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Systematic Review

Making Sample Adequacy Assessable: A Systematic Review of Saturation Reporting and Other Adequacy Rationales in Qualitative Gig-Worker Research

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Abstract

Qualitative studies may report saturation without specifying what was judged sufficient, supporting evidence, or scope. This systematic review examines how studies of gig-worker experiences report saturation and other sample-adequacy rationales. Searches of Scopus and Web of Science yielded 343 records. After screening 237 deduplicated records and assessing 159 full texts, 44 studies reporting an adequacy rationale were included. Thirty-two specified an operational saturation criterion, such as no new themes or concepts; 12 presented limited or general claims, literature-based sample-size justification, or alternative rationales. Eight of the 32 operational saturation studies reported saturation judgments at specified interview counts ranging from 7 to 51, across different sampling scopes and analytic aims. Study-level coding of the 32 operational studies, informed by the methodological literature, yielded six reporting dimensions: adequacy logic, analytic object, sampling boundary, monitoring process, confirmation evidence, and bounded claim. Among these, 31 reported monitoring, nine explicit confirmation evidence, and two explicitly bounded claims. The framework offers authors and reviewers a structured way to examine how published reports connect adequacy criteria, supporting evidence, and the scope of their claims. The findings describe studies reporting an adequacy rationale and do not estimate reporting prevalence across all qualitative gig-work research.

Keywords: sample adequacy; data saturation; qualitative research; gig work; work and employment; systematic literature review

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1. Introduction

Saturation is often invoked to justify the adequacy of a qualitative sample, yet the term does not always mean the same thing. Code saturation refers to the point at which no new codes emerge, thematic saturation to the point at which no new themes appear, meaning saturation to the depth and variation captured within existing findings, and theoretical saturation to the development of theoretical categories and their relationships (Hennink et al. 2017; Saunders et al. 2018). When these forms are treated as interchangeable, it becomes unclear whether a study is aiming for descriptive coverage, interpretive depth, or theoretical development and consequently what kind of evidence would actually support its adequacy claim.

Gig-economy research offers a useful case for this issue, since it spans several forms of digitally mediated work that vary in platform control and workers' economic dependence (Duggan et al. 2020; Kuhn and Maleki 2017). Duggan et al. (2020), for instance, distinguish app-work, crowd work and capital platform work, while Kuhn and Maleki (2017) differentiate platform workforces according to worker autonomy, incentives, and economic dependence. Within these arrangements, flexibility and autonomy tend to coexist with algorithmic control, income insecurity, irregular hours, social isolation, and monitoring through ratings or reputation systems (Gandini 2019; Wood et al. 2019). As a result, relevant samples can differ considerably by platform, occupation, country, employment status, and degree of economic dependence (Duggan et al. 2020; Kuhn and Maleki 2017; Wood et al. 2019).

These differences are relevant to judgments about sample adequacy (Malterud et al. 2016; Saunders et al. 2018). The adequacy of a qualitative sample depends on the study aim, sample specificity, the use of established theory, the quality of dialogue, and analytic strategy (Malterud et al. 2016). Empirical tests of saturation have generally found that relatively small samples were sufficient when the population was homogeneous and the study aim was narrow (Hennink and Kaiser 2022). This means the same number of interviews might be adequate for a focused study of one worker group but insufficient for a study spanning several groups or contexts (Hennink and Kaiser 2022; Malterud et al. 2016). Saturation therefore needs to be specified in relation to the research question, theoretical position, analytic framework, and the particular object being saturated (Saunders et al. 2018).

Existing methodological research has already distinguished different forms of saturation, proposed procedures for assessing it, and examined sample-size patterns under specific research conditions (Francis et al. 2010; Guest et al. 2020; Hennink and Kaiser 2022; Wutich et al. 2024). Research on published qualitative studies has also documented variation in how sample-size sufficiency is justified (Vasileiou et al. 2018). These methodological developments raise a specific question for qualitative gig-work research: how clearly do published accounts connect the adequacy criterion with its reported supporting evidence and the scope of the resulting claim?

These reporting issues are particularly relevant to qualitative research on contemporary work and employment. Gig-work studies frequently examine workers across different platforms, occupations, locations, levels of economic dependence, and forms of platform control. Such variation affects what a qualitative sample is expected to support and the extent to which an adequacy claim can justify conclusions about worker experiences. Greater transparency in reporting sample adequacy can help readers assess the evidentiary basis of qualitative findings concerning platform work, employment conditions, worker motivation, and related work experiences.

The primary aim of this review is to systematically examine how qualitative studies of gig-worker experiences specify and support sample-adequacy judgments in published research. Against this background, this review asks: How do qualitative studies of gig-worker experiences report and justify sample adequacy when invoking saturation or an alternative adequacy rationale? The review makes two contributions. First, it provides a systematic account of how sample adequacy is reported and supported in qualitative research on gig-worker experiences. It distinguishes different forms of adequacy justification and examines the information available to interpret the judgments reported by the included studies. Second, it synthesizes six reporting dimensions from study-level evidence in the operational saturation subset, informed by the established methodological literature: adequacy logic, analytic object, sampling boundary, monitoring process, confirmation evidence, and bounded claim. The framework enables the stated criterion, reported supporting evidence, and scope of an adequacy claim to be examined as related but distinct elements within published research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Data Saturation in Qualitative Research

Sample adequacy concerns whether a qualitative sample provides sufficient information for the study aim, while saturation is one commonly used rationale for making this judgment (Malterud et al. 2016; Saunders et al. 2018). Data saturation helps qualitative researchers explain when data collection can stop and why a sample is adequate for the study aim (Saunders et al. 2018). In interview studies, saturation is often linked to the point at which additional interviews no longer generate new themes or codes (Guest et al. 2006). Saturation is not a fixed numerical standard (Saunders et al. 2018; Wutich et al. 2024). It depends on the research question, sampling strategy, participant heterogeneity, data quality, analytic approach, and qualitative design (Saunders et al. 2018; Wutich et al. 2024). Treating saturation as an interview count therefore separates the adequacy claim from the study conditions that give it meaning (Malterud et al. 2016; Saunders et al. 2018). A reported saturation point identifies the interview or data-collection stage at which authors judged their criterion to have been met. This differs from an adequacy rationale, which explains the basis of the judgment, and from a sample-size recommendation, which offers guidance on the amount of data to collect.

Methodological research distinguishes several forms of saturation (Hennink et al. 2017; Saunders et al. 2018). Data saturation and thematic saturation often refer to the point at which no new information or themes emerge (Guest et al. 2006; Saunders et al. 2018). Code saturation concerns the point at which no new codes are identified. Meaning saturation requires a deeper level of interpretive richness, where existing codes or themes are sufficiently understood in their dimensions, variation, and implications (Hennink et al. 2017). Theoretical saturation, often associated with grounded theory, refers to the point at which categories and relationships are sufficiently developed (Saunders et al. 2018). A study may therefore reach code saturation without achieving meaning or theoretical saturation (Hennink et al. 2017; Saunders et al. 2018).

Several authors have sought to operationalize saturation. Francis et al. (2010) proposed an initial analysis sample and a stopping criterion. Guest et al. (2020) proposed reporting thematic saturation through base size, run length, and new-information thresholds. Malterud et al. (2016) proposed information power as an alternative approach to considering sample size, drawing on the study aim, sample specificity, established theory, dialogue quality, and analysis strategy. More recent work has extended methodological guidance on saturation assessment and sample-size planning in two directions. Naeem et al. (2024) described a process for assessing saturation during thematic analysis by refining quotations, codes, themes, and concepts. Wutich et al. (2024) integrated empirical sample-size guidance across ten types of qualitative analysis and showed that sample expectations depend on the analytic purpose. These contributions highlight the importance of selecting an adequacy rationale and supporting evidence appropriate to the study's design and analytic purpose (Malterud et al. 2016; Saunders et al. 2018; Wutich et al. 2024). General qualitative reporting guidance also emphasizes transparency in sampling and analysis (O'Brien et al. 2014).

2.2. Qualitative Research in the Gig Economy

Qualitative and mixed-method studies of gig work have examined how workers interpret autonomy, dependence, platform control, and changing work conditions within particular settings (Sun et al. 2025; Wood et al. 2019). Mixed-method designs can combine broader patterns with qualitative accounts when both structural conditions and subjective interpretations are relevant to the research question (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018).

