings to help them improve their ratings and improve overall quality.

“Rating effects a lot. We have to maintain above 4-star rating to survive in the job. If we get bad ratings, we might not receive many rides. In some extreme cases, our IDs might also get suspended.” (Uber Driver 2)

“If someone has consistent below 3.5 rating, we will give them warning first, that you are not providing a quality surface service. If you perform better, you can increase your rating. So once we give this warning, if the rating increases, then it’s fine. If it does not increase, then we call them in our centre we educate them, if again, it does not, after three such kind of warnings, we let go of them from our system. So, we try to sort of help at three points so that they can improve their rating and experience. But still, if someone is not able to, we do not want to risk our riders because of this then we sort of let go and like whitelist those drives from our platform.” (Uber Manager)

This system of rating and feedback instituted supervision on the drivers to improve the quality of the service to the requestors. In order to increase the market share of the platform and increase revenue generation, the platform kept check on quality of the service by managing the performance of the workers, thus aligning with the corporation logic of control and supervision.

4.1.2.5 Compensation and Benefits

The compensation of the drivers is in such a way that for one ride, after the fare has been decided by the algorithm of the platform, 20-30% of that fair is kept by the platform and 70-80% of the fare is income of the driver. Their overall compensation mainly depends on how many

rides they complete in a day, and because they choose their own working hours, they should have control over their compensation, but the fare per ride is decided by the platform based on its algorithm of fuel prices, demand and supply, peak hours etc. Specifically, during non-peak hours, where there is less demand and enough supply, fare will be lesser than usual, thereby impacting the drivers' earning for that ride.

"These big companies like Uber, Ola calculates fare after considering a lot of factors like fuel prices, etc, so I trust their system, but we don't really get much say when it comes to the fare. We can't even see the fare before completing the ride, once we have reached the destination and finished the ride, only then we can see the fare and that is what we take from the passenger. So, I have never felt the need to interfere with the incentives." (Ola Driver 1)

I believe drivers should also have an option to accept the fare or ask for a higher fare. Because most of the times the fare is okay. But sometimes the fare is less, and it is a loss to me. So uber should give drivers an option to decide the fare." (Uber Driver 3)

"It's not like the partners can decide their own fare. Our government has also imposed a limit on how much the cab companies can charge, so different prices differ with factors." (Uber Manager)

Platform also provides additional incentives to the drivers through defined levels of ride which will fetch a driver additional earning over their regular earnings. To illustrate further, on completion of 9 rides per day, a bonus of 1000 INR is received, and on completion of 15 rides, even higher bonus is received and so on. This incentivises the driver to complete a set number of rides and reduces their freedom by creating a bias for grinding more than 8 rides every day.

"For Uber getting a new driver is costlier as compared to increasing the supply by our existing driver because getting a new driver is a customer acquisition cost where we will have to pay more for education, where we will have to wait for 2 months before a driver is comfortable with driving with Uber and providing higher rating expectation but someone who is already driving in the system, and we give him incentive to increase his hours in the system, then it's a win-win for both of us." (Uber Manager)

To gain the perspective of labour union, when asked about autonomy and freedom as a benefit of working with Uber and Ola, National General Secretary of All India Federation of App-based Transport Workers (IFAT) said-

"The freedom one gets today is no freedom if it goes tomorrow. Today they have tied our hands through their incentive-based structure, they have tied us in packages, in targets. What kind of flexibility is that? If I don't finish at least 20 rides in a day, If I finish only 19 and miss by even 1 then I will not be provided with an incentive. If only I finish 20 rides, then I will be provided with extra INR 2000 that makes my earnings enough. There is no freedom, never was, never will be as well. So, they bind the drivers, due to this incentive practice, the drivers are exploited. This is something I speak as a driver and not a leader." (Labour Union Representative)

However, when the drivers were asked about how the incentive-based compensation practice reduces their freedom, most of them rather gave diplomatic answers and some of them even chose to not answer the question.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, a significant number of drivers do not have their own cars and have to depend on the platform for the same. The platforms provide them a car on lease with the condition that the drivers must pay a fixed amount from their earnings per day for the rent.