Platform workers differ by platform type, income dependence, occupation, location, legal status, work intensity, and relationship to the platform (Kuhn and Maleki 2017;

Wood et al. 2019). Studies in the present review ranged from single worker groups in one setting to samples covering several platforms, countries, or worker groups. These differences matter because sample adequacy depends on the study aim, participant specificity, sample heterogeneity, dialogue quality, and analytic purpose, not on sample size alone (Hennink and Kaiser 2022; Malterud et al. 2016; Saunders et al. 2018). A small, focused sample may be adequate for a narrow question with information-rich participants, whereas a more heterogeneous study may require broader sampling or a different adequacy rationale (Malterud et al. 2016). In studies covering several worker groups or platform contexts, describing the sample does not necessarily clarify whether the adequacy judgment concerns understanding within particular groups or comparisons across them.

3. Methods

This review used the SALSA framework, which has four stages: Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, and Analysis (Booth et al. 2016). SALSA supports systematic searching and structured synthesis when statistical meta-analysis is not appropriate (Snyder 2019). It has also been used to review saturation practices in entrepreneurship research (Lu et al. 2024). The four stages guided the search, eligibility assessment, data extraction, synthesis, and interpretation. The review was reported in accordance with PRISMA 2020 reporting guidelines (Page et al. 2021).

3.1. Search

The Web of Science Core Collection and Scopus were selected as the primary databases. The databases provided multidisciplinary coverage relevant to business, management, labor, and social science research. The search focused on qualitative empirical studies of gig work, platform-mediated labor, freelancing, crowd work, and related flexible work arrangements. Search syntax was adapted to the indexing structure and search functionality of each database, while covering the same three concept blocks: gig/platform work, worker experiences, and qualitative search methods.

The search strings did not require the term "data saturation." Requiring this term could have missed studies that used related terms or described sample adequacy elsewhere in the full text. Saturation terminology was therefore assessed during full-text screening without restricting the database searches to articles containing this term. Only studies that explicitly reported saturation or an alternative sample-adequacy rationale were included in the focal synthesis corpus.

The initial searches were conducted in June 2026 and updated on 10 October 2026. The Scopus and Web of Science strategies combined three concept blocks: gig economy or platform work, worker motivation or retention-related experience, and qualitative research methods. The worker-experience block was used to delimit the review to studies concerned with workers' experiences, attitudes, participation, and employment conditions, thereby excluding research that prioritizes technology, consumers, or platform design without treating workers as a substantive focus. The Scopus search used TITLE-ABS-KEY fields, while the Web of Science search used the Topic (TS) field. Eligible publications were English-language journal articles and conference papers published after 2005. Peer-reviewed conference papers were retained because conference proceedings are an important publication outlet for qualitative research on platform work, digital labor, and human–computer interaction. Table 1 presents the search strings.

Figure 1 presents the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion process using the PRISMA 2020 flow-diagram structure. It shows how the initial database records were narrowed to the final synthesis corpus and separates reports that could not be retrieved from full-text reports excluded after eligibility assessment.

Table 1. Database Search Strategies.

Database	Search String
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY((“gig economy” OR “gig worker*” OR “platform worker*” OR “platform work*” OR “on-demand work” OR “ride-hailing” OR “food delivery rider*” OR freelancer* OR crowdworker*) AND (interview* OR “semi-structured interview*” OR “semi structured interview*” OR “in-depth interview*” OR “in depth interview*” OR “focus group*”) AND (motivation OR retention OR engagement OR satisfaction OR turnover OR “continued participation” OR “worker experience”)) AND PUBYEAR AFT 2005 AND LANGUAGE(english) AND (DOCTYPE(ar) OR DOCTYPE(cp))
Web of Science	TS = ((“gig economy” OR “gig worker*” OR “platform worker*” OR “platform work*” OR “on-demand work” OR “ride-hailing” OR “food delivery rider*” OR freelancer* OR crowdworker*) AND (interview* OR “semi-structured interview*” OR “semi structured interview*” OR “in-depth interview*” OR “in depth interview*” OR “focus group*”) AND (motivation OR retention OR engagement OR satisfaction OR turnover OR “continued participation” OR “worker experience”))

Note: The asterisk (*) is a truncation wildcard used to retrieve word variants sharing the same stem (e.g., worker retrieves worker and workers).

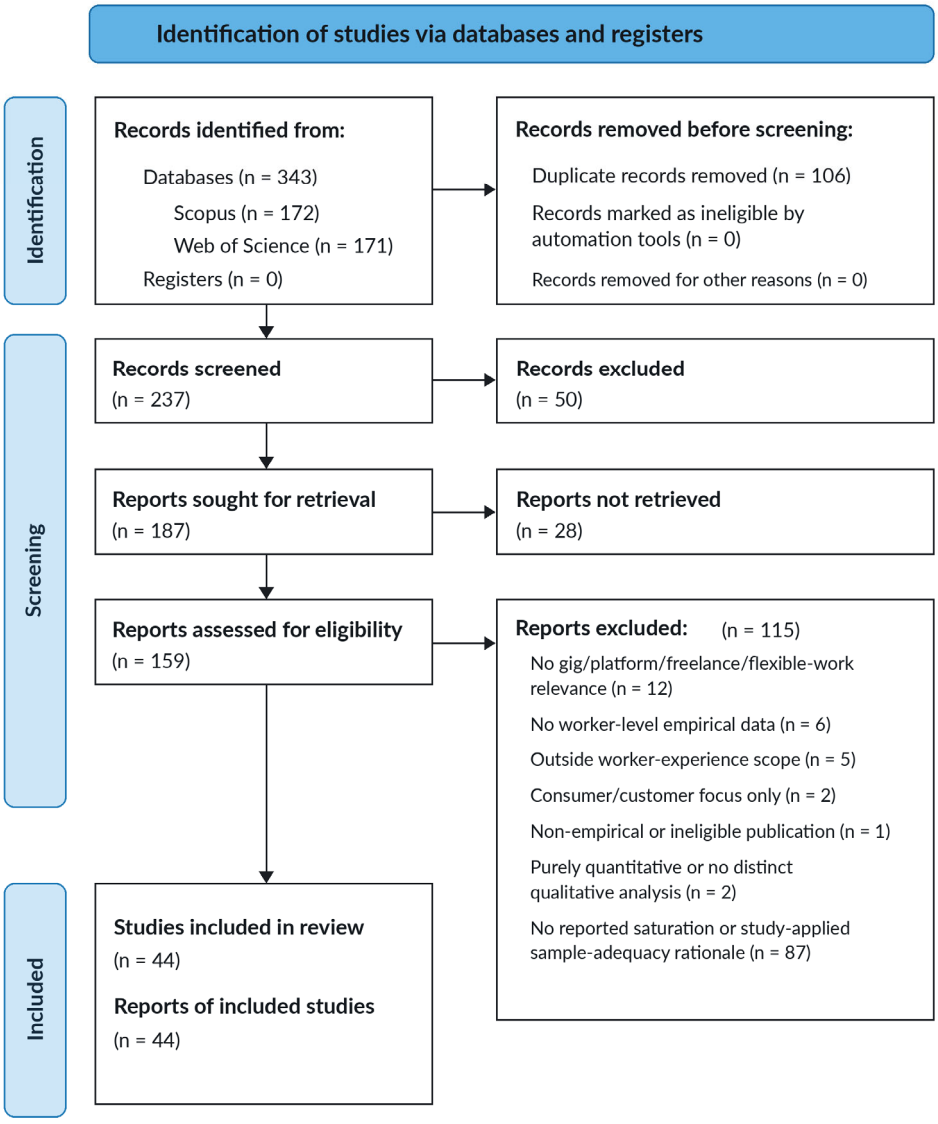


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram for Search and Screening Procedures.

3.2. Appraisal

The appraisal stage covered eligibility screening, record management, and full-text assessment. Eligibility assessment proceeded in two stages. First, studies were assessed for substantive and methodological relevance to qualitative gig-worker-experience research. Second, studies meeting these criteria were retained in synthesis only if they explicitly reported saturation or another sample-adequacy rationale. Alternative rationales included reported justifications for sample sufficiency based on information power, theoretical sufficiency, case logic, or prior sample-size guidance. Eligible studies were English-language journal articles or conference papers published between 2006 and the final search date. They used qualitative methods or mixed methods with a distinct qualitative component and focused on gig workers or related flexible workers. The studies addressed motivation, retention, engagement, job satisfaction, turnover intention, continued participation, work meaning, working conditions, job quality, or broader worker experience. They also reported the qualitative data-collection method and sample size. A sample-adequacy rationale had to be applied to the study's qualitative sample; naming a sampling strategy alone did not qualify.

Studies were excluded if they were purely quantitative, non-empirical, unrelated to workers, unrelated to gig/platform/freelance/flexible work, or outside the review's worker-experience scope. Full texts were sought through multiple retrieval routes, including publisher websites, DOI- and title-based searches, institutional library access, Google Scholar, institutional repositories, conference or proceedings archives, and available author-uploaded versions. Direct author contact was used where feasible. A report was classified as not retrieved when no usable full text had been obtained by the final retrieval check. Reports that could not be retrieved were recorded separately in the PRISMA flow and were not treated as full-text exclusions.

Search results were imported into a structured Excel workbook. Scopus records were assigned "S" identifiers and Web of Science records were assigned "W" identifiers. Deduplication was conducted using DOI and title matching. Two researchers independently screened all 237 titles and abstracts against the predefined eligibility criteria. Disagreements were resolved through discussion, with reference to the eligibility criteria and the original reports where necessary. Both researchers independently assessed all 159 retrieved full-text reports for eligibility. Differences in full-text assessments were also examined through discussion and reference to the published reports. Screening decisions were recorded in a structured Excel workbook. No automation tools were used for study selection.

The database search identified 343 records, 172 from Scopus and 171 from Web of Science, after consolidating repeated searches within each database. A further 106 duplicate records were removed across the databases before title-and-abstract screening. This screening excluded 50 records, leaving 187 reports for full-text retrieval. Retrieval failed for 28 reports. Of the 187 reports sought for retrieval, 159 (85%) were successfully obtained and assessed in full text. Of these, 28 were excluded for substantive or methodological eligibility reasons and 87 because they did not report saturation or a study-applied sample-adequacy rationale. The final synthesis included 44 studies. These counts follow PRISMA 2020 logic (Page et al. 2021).

A formal methodological quality appraisal was not conducted because the review examined how studies reported sample-adequacy decisions and did not evaluate the overall methodological quality of their substantive findings. The appraisal therefore focused on eligibility and the evidence supporting each reported adequacy rationale.

3.3. Synthesis

At this stage, data were extracted from the 44 included studies by one primary reviewer using a structured extraction matrix. The bibliographic and study fields covered country or region, gig-work context, worker group, research aim, qualitative method, sampling strategy, sample size, and analysis method. The saturation fields covered terminology, definition, assessment method, reported point, supporting evidence, and sample-size justification. No automation tools were used for data extraction. Information that was not explicitly reported in the original article was recorded as not reported and was not inferred unless the coding rules specifically distinguished explicit from inferable evidence. The extraction distinguished author-reported initial saturation judgments, approximate judgments, and saturation-related stopping counts. When a report described saturation at the final interview without separately identifying an earlier judgment, this was recorded as a saturation-related stopping count. This distinction describes the information reported and does not establish that saturation was first reached before the final interview. Initial judgment counts and confirmation were not inferred from final sample size or from the number of subsequent interviews.

Before synthesis, the category criteria distinguished a reference to saturation from an operational account of how it was assessed. Studies were assigned to five mutually exclusive reporting categories. Category A provided an explicit saturation definition and a clear operational criterion. Category B provided limited study-specific detail about assessing saturation, such as observations across responses or variation in saturation across parts of the study, but did not specify a clear operational criterion. Category C asserted saturation without describing a study-specific assessment process or operational criterion. A stated interview count alone did not establish an assessment process and was insufficient for assignment to Category A or B. Category D cited the prior sample-size literature to justify the study sample without study-specific saturation evidence. Category E used an alternative adequacy rationale, such as information power, a study-specific sufficiency argument based on theoretical sampling, theoretical sufficiency, or case logic. Categories A–D captured different forms of saturation or sample-size justification reporting, while Category E represented alternative sample-adequacy rationales.

The synthesis first compared studies across these categories and then recoded the 32 Category A studies by individual reporting element. The raw fields were the saturation term and definition, analytic object, participant and contextual scope, assessment method, saturation point, and evidence reported after the judgment. Related indicators formed six intermediate categories: named adequacy rationale, object of sufficiency, empirical scope, monitoring procedure, confirmation, and scope of the claim. These categories were then synthesized into six reporting dimensions: adequacy logic, analytic object, sampling boundary, monitoring process, confirmation evidence, and bounded claim.

3.4. Analysis

The analysis identified patterns in saturation reporting across qualitative gig-economy research. The included studies differed in design, population, saturation terminology, and level of reporting detail, so saturation points were not pooled into a single average. Because the studies also differed in analytic purpose, participant heterogeneity, and the meaning assigned to saturation, the reported saturation points were not treated as directly comparable observations suitable for pooling. Instead, studies were grouped by relevant features and compared through a stratified descriptive narrative synthesis (Campbell et al. 2020; Popay et al. 2006). Descriptive statistics showed how many studies fell into each reporting category. Operational examples were then compared to identify the criteria used to judge saturation. The studies were also compared by sampling scope, sample

heterogeneity, and whether they reported an exact saturation point. For this descriptive comparison, focused samples were defined around a narrower occupation, worker group, platform-work setting, or context. Broader samples covered more heterogeneous worker groups, platforms, settings, or longitudinal designs. This grouping described sampling scope and did not determine eligibility or sample adequacy. Finally, recurring elements were synthesized into a reporting framework for saturation and sample adequacy. The framework has not been externally validated and is presented as a structured synthesis of reporting practices, not a universal standard.

3.5. Coding Procedure and Consistency Checks

Two researchers independently screened all 237 titles and abstracts and assessed all 159 retrieved full-text reports for eligibility. The primary reviewer conducted data extraction, category assignment, and framework coding. The second researcher conducted an in-depth review of 72 full-text reports, examining supporting evidence and sample-adequacy classifications. The 32 Category A studies were checked again against explicit coding rules. A dimension was counted only when the published account contained the required information. Confirmation evidence, for example, required an explicit statement that later interviews or data sources confirmed an earlier judgment. When later interviews occurred after a reported saturation point without an explicit confirmation statement, confirmation evidence was coded as inferable, not explicit. Similarly, a described participant group counted as an identifiable sampling boundary. A bounded claim required an explicit limit to the population, context, or analytic scope covered by the adequacy judgment.

The primary reviewer conducted the initial coding using the predefined coding rules and extraction matrix. The second researcher subsequently reviewed all of the coding decisions against the original full-text evidence, focusing on category assignments, operational saturation criteria, sampling boundaries, monitoring procedures, confirmation evidence, and bounded claims. Differences in interpretation were discussed with reference to the published reports and coding rules. Agreed decisions were incorporated into the final coding matrix to maintain consistency across studies. The study-level coding matrix is provided in Appendix A, Table A1, so that the coding underlying the six reporting dimensions can be inspected at the individual-study level.

3.6. Researcher Context and Reflexivity

The review formed part of a broader program of research on qualitative research practices in the gig economy. The researchers' familiarity with the field not only guided the selection of search terms and the focus on the reporting of sample adequacy but may also have influenced the interpretation of the findings. To reduce this potential bias, the research team established clear inclusion criteria and data extraction parameters prior to the synthesis and included only explicitly reported evidence in the six-dimension coverage counts, while recording inferable confirmation evidence separately. Independent screening and selected full-text checks provided an additional opportunity to identify differences in interpretation and revisit decisions against the original evidence.

3.7. Reporting Guideline and Registration

The review was not prospectively registered, and no publicly registered review protocol was prepared.

4. Results

4.1. Approaches to Reporting and Assessing Saturation

Of the 159 full-text reports assessed, 131 met the substantive topic and design criteria. In total, 44 of these explicitly reported saturation or an alternative adequacy rationale and formed the core corpus of the synthesis. Data were extracted from the focal studies on authorship, year, publication venue, methodological design, qualitative method, sampling strategy, study objective, population, saturation terminology, operational criteria, saturation point, and sample-size justification.

Table 2 presents the complete search and screening process, from the 343 database records identified to the 131 reports meeting the substantive topic and design criteria and the 44 studies retained in the focal synthesis corpus.

Table 2. Search and Screening Summary.