Therefore, when the vehicle rent is coupled with the incentive-based compensation, this results in drivers trying to cover up that cost from the incentive money and thus, working long hours.

“As I didn’t have my own car, I paid INR 5000/- registration fees. Over that, I paid INR 27000 as security deposit for the car which is refundable. Along with that, they charge around INR 5000-5500 every week on top of their commission. So, even though the incentives are low, it somewhat pushes me to work more as I have to pay them money for the car, so I end up working even more for that incentive, even sometimes 12-15 hours a day. I never thought of it this way, but I guess yes, Uber is controlling my actions indirectly” (Uber Driver 3).

By deciding the fare of every ride through algorithm, the OLP restricts the autonomy of the driver to decide the fare themselves based on their services. Apart from that, despite providing the drivers with freedom to decide their working hours, the incentive slabs set by the platform to generate more revenue, indirectly pushes the driver to work long hours and finish 9 or more rides for more compensation. This helps the platform generate more revenue and induces indirect control on the workers, thereby, complying with the corporation logic of revenue growth and market share through imposing control.

4.1.3. Institutional Complexity experienced by stakeholders

The way some activities institute market logic, while other institute the corporation logic, it is anticipated to give rise to institutional complexity in the ecosystem of these platforms ([Meijerink et al, 2021](#)). When it came to the drivers as one of the stakeholders, they seemed to be subjected to market logic from the HR practices of open recruitment and selection, along with autonomy with job design. While simultaneously, being subjected to the corporation logic in the form of control through the necessary trainings, supervision of performance, anticipated job design, and administered compensation. However, workers were asked about how they experience this, in terms of institutional complexity, majority of them were of the belief they do not have any complaints as the platforms provide them with regular earning, thus they don’t mind the control in the form of corporation logic with the autonomy given to them as for them, being able to earn is their priority.

“So whatever price Ola decide, they put a lot of thought process in it, their system is very good in that way, with respect to changes in fuel prices, so after considering all possible factors the fare is decided. So I am happy with the system and the fares, it is enough for me.” (Ola Driver 4)

“As I said, I am happy with what I get from Uber, I get a decent amount of money after all of that after I lost my job during the pandemic. Their practices are in accordance with a lot of factors, and I don’t have much to say.” (Uber Driver 2)

Therefore, workers did not really seem to question the legitimacy of the platforms as according to them the benefit of good earnings, overshadowed the need for freedom to have a say in their compensation, or how they choose to work as they seemed to have faith in the platforms. Apart from that, the workers were hesitant to say anything, or gave rather strategic and careful answers, thus hardly reported on institutional complexity. Only one of them shared his experience which highlighted the issue with conflicting logics:

“I strongly believe drivers should have more freedom and have a strong say when it comes to deciding fare, or not be pushed to work more to complete targets, I have to pay them back for the lease of car and I don’t feel any freedom.” (Uber Driver 3)

Additionally, from the management’s perspective, the managers at Uber and Ola as stakeholders shared how the HRM activities do not reflect institutional complexity in India’s perspective as long as the activities add value to the work and benefit the platform.

“So, when you look at trainings from an Indian perspective, India, being a developing country, currently has a lack of resources, and everyone knows about it. So, in such situation when you talk about upscaling the driver, from an international perspective is not much but for these mediocre workers who enter the system, it is a lot. The basic upscaling for us, is very complex for them, but again, it has a huge value addition in their work and for the platform as well. Because for them, a job that they don’t do properly, there will be 10 others for replacement. So, the idea of training becomes normal”. (Ola Manager)

“I wouldn’t call rating as supervision, rather a process to improve the overall quality of the marketplace, we are tracking but it’s not like those numbers are used in a negative manner, they are used in a positive manner for the benefit of the marketplace.” (Uber Manager)

However, the institutional complexity experienced was highlighted by the labour union representative by questioning the legitimacy of the platforms with how their numbers of drivers increased during recent years due to the freedom they *claimed*, while also having a system to manage the workers’ actions:

“These platforms promised us freedom and good earnings, over the last few years they have expanded so much that the number of drivers increased from 30k to almost 100k. But their incentive and compensation system sucks blood out of poor workers, coupled with their rating system where someone with better car will get more rides than the one with a basic car, gives rise to unhealthy competition for survival. These companies at the end work for their own profit with their schemes.” (Labour Union Representative)

5. Discussion

The main objective of this study was to identify the HRM activities that lead to institutional complexity in an OLP in a developing country like India, to demonstrate how the findings will be different from previous studies conducted within the European framework ([Meijerink et al, 2021](#)) in terms of the HRM practices followed and the degree of institutional complexity they lead to. In this section, by analysing the results of this study, the findings are discussed based on their theoretical and practical implications. And lastly, any limitations that can potentially alter the reliability of the results are mentioned with recommendations for possible future research.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

Based on the above-mentioned results, the study provides novel insights to the existing literature of institutional theory and online labour platforms. First, our findings echoes earlier research conducted by [Meijerink et al, 2021](#) by showing that the HRM activities that the OLPs practice in India, were similar to that in the Netherlands which is surprising because the OLPs studied in

both the context operated in different services, specifically this research focused on mobility service platform (Uber & Ola) whereas the study by [Meijerink et al, 2021](#) focused on food delivery platforms (Deliveroo & UberEats). Thus, this finding should be taken into account as the HRM activities were identical when studying two different types of platforms in two culturally, economically different contexts (India & Netherlands). This can be explained by how, despite the different services, both the types of OLPs deal in blue collar jobs with low-skilled and on-location work. Further, the novelty of the business model that these OLPs follow, restricts them from experimenting and trying activities different than the ones already adopted and practiced in the western framework this early.

Second, our findings confirm that the similar HR practices that lead to institutional complexity in the west, did not result in institutional complexity in India. Specifically, while previous research by [Meijerink et al, 2021](#) showed that the stakeholders in OLPs in the west experience institutional complexity when the HRM activities simultaneously reinforced competing logics of market and corporation both, our results demonstrate that this was not the case in India as the stakeholders did not question the legitimacy of these platforms. Therefore, the same model that was seen as illegitimate in the west, was legitimate in India, despite the identical business models. Building on the existing evidence by [Basu et al, 2020](#) and [Chakraborty et al, 2020](#), this seemed to be because of Indian history, when workers used to perform gigs directly for the requestors, as after industrialisation, gig-work was discontinued in the west, whereas it was still continued as a usual, taken-for-granted practice in India that resulted in prevailing norms in the country with respect to contract labour, thereby reinforcing normative legitimacy. This can further be proved by recent developments in gig-work in the west, with a proposal by European commission asking gig-worker to have the status of an employee, whereas in India, gig-work was legitimate as it is. Additionally, our findings show another reason as to why stakeholders hardly experienced complexity because for the workers, OLPs provided these workers with good earnings, and working in a developing country being in early stage of industrialisation and with lower per capita income, the benefit of regular earning and means to employment legitimized the business model of these platforms in the country. Thus, confirming our assumption based on the findings of [D'Cruz & Noronha, 2016](#), how several negatives in some Indian crowdsourcing platforms are outweighed by their positives. Moreover, our findings also confirm that OLPs in India comply with moral, pragmatic, and cognitive legitimacy as their practices align with the prevailing norms and morals, they provide benefit to the society and lastly, their activities are so common that they are taken-for granted as a social fact ([Lewis et al, 2019](#)). However, there were few exceptions who questioned the legitimacy of the system and experienced complexity. Specifically, labour union representatives who were against the control workers are subjected to while working with the platform. This can be explained by how the aim of labour union representative was promoting welfare as compared to workers' aim to have regular earnings. As these labour union representatives are more politically active and are aware of legitimacy issues the same OLPs face in the west and their response strategies, thus influencing their perception of complexity. And there were some workers as well who reported on complexity, they were the ones who did not have their own vehicle and were provided one by the platform on lease, which negatively impacted their earnings by some percentage as they were compelled to pay the rent for the vehicle. This exception further strengthens our findings, by showing how earnings as a factor plays huge role in the legitimacy of these platforms as they were perceived to be illegitimate only when the earnings were reduced.