Stage	Count
Records identified from Scopus	172
Records identified from Web of Science	171
Total records before deduplication	343
Duplicates removed	106
Records screened by title and abstract	237
Records excluded at title-and-abstract stage	50
Reports sought for full-text retrieval	187
Reports not retrieved after retrieval attempts	28
Full-text reports assessed for eligibility	159
Full-text reports excluded with no gig/platform/freelance/flexible work	12
Full-text reports excluded with no work-level empirical data	6
Full-text reports excluded with outside worker-experience scope	5
Full-text reports excluded with consumer/customer focus only	2
Full-text reports excluded with non-empirical publication	1
Full-text reports excluded with purely quantitative study or no distinct qualitative analysis	2
Studies meeting substantive topic and design criteria	131
Reports without saturation or an alternative adequacy rationale	87
Studies included in focal synthesis corpus	44

Full-text retrieval was less complete for recent publications. Among the 28 reports that could not be retrieved, 20 (71.4%) were published in 2025–2026, compared with 63 of the 159 reports assessed in full text (39.6%). The composition of the two groups also differed by database source. Scopus accounted for 53.6% of unretrieved reports and 79.9% of those assessed, while the corresponding proportions for Web of Science were 46.4% and 20.1%. These differences do not establish whether either database affected retrieval success. Publication type showed a more consistent pattern, with journal articles representing 85.7% of unretrieved reports and 88.7% of those assessed. The main concern is that recent research may be underrepresented in the review. Since the unavailable reports could not be assessed for eligibility or sample-adequacy reporting, their potential influence on the findings remains uncertain.

The analysis of saturation reporting was based on the 44 studies included in the final synthesis. Of these, 32 (72.7%) provided an explicit saturation definition and a clear operational criterion. Two studies (4.5%) mentioned saturation with limited operational detail, seven (15.9%) made only a general saturation claim, and one (2.3%) cited the prior sample-size literature without a study-specific saturation process. Two studies (4.5%) used an alternative adequacy rationale. Table 3 summarizes these reporting categories.

Table 3. Saturation Reporting Categories.

Category	Operational Meaning	Count	Percent
A	Explicit saturation definition and clear operational criterion	32	72.7%
B	Saturation mentioned with limited operational detail	2	4.5%
C	Saturation claimed only as a general statement	7	15.9%
D	Prior sample-size literature cited but no study-specific saturation process shown	1	2.3%
E	Alternative sample-adequacy rationale used	2	4.5%
	Total	44	100% *

* Individual percentages are rounded to one decimal place.

Studies in the operational saturation subset assessed saturation by specifying what additional data no longer contributed. The wording varied across studies. Some studies referred to no new codes, and others to no new themes, concepts, categories, properties, patterns, or findings. This variation resembles the distinction in the methodological literature between code saturation, meaning saturation, thematic saturation, and theoretical saturation (Hennink et al. 2017; Saunders et al. 2018).

Table 4 presents the 32 studies that provided both a saturation claim and an operational criterion. These studies show how authors supported their sample-adequacy judgments.

Table 4. Articles Assessing Saturation Using Empirical Data.

Study, Author (Year), and Focus	Methodology and Sampling Method	Saturation Criterion, Reported Point, Evidence, and Sample
Study 01—Mustafa and Mansour (2026) Algorithmic management, platform trust, and continued participation.	Explanatory-sequential mixed methods; purposive survey follow-up, with invitations randomly drawn within targeted tenure/age/trust criteria across four countries.	No new major themes in final coding; point not reported; recurring themes across interviews. Final n = 40 workers (10/country).
Study 02—Felix et al. (2023) Algorithmic management, autonomy/security preferences, and well-being.	Grounded-theory interviews; iterative theoretical sampling and snowball recruitment across contrasting platform experiences.	No new codes/theoretical dimensions at interview 51; seven later interviews (not labeled confirmation). Final n = 58 workers.
Study 04—López-Martínez et al. (2023) Riders' autonomy, flexibility, employment status, and vulnerability.	Mixed methods; 15 semi-structured rider interviews in Murcia; qualitative sampling unspecified (snowball applied to the separate 143-person survey).	Authors inferred saturation from repeated responses, conceptual redundancy, and limited new information in later interviews; data were also compared with existing theoretical frameworks. No specific saturation point reported. Final n = 15 riders.
Study 05—Wadhwa et al. (2026) Food-delivery workers' and restaurateurs' platform motivations and barriers.	Qualitative interviews; author-described "qualified sampling" (≥6 months' aggregator experience); workers approached outside Delhi-NCR restaurants.	Saturation defined as no new themes emerging; interviews continued until authors judged saturation achieved for both workers and restaurateurs. No group-specific saturation point reported. Final n = 21 workers + 27 restaurateurs.
Study 06—Park (2025) Changing rider responses to algorithmic dispatch.	Mixed methods; grounded-theory-oriented interviews with five riders across three rounds; recruitment method unverified.	Theoretical saturation reported at the fifth interview in round three; no earlier onset or separate confirmation. Final n = 5 riders.

Table 4. *Cont.*

Study, Author (Year), and Focus	Methodology and Sampling Method	Saturation Criterion, Reported Point, Evidence, and Sample
Study 08—Nagre et al. (2025) Employer branding and gig-worker value proposition.	Interpretive phenomenology; purposively sampled delivery and mobility workers in urban India; semi-structured interviews.	No new codes/themes after interview 20; three additional interviews checked established themes. Final n = 23 workers.
Study 09—Jiang et al. (2025) Perceived algorithmic management and scale development.	Grounded-theory scale-development interviews with Chinese delivery and ride-hailing workers; qualitative recruitment/sampling method unspecified.	No new conceptual structures in follow-up check; initial onset unreported; four interviews after first 20, with literature/expert checks. Final n = 24 interview events; unique n unknown.
Study 10—Daufenback et al. (2025) Delivery work, food access, and food insecurity.	Descriptive exploratory, hermeneutic–dialectic study; purposeful recruitment across rider profiles at ten Curitiba waiting sites.	Repetition within worker profiles and no further substantive insights; point unreported; recruitment shifted between profiles. Final n = 94 workers (50-item instrument).
Study 13—Centeno Maya et al. (2022) Gender inequality among Mexico City food-delivery workers.	Mixed methods; street-intercept semi-structured interviews at shopping-center order-waiting sites across 14 municipalities; interview sampling type unnamed.	Accounts recurred, supporting information sufficiency; point unreported. Final n = 26 workers.
Study 14—Alawadhi and Lugo-Ocando (2026) UAE freelance journalists' working conditions and contracts.	Qualitative semi-structured interviews; purposive sampling stratified by demographics and professional characteristics via media organizations/freelancer lists.	No new themes after 10 interviews; five further interviews (no explicit confirmation test). Final n = 15: 12 journalists + 3 media representatives.
Study 15—Nawaz et al. (2020) Freelancer value proposition and job stress on e-lancing platforms.	Grounded-theory-oriented interviews; purposive sampling of Pakistani e-lancing workers.	No new theoretical coding nodes at interview 11; interviews 12–20 added none. Final n = 20 freelancers.
Study 17—Lin et al. (2026) Skilled freelancers' career transitions and social capital.	Qualitative interviews; purposive and snowball sampling of full-time skilled freelancers in Taiwan.	No substantively new themes/dimensions after participant 7; participants 8–9 confirmed patterns. Final n = 9 freelancers.
Study 18—Kim et al. (2026) South Korean motorcycle couriers' health risks and management.	Qualitative interviews; purposive selection by tenure/role, with snowball referrals through workers and agencies.	No new codes/themes after interview 8; interview 9 checked patterns. Final n = 9 couriers.
Study 20—Tiwari et al. (2024) Work-related conditions shaping food-delivery workers' happiness.	Sequential mixed methods; snowball-recruited qualitative interviews followed by a separate survey.	Repeated themes/patterns; saturation reported at completion of 21 interviews, with no earlier onset or later check. Final n = 21 workers.
Study 21—Kariveliparambil et al. (2026) Psychosocial and physical burdens among Indian delivery riders.	Phenomenological interviews; purposive and snowball recruitment of riders with ≥6 months' delivery experience.	No new themes; exact first point unreported (10 is final n); authors cited redundancy. Final n = 10 riders.
Study 22—Lippert et al. (2023) Courier job crafting under algorithmic demands.	Qualitative interviews with German bicycle couriers; recruitment at waiting/break sites and via Twitter/worker groups; sampling type unnamed.	No new analytical insights from further interviews; point unreported. Final n = 18 couriers.

Table 4. *Cont.*

Study, Author (Year), and Focus	Methodology and Sampling Method	Saturation Criterion, Reported Point, Evidence, and Sample
Study 23—Affolter et al. (2024) Platform work and workers' sense of calling.	Grounded-theory-oriented interviews; purposive screening of Switzerland-based workers who reported a calling.	No new topics in later interviews; point unreported. Final n = 34 freelancers.
Study 24—Blaising et al. (2020) Platform freelancers' longer-term career development.	Longitudinal interviews; platform outreach/snowball recruitment, with follow-ups to prior interviewees and six previously survey-only respondents.	No new codes/themes in iterative coding; point unreported. Final n = 35 unique freelancers; 49 interviews (29 initial + 20 follow-up).
Study 27—Sharma et al. (2026) Algorithmic-management challenges and worker suggestions.	Social-constructionist interviews; non-probability purposive sampling across Indian ride-hailing, delivery, and freelance work.	No new major themes around interview 30 (approximate); last three reinforced patterns. Final n = 33 workers.
Study 28—Bellesia et al. (2019) Online freelancers' identities and entrepreneurial orientations.	Exploratory grounded theory; iterative theoretical sampling via platform contacts across freelancer occupations.	No new information or theoretical-model extensions; point unreported; iterative comparison supported adequacy. Final n = 46 freelancers.
Study 29—Gürsoy et al. (2026) Gig-work demands/resources and configurational outcomes.	Qualitative interviews across 15 Turkish provinces; criterion-based purposive selection within convenience recruitment; focus group of five interviewees.	Interviews yielded no new themes, but a later focus group added themes; point unreported. Final n = 17 unique workers (five in focus group).
Study 30—Cameron et al. (2021) TaskRabbit workers' customer expectations and COVID-19 risks.	Qualitative interviews; worker recruitment through Facebook/Reddit ads and online-community direct messages in 23 U.S. cities.	No new codes and theoretical-category gaps judged filled; point unreported. Final n = 49 workers.
Study 31—Agarwal et al. (2024) On-demand work apps, women's inclusion, and life satisfaction.	Sequential mixed methods; snowball-sampled semi-structured interviews with Urban Company beauty/wellness workers.	No further themes on app affordances; point unreported; authors invoked theoretical saturation. Final n = 20 women workers.
Study 32—Ming et al. (2025) Hong Kong platform workers' social risks and welfare access.	Qualitative in-depth interviews with delivery/courier workers; purposeful sampling and snowball sampling, with recruitment through workplaces, online forums, and participant referrals.	Last three interviews added no substantial themes; earlier saturation point unreported. Final n = 23 workers.
Study 33—May et al. (2022) COVID-19 adversities among UK cultural freelancers.	Qualitative interviews; convenience recruitment via social media, professional networks, MARCH, and UCL COVID-19 study.	No further category/property development expected; point unreported; theoretical saturation cited. Final n = 20 freelancers.
Study 35—Wan (2026) Rural-migrant delivery riders' decent work and career aspirations.	Qualitative semi-structured interviews; maximum-variation purposive sampling via delivery stations and rider social-media ads in China.	No new themes/perspectives by final (18th) interview; earlier onset unreported; no later check. Final n = 18 riders.

Table 4. *Cont.*

Study, Author (Year), and Focus	Methodology and Sampling Method	Saturation Criterion, Reported Point, Evidence, and Sample
Study 36—Nanda (2026) Supportive and controlling experiences of algorithmic personalization.	Qualitative interviews; purposive and snowball recruitment through online groups/referrals across gig occupations (≥1 year's experience).	No substantively new insights with further interviewing; point unreported. Final n = 22 workers.
Study 37—Sannon and Cosley (2022) Disabled workers' gig-work risks and opportunities.	Grounded-theory interviews/fieldwork; criterion-based online recruitment followed by iterative theoretical sampling and negative-case exploration.	No new concepts; category dimensions/variation judged developed; point unreported. Final n = 24 workers.
Study 38—Lee and Mitson (2025) AI-mediated managerial communication and worker trust.	Qualitative interviews; recruited through U.S. driver/courier Reddit groups; screened for gig work in past six months.	Accounts became redundant by interview 20; six later interviews checked established themes. Final n = 26 workers.
Study 41—Díaz-Avendaño et al. (2026) Online tutors' vulnerability and adaptive resilience across countries.	Cross-cultural grounded theory; maximum-variation purposive sampling through *Preply* direct messages; interview guide adapted iteratively.	No new analytic categories after interview 37; three additional interviews tested saturation. Final n = 40 tutors.
Study 42—Subasinghe et al. (2026) Digital skills and motivation among Sri Lankan freelancers.	Qualitative interviews; snowball referrals among eligible Fiverr/Upwork freelancers.	Code generation declined; saturation was judged at approximately interview 12. Interviews 13–14 were used to strengthen existing themes and thematic robustness. Final n = 14 freelancers.
Study 43—Sun et al. (2025) Migrant delivery riders' work rights in Sydney.	Qualitative case study; purposive street intercepts, worker-network snowball referrals, and union-assisted recruitment.	Recurring accounts/patterns across interviews and follow-ups; point unreported. Final n = 30 riders (38 interview events).

Table 5 groups three recurring approaches: the absence or declining emergence of new themes, codes, or insights; theoretical or category saturation; and pattern recurrence or reported information sufficiency. These are descriptive, overlapping approaches, and individual studies may fall under more than one. Explicit confirmation after an initial judgment was reported in some studies, whereas other reports identified only a criterion or stage.

The six reporting dimensions were developed through a second-pass comparison of extracted study accounts and interpretation against the established qualitative-method literature. Adequacy logic addresses the rationale for judging sufficiency, while analytic object identifies what was being judged sufficient; monitoring process and confirmation evidence address how the judgment was made and whether it was subsequently confirmed. Sampling boundary records the participant group and research setting. A bounded claim is distinct: it concerns whether authors explicitly restricted the reach of their adequacy judgment. For example, identifying food-delivery riders in one city establishes the sampling boundary; a bounded claim is present only when authors explicitly limit their adequacy judgment to that group or setting. The methodological literature informed the interpretation of these dimensions without supplying study-level observations absent from the included reports (Francis et al. 2010; Guest et al. 2020; Hennink et al. 2017; Malterud et al. 2016; O'Brien et al. 2014; Saunders et al. 2018). Table 6 presents the synthesized reporting framework.

Table 5. Strategies Used to Assess Saturation.

Type of Approach	Description of Approach	Studies Using Each Approach (Non-Mutually Exclusive)
No-new-themes/codes stopping criterion	Saturation was assessed when later interviews or data sources no longer generated new themes, codes, or findings, or when new information diminished sufficiently to support an adequacy judgment. Some studies reported additional interviews to confirm an initial saturation judgment.	Study 01, 02, 04, 05, 08, 09, 10, 14, 15, 17, 18, 21, 22, 23, 24, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 35, 36, 37, 38, 41, 42
Theoretical or category saturation	Saturation was linked to the development of theoretical categories, properties, concepts, models, or analytical insight.	Study 02, 06, 09, 15, 24, 28, 30, 31, 33, 37, 41
Pattern recurrence or reported information sufficiency	Saturation was inferred from repeated patterns, experiences, expressions, or corroborated accounts rather than only from code counts.	Study 01, 10, 13, 20, 38, 43

Table Note: The approaches are non-mutually exclusive. Study IDs correspond to Appendix A Table A2.

Table 6. Synthesized Sample-Adequacy Reporting Framework.

Reporting Dimension	Core Reporting Element	More Detailed Reporting
Adequacy logic	State whether the study used data saturation, thematic saturation, code saturation, meaning saturation, theoretical saturation, information power, theoretical sufficiency, or another explicitly reported sample-adequacy rationale.	Explain why the chosen adequacy logic fits the qualitative design and epistemological orientation.
Analytic object	Specify what was expected to become sufficient or stop emerging, such as codes, themes, categories, meanings, properties, patterns, cases, or analytical insights.	Distinguish between code-level, meaning-level, and theory-level sufficiency rather than using saturation as an undifferentiated label.
Sampling boundary	Describe the participant group, platform type, location, and empirical scope of the sample.	Explain whether the sample is narrow and information-rich or broad and heterogeneous, and how this affects the adequacy judgment.
Monitoring process	Describe how saturation or adequacy was assessed during data collection and/or analysis.	Report staged coding, memoing, constant comparison, team discussion, negative-case checking, or another assessable monitoring process.
Confirmation evidence	State whether later interviews or data sources confirmed the adequacy judgment.	Report the interview number or data-collection stage at which saturation was first judged, if reported, and whether subsequent data confirmed or changed the analysis.
Bounded claim	Avoid implying that sample-adequacy judgment is universal across all gig workers or all platform contexts.	Explicitly state the limits of the claim and identify where further sampling might be needed.