Third, our findings confirm that there is a third dominant logic reinforced by OLPs in India, above the market and corporation logic, which is the state logic of collective welfare and good. Specifically, the HRM activities of the OLPs are legitimized in the society by the notion of

providing source of income to several skilled but deprived people in a developing country, thereby carrying out collective good and reinforcing the state logic over any other logic.

5.2 Practical Implications

In addition to the theoretical implications, we further discuss the implications of the study for practice. Based on our findings, we discuss implications for OLPs and the management and offer them guidance. From the management and the platforms' perspective, based on our findings, it can be established that OLPs in future when expanding to other developing countries can do so without having to customize and change their HRM practices, as the HRM activities originally practiced in the context of a developed country are also competent for OLPs in a developing country. Additionally, OLPs can expand further in developing and countries and can impose control on their workers while providing flexibility without the risk of any legal issues, as the business model will be legitimate in those countries under the state logic. Apart from that, OLPs should take steps to ensure legitimacy in the long run by developing response strategies to tackle the institutional complexity experienced by workers who take vehicles on lease from the OLP and pay high rent from their earning.

5.3 Limitations and future research

Despite considering all possible factors while conducting research, the reliability of the data can still be impacted by the level of honesty of the workers interviewed. It was observed that during data collection, some workers hardly reported as candidly as they wanted to out of lack of confidence on the interviewer and fear of their statements being used against them or taken to the management, given how easily replaceable these workers are. They portrayed a sense of belonging associated with the platform and highlighted how they get their income because of the platform, thus, seemed to incline towards safe and favourable answers and shared as little as possible. Therefore, future research should be conducted with a higher pool of interviewees, which, despite the same ratio, increases the number of candid and honest interactions and provide with better insights to establish findings. Instead of interviews, future research can be conducted in a group discussion atmosphere so that workers feel free to share their genuine opinions without any doubt with more confidence in the research. Also, interviews of ex-workers should be conducted who have experience of working with the platform but do not work with it anymore, so that the fear factor is completely eliminated from the interviews and participants can speak more openly. Furthermore, due to pragmatic reasons, the study focused only on developing country context to compare with previously conducted research in the European context, instead of a comparative study simultaneously focusing on OLPs in both contexts. To identify differences and similarities in same timeline with common methodology, and to draw more accurate conclusions, it becomes important for future researchers to conduct a comparative study focusing on both frameworks simultaneously.

Additionally, the research was conducted for OLPs involved in blue collars services, that requires low skilled, on-location work, and cannot be generalised for other OLPs which deal in white collar jobs, which are done virtually. For instance, as previously mentioned, Upwork and Amazon Mechanical Turk. The nature of work in such platforms is generally high skilled. And therefore, there HRM practices are bound to be different when it comes to the involvement of the OLP in

providing gigs, deciding the compensation etc. as in these platforms, the requestors also play a third role which also impacts the equation between the platform and the worker, thus influencing perception of institutional complexity. Therefore, it becomes important to conduct research focusing on institutional complexity on platforms who deal in virtual work to expand the literature beyond blue-collar jobs to either help generalise the results from the studies so far or establish different findings due to the difference in nature of work.

6. Conclusion

The research aimed on identifying what are the HRM activities practiced by online labour platforms lead to institutional complexity in a developing country like India. Based on a qualitative analysis of interviews with workers and managers of these OLPs and labour union representatives as stakeholders, the HRM activities that were followed were concluded to be similar to those in the European context ([Meijerink et al. 2021](#)). Thus, these activities reinforced both, market logic and corporation logic. However, it was concluded that, unlike the research conducted in the European context, the same HRM activities did not give rise to institutional complexity in India because of the following reasons: first, gig work existed in India even before the emergence of OLPs, if not for OLPs, the workers were still subjected to control from the requestors, making it a taken-for-granted and socially accepted practice. Secondly, these OLPs provided work and earnings to a skilled but deprived workforce in the country, which made them legitimate. Thus, it was established that even though there existed conflicting market logic and corporation logic in theory, but in practice, these logics did not clash with each other due to the prevailing norms with control and did not lead to institutional complexity. Finally, it was concluded that state logic was more dominant in OLPs in India as by providing regular earnings to their workers, these OLPs induce collective welfare, and are thus legitimate under the state logic.