Table 7 links the raw extraction indicators to the intermediate categories, final dimensions, empirical coverage, and methodological interpretation. Coverage was calculated across the 32 Category A studies. Explicit reporting was distinguished from inferable or unreported evidence (Appendix A Table A1).

Table 7. Derivation and Empirical Coverage of the Six Reporting Dimensions.

Raw Extraction Indicators	Intermediate Category	Synthesized Dimension	Coverage and Source of Interpretation
Explicit saturation term, definition, or study-applied rationale	Named adequacy rationale	Adequacy logic	Explicit in 32/32. Coded from the authors' reported adequacy rationale; interpreted with Malterud et al. (2016) and Saunders et al. (2018).
Codes, themes, categories, meanings, patterns, or analytical insights judged sufficient	Object of sufficiency	Analytic object	Explicit in 32/32. Coded from what authors described as no longer emerging or adequately developed; interpreted with Hennink et al. (2017) and Saunders et al. (2018).
Participant group, work type, platform, setting, geographic scope, or other identifiable study population	Empirical scope	Sampling boundary	Explicit in 32/32. Based on reported qualitative sample boundaries, including Methods descriptions; informed by Malterud et al. (2016).
Concurrent analysis, iterative collection, coding stage, constant comparison, stopping rule, or assessment timing	Monitoring procedure	Monitoring process	Reported in 31/32; not identifiable in Study 21. Direct empirical category supported by Francis et al. (2010) and Guest et al. (2020).
Explicit use of later interviews or data sources to test or confirm an initial adequacy judgment	Confirmation	Confirmation evidence	Explicit in 9/32. Inferable but not explicit in two further studies (Study 14, 02), which were not counted. Empirical category supported by Francis et al. (2010) and Guest et al. (2020).
Statement restricting adequacy to a participant group, setting, or analytic scope	Scope of the claim	Bounded claim	Explicit in 2/32 (Study 05, 10). Synthesized from an empirical reporting gap and interpreted with Malterud et al. (2016), O'Brien et al. (2014), and Saunders et al. (2018).

Table note: Coverage refers to explicit evidence in the 32 Category A studies. Only explicitly reported evidence was included in the coverage counts.

The coverage pattern distinguishes common content from less common reporting practices. All Category A studies named an adequacy rationale, identified what had ceased to emerge, and described the sample context. Thirty-one described a monitoring procedure. Only nine explicitly reported confirmation after an initial judgment, and only two explicitly limited the adequacy claim. These counts describe the published reports. They do not rate the methodological quality of the studies or establish independently that saturation was achieved.

4.2. Sample Size and Clarity of Saturation Reporting

Exact saturation points appeared in only a minority of studies. Among the 32 Category A studies, eight reported exact saturation points, two reported approximate judgments, and four described identifiable stopping or checking stages without an exact first point. These are descriptive examples, not numerical recommendations. Figure 2 shows the total numbers of qualitative interviews for the 14 Category A studies that reported exact or approximate saturation judgments or identifiable assessment stages. Red markers indicate exact and approximate author-reported judgments. Four studies without an identifiable first judgment are shown without markers.

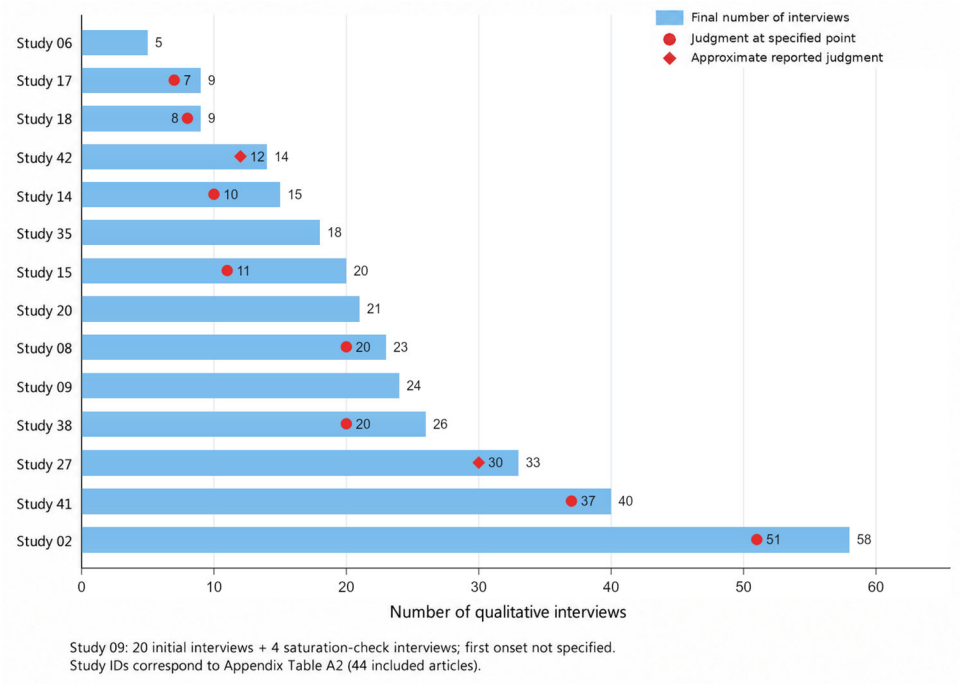


Figure 2. Total Qualitative Interviews and Author-Reported Saturation Judgments.

Eight studies reported exact points: Study 17 (7 interviews), Study 18 (8), Study 14 (10), Study 15 (11), Study 08 (20), Study 38 (20), Study 41 (37), and Study 02 (51). Kim et al. (2026) reported saturation after eight interviews and used a ninth for confirmation. Alawadhi and Lugo-Ocando (2026) reported saturation after 10 interviews in a final sample of 15. Among the broader or theory-building studies, Díaz-Avendaño et al. (2026) reported saturation at interview 37 and conducted three confirmatory interviews. Felix et al. (2023) reported saturation at interview 51 in a final sample of 58. Study 27 and Study 42 also reported approximate judgments. Studies 06, 09, 20, and 35 reported identifiable stopping or checking stages without an exact first saturation point.

To interpret this variation, Figure 3 organizes all 32 Category A studies by sampling scope. Panel A presents 15 studies with focused or bounded participant groups, where the study population was defined around a narrower occupation, worker group, platform-work setting, or context. Panel B presents 17 studies with broader, heterogeneous, or multi-site samples, including cross-country, cross-platform, broader freelancer/gig-worker, longitudinal, or multi-subgroup designs. This classification concerns the scope and heterogeneity of the sample rather than interview mode or sample size alone. A large sample can still be classified as focused when it examines an internally diverse but clearly bounded participant group.

Grouping studies by scope provides context for interpreting the wide range. Some focused studies reported relatively early saturation points, although these observations do not establish a general interview threshold. Larger samples appeared in cross-national, cross-platform, longitudinal, or multi-subgroup studies, and in studies that sought wider experience within a specific worker population. Study 43 was classified as focused because it examined migrant riders within a defined work and migration context. Study 10 was also classified as focused despite its final sample of 94, as it examined a bounded population of food-delivery workers. Study 24 included 35 distinct participants across 49 interview events, whereas Study 09 reported 24 interview events without separately establishing the number of distinct participants.

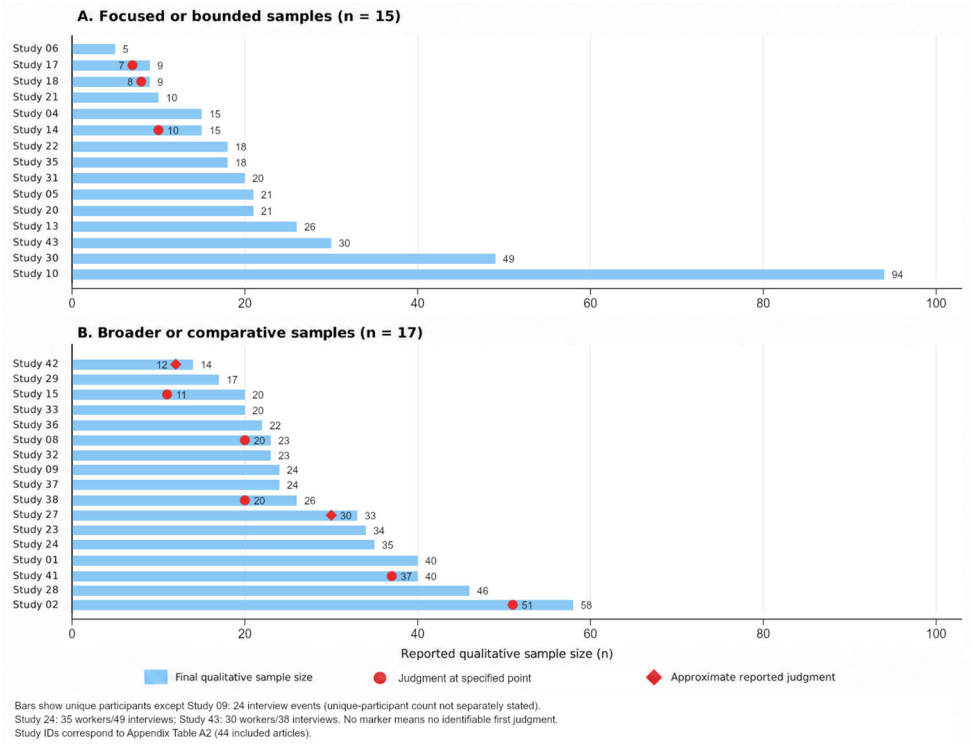


Figure 3. Sample Scope, Final Sample Size, and Reported Saturation Judgments.