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Appendix

Characteristic	Market	Corporations	Professions	State	Families	Religions
Economic system	Investor Capitalism	Managerial capitalism	Personal Capitalism	Collective welfare	Personal Capitalism	Western capitalism
Symbolic analogy effect	Market as transaction	Hierarchy as a corporation	Professions as a network	State as a redistribution mechanism	Family as firm	Temple as bank
Sources of identity	Faceless	Bureaucratic roles / quantity production	Personal reputation / quality of innovation	Political ideology of social class	Family reputation / father and son relationships	Occupational and vocational Association with deities
Sources of legitimacy	Share's price	Market position of the company	Personal expertise	Democratic Participation	Loyalty unconditional	Evocation supernatural
Sources of authority	Activism shareholder	Board of directors / management	Professional Associations	Bureaucratic domination / political parties	Patriarchal domination	Personal charisma of the prophet / power and status of the priesthood
Base strategies: increase of ...	Efficiency of transactions	Size and diversification of the firm	Reputation / quality craft	Collective good	Honor, security and family solidarity	Supernatural symbolism of natural events
Informal mechanisms of control	Analysis of the industrial segment	Organizational culture	Professional celebrity	Policy Backstage	Family policy	Worship
Formal mechanisms of control	Imposition of regulation	Authority of the board and management	Internal / external supervision	Imposition of legislation	Inheritance rules and succession	Rationalization of usury / taboos standards
Organizational form	Market	<i>M-Form</i>	Network organization	Legal Bureaucracy	Family Partnership	Religious congregation
Logic investment	Capital committed to the capital market	Capital committed to corporation	Capital committed to the relationship link	Capital committed to public policy	Capital committed to home	Capital committed to salvation

Source: Based on Thornton (2004, p. 44), Thornton, Jones and Kury (2005, p.168).

Appendix 1: Overview of logics as defined by Thornton (2004) and Thornton et al (2005)

All questions-

Questions for drivers:

1. How did you learn about Uber/Ola?
2. What steps did you need to take before you could start driving via Uber/Ola?
3. Which criteria did you need to meet before you could start driving via Uber/Ola?
4. Which possibilities does Uber/Ola offer for you to develop your knowledge and skills?
5. How is your pay determined?
6. To which extent are you free to decide on working times, fees and how you perform your work?
7. What does Uber/Ola do to retain/commit you to their platform?
8. What are the initial investments when joining Uber/Ola?
9. What motivates you to work with Ola/Uber? Why did you join the platform?
10. Why do you choose to work with a platform and be controlled instead of working individually?
11. How does bad or good rating/feedback influence your work with Uber/Ola?
12. How do you feel about the ride fare being decided by Uber/Ola itself and not by the driver itself?
13. Despite having flexibility, do the bonus levels defined by Uber/Ola, control your actions?

Question for Managers:

1. How does Uber attract more drivers?
2. What steps does Uber asks a worker to take before they could start driving via Uber?
3. Which criteria do the workers need to meet before they could start driving via Uber?
4. Which possibilities does Uber offer for the development of workers' knowledge and skills?
5. To which extent does Uber let the workers freely decide on working times, fees and how they perform their work?
6. What does Uber do to retain/commit workers to their platform?
7. How does Uber make sure to have both quality and quantity of work? i.e., have constant source of workers coming, while also ensure every worker provide quality service?
8. Which target group does Uber prioritize., to ensure more workers associated with the platform or more requestors?
9. Why does the platform (Uber) impose control on the workers (in form of incentives, supervision)? (What are the benefits)

Questions for Labour Union Representatives:

1. What is the main aim of the trade union currently?
2. How do you think your voices are heard given the benefits OLP bring to the country?
3. Various studies have found out that OLPs in a developing country such as India, does more good than bad by providing flexibility, how do you feel about these findings in practical life?
4. What is your stance on flexibility, given the absence of minimum wages, along with no restriction on working hours results in a worker doing overtime daily?