A central pattern in the corpus concerned variation across sample size, study scope, and reporting clarity. For this reason, the analysis used a stratified descriptive approach rather than a pooled average. The focused/broader grouping was used for descriptive comparison and did not determine study eligibility or sample adequacy. Studies were interpreted according to their degree of focus, sample heterogeneity, and whether an exact saturation point was reported. Even within a corpus restricted to studies that mentioned saturation or an equivalent adequacy rationale, the level of operational detail varied substantially.

This review makes two related contributions to qualitative gig-economy research. First, it provides field-specific descriptive evidence. Across eight Category A studies reporting exact points, saturation judgments ranged from interview 7 to interview 51. These values describe the included reports and do not establish a transferable sample-size threshold. Second, the review synthesizes six dimensions for interpreting how published sample-adequacy claims are reported. Together, the two contributions connect a reported judgment to what the sample was intended to support, within which empirical and analytical boundary, and how the adequacy judgment was formed (Malterud et al. 2016; Saunders et al. 2018).

5. Discussion

5.1. From Sample Size to Assessable Sample Adequacy

The variation in reported saturation judgments becomes more informative when studies are compared by sampling scope. In focused studies, adequacy claims concerned recurring themes or codes within clearly bounded participant groups. Some broader or theory-building studies examined category development, cross-context comparison, or the stability of analytical patterns. For studies comparing worker groups or platforms, recurring themes within each group do not, by themselves, show whether differences between groups have been adequately explored. An adequacy claim for food-delivery riders in one city cannot automatically extend to workers across platforms, occupations, or

national settings. These differences affect what a reported saturation judgment can support (Hennink and Kaiser 2022; Malterud et al. 2016; Saunders et al. 2018).

Sampling scope should not be inferred from final sample size. Study 10, for example, interviewed 94 food-delivery workers in Brazil, yet its participant group remained focused on one type of gig work. In this review, the focused/broader distinction refers to the range of worker groups, platform types, and research settings covered by each study, not to the number of participants (Malterud et al. 2016; Wutich et al. 2024). A study may seek substantial variation within one occupational population, while another examines how experiences or theoretical categories differ across participant groups or institutional contexts.

A reported saturation point and final sample size also serve different purposes. The first records when researchers judged that additional data no longer changed the relevant codes, themes, meanings, or categories; the second records the corpus ultimately analyzed. A final sample beyond the reported point may include confirmation interviews, planned sampling stages, or continued recruitment, but the difference alone does not show how the later data were used. In this review, confirmation was coded as explicit only when authors stated that subsequent data tested or supported an earlier judgment. The distinction is illustrated by the reporting practices of individual studies. Kim et al. (2026) identified saturation after the eighth interview and described a ninth interview as confirming existing patterns. Blaising et al. (2020) reported iterative analysis and a saturation-related stopping judgment without identifying an exact initial point. Both accounts provide information about how adequacy was considered, although they make different aspects of the judgment traceable. The comparison illustrates why an exact saturation point and a description of the assessment process provide different kinds of methodological information. Reporting both values and their relationship enables readers to distinguish an initial stopping judgment from evidence used to examine it (Francis et al. 2010; Guest et al. 2020).

5.2. Saturation as an Assessable Analytic Judgment

A sample-adequacy judgment is assessable when the published account explains how it was reached. Studies in Category A supported such assessment by identifying what stopped changing, such as codes, themes, categories, or analytical insights. Some also reported when this occurred or used later interviews for confirmation. These practices follow methodological guidance to operationalize saturation through an explicit criterion and monitoring process rather than assert it as a general statement (Francis et al. 2010; Guest et al. 2020; Saunders et al. 2018).

The present findings draw attention to an additional distinction between operationalization and assessability in published research. An operational criterion identifies the basis on which researchers judged saturation, but the information available to examine its application may vary. Among the 32 Category A studies, 31 described a monitoring process, while nine explicitly reported confirmation evidence (Table 7). These figures do not establish whether the remaining studies required or performed a separate confirmation stage. They show that monitoring and confirmation represent different aspects of the published account.

The findings also show why the adequacy logic must fit the qualitative design and analytic purpose. Code, meaning, and theoretical saturation require different evidence, and one form of adequacy does not establish another (Hennink et al. 2017; Saunders et al. 2018). The six reporting dimensions therefore ask authors to identify the adequacy logic, analytic object, sampling boundary, monitoring process, confirmation evidence, and limits of the claim. Researchers should select the adequacy logic during study design and make clear how the selected rationale supports the research aim and analytical approach. Reviewers

and editors should evaluate whether the rationale, evidence, and boundary fit together, including whether the reported evidence supports the specific judgment being made.

The framework can be used as a set of reporting prompts that connect these aspects of sample adequacy. During study planning, researchers can specify which adequacy rationale fits their research aim, what variation the sample needs to cover, and how they intend to judge whether sufficient evidence has been collected. During data collection and analysis, they can track whether additional interviews change the relevant codes, themes, or categories and document how later evidence informs an earlier judgment. For example, a study interviewing delivery riders across two cities could monitor whether new themes continue to emerge within each location and state whether its adequacy judgment applies to each city or to the combined sample. Where relevant, they should report whether later data confirmed or changed the judgment and limit the claim to the population, setting, and analytic purpose examined. The findings suggest three practical questions for interpreting such reports: What analytical object was judged sufficient? What reported evidence explains how that judgment was reached or subsequently examined? Which empirical and analytical boundaries apply to the claim? These questions can inform the documentation of adequacy decisions during analysis and the examination of methodological accounts during peer review. They also allow readers to distinguish information that is explicitly reported from information that remains unclear. A study using information power, theoretical sufficiency, or another rationale should report that logic instead of adopting saturation by default.

5.3. Implications for Qualitative Work and Employment Research

The six dimensions bring together reporting elements established across the qualitative-method literature and organize them for use in qualitative work and employment research. Adequacy logic and analytic object distinguish among code, meaning, thematic, and theoretical saturation (Hennink et al. 2017; Saunders et al. 2018). Monitoring process and confirmation evidence draw on operational approaches to assessing saturation (Francis et al. 2010; Guest et al. 2020). Sampling boundary connects adequacy to the study aim, sample specificity, and contextual reporting (Malterud et al. 2016; O'Brien et al. 2014). Bounded claim captures whether authors explicitly restrict the reach of an adequacy judgment beyond describing the sample context.

Existing approaches have established criteria for monitoring saturation, emphasized the relationship between sample adequacy and analytical purpose, and called for more transparent sample-size justification (Francis et al. 2010; Guest et al. 2020; Malterud et al. 2016; Vasileiou et al. 2018). The present review extends this work through a study-level synthesis of how adequacy judgments are specified, supported, and bounded in published research. Its contribution lies in examining these aspects within the same reporting account, allowing distinctions that are not captured by identifying the presence of an operational saturation criterion alone.

The A–E classification distinguishes broad forms of sample-adequacy justification across the 44 included studies. The six-dimensional analysis provides further insight into the 32 Category A studies. Adequacy logic, analytic object, and sampling boundary were identifiable in all 32 under the coding criteria, while 31 reported a monitoring process, nine explicit confirmation evidence, and two an explicitly bounded claim (Table 7). The complete coverage of adequacy logic and analytic object partly reflects the operational criterion required for Category A membership. This pattern highlights a methodological distinction: an operational criterion specifies what researchers considered sufficient, while the reported evidence and scope of the claim shape what readers can assess about how that judgment was reached and where it applies. By examining these elements separately and

in relation to one another, the framework offers a structured basis for examining what a published adequacy justification supports and where further explanation is needed.

The relevance of these distinctions is particularly apparent in qualitative gig-work research, where the reviewed studies ranged from focused occupational populations to broader samples covering different worker groups, platforms, and settings (Figure 3). In a focused study, an adequacy judgment may concern the range and depth of experiences within a defined population. In a multi-group study, the judgment may also need to support comparisons across groups or contexts.

Reviewers and editors can examine whether the reported evidence supports the stated judgment, while systematic reviewers can compare explicit, inferable, and unreported information across studies. These reporting questions can also be adapted to alternative adequacy rationales, such as information power, with the supporting evidence interpreted in relation to the chosen rationale (Malterud et al. 2016; Saunders et al. 2018). Figure 4 translates the six-dimensional framework into three practical questions: what is judged, how the judgment is supported, and where the claim applies.

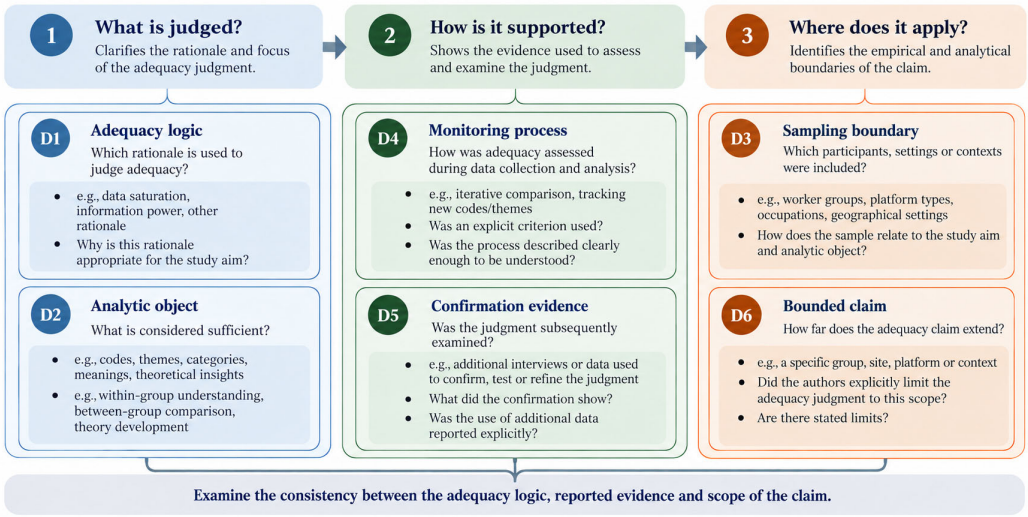


Figure 4. A practical guide to applying the six-dimensional sample-adequacy reporting framework.

5.4. Limitations

The search covered Scopus and Web of Science, English-language publications, and the specified terms for gig work and worker experience. Full texts could not be retrieved for 28 reports. Recent publications accounted for a larger share of these reports, so the review may not fully reflect the most recent research. Relevant studies indexed elsewhere, published in other languages, described with different terminology, or unavailable through the retrieval routes may therefore be absent from the review. The review protocol was not prospectively registered.

The focal synthesis was restricted to studies that explicitly reported saturation or an alternative adequacy rationale. This eligibility decision enabled detailed analysis of how adequacy claims were constructed, but the findings characterize reporting within the focal corpus rather than the prevalence of saturation reporting across all qualitative gig-economy research.

Both researchers independently screened all 237 titles and abstracts and assessed all 159 retrieved full-text reports for eligibility. The primary reviewer conducted data extraction and framework coding, and the second researcher reviewed all coding decisions against the original full-text evidence. The category assignments and dimension-coverage counts may remain sensitive to interpretive decisions, particularly the distinction between

an identifiable sampling context and an explicitly bounded claim. Exact saturation points were available in eight studies. These reported saturation points are study-specific and do not provide a basis for a general interview-number threshold.

6. Conclusions

The review found substantial variation in how qualitative research on gig-worker experiences justified sample adequacy. Forty-four studies invoked saturation or an equivalent adequacy rationale; 32 provided an operational criterion. Among the 32 Category A studies, eight studies reported an exact saturation point. These values should be interpreted as descriptive, context-dependent observations rather than as a general numerical rule. The findings describe studies reporting an adequacy rationale and do not estimate reporting prevalence across all qualitative gig-work research.

The review also synthesizes six sample-adequacy reporting dimensions: adequacy logic, analytic object, sampling boundary, monitoring process, confirmation evidence, and bounded claim. Across the 32 operational studies, adequacy logic, analytic object, and sampling boundary were explicit in all 32 studies, monitoring process in 31, and confirmation evidence and bounded claim in nine and two studies, respectively. The methodological literature informed the interpretation of these patterns.

The synthesized reporting framework provides a structured way for authors to explain, and readers to evaluate, the adequacy rationale appropriate to the study design. The reporting questions may be adapted to other adequacy rationales, including information power and theoretical sufficiency. Its purpose is to make sample-adequacy judgments more transparent and assessable, not to prescribe a preferred interview count. The central methodological questions are what the sample is intended to support, within what empirical and analytical boundary, and how the adequacy judgment was formed.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/socsci15110739/s1. Supplementary File S1 contains the data extraction template (Table S1) and coding instructions (Table S2).

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, J.W.; methodology, J.W.; validation, Y.L.; formal analysis, J.W.; investigation, J.W.; data curation, J.W.; writing—original draft preparation, J.W.; writing—review and editing, J.W.; visualization, J.W.; supervision, N.S.M.; project administration, J.W. and N.S.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Study-level reporting codes, study characteristics, and classification rationales are provided in Appendix A. The data extraction template and coding instructions are provided in Supplementary File S1. Additional review materials supporting the findings are available upon request.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A

Appendix A.1

Appendix A Table A1 presents the six-dimensional reporting codes for the 32 Category A studies. Table A2 presents the characteristics and reporting classifications of all 44 included studies, while Table A3 provides the classification rationales for the 12 Category B–E studies.

Table A1 records the second-pass coding used to calculate the coverage figures in Table 7. E indicates explicit reporting. I indicates that later interviews occurred after a reported saturation judgment, without an explicit statement that they served to confirm that judgment. N indicates that the reporting dimension was not reported. All 32 studies belonged to Category A.

Table A1. Study-Level Coding Matrix for the Six Reporting Dimensions.

Study ID	Adequacy Logic	Analytic Object	Sampling Boundary	Monitoring Process	Confirmation Evidence	Bounded Claim
Study 01	E	E	E	E	N	N
Study 02	E	E	E	E	I	N
Study 04	E	E	E	E	N	N
Study 05	E	E	E	E	N	E
Study 06	E	E	E	E	N	N
Study 08	E	E	E	E	E	N
Study 09	E	E	E	E	E	N
Study 10	E	E	E	E	N	E
Study 13	E	E	E	E	N	N
Study 14	E	E	E	E	I	N
Study 15	E	E	E	E	E	N
Study 17	E	E	E	E	E	N
Study 18	E	E	E	E	E	N
Study 20	E	E	E	E	N	N
Study 21	E	E	E	N	N	N
Study 22	E	E	E	E	N	N
Study 23	E	E	E	E	N	N
Study 24	E	E	E	E	N	N
Study 27	E	E	E	E	E	N
Study 28	E	E	E	E	N	N
Study 29	E	E	E	E	N	N
Study 30	E	E	E	E	N	N
Study 31	E	E	E	E	N	N
Study 32	E	E	E	E	N	N
Study 33	E	E	E	E	N	N
Study 35	E	E	E	E	N	N
Study 36	E	E	E	E	N	N
Study 37	E	E	E	E	N	N
Study 38	E	E	E	E	E	N
Study 41	E	E	E	E	E	N
Study 42	E	E	E	E	E	N
Study 43	E	E	E	E	N	N

E = explicit; I = inferable; N = not reported. Only E values are counted in Table 7 coverage.

Appendix A.2

Table A2 summarizes the characteristics and reporting category assignments of all 44 included studies. Detailed saturation evidence for the 32 Category A studies is presented in Table 4. The classification rationales for the 12 Category B–E studies are provided in Table A3.

Table A2. Characteristics and Reporting Classifications of the Included Studies.

Study ID	Author (Year)	Article Title	Country/Region	Qualitative Design and Sampling	Category
Study 01	Mustafa and Mansour (2026)	Algorithmic management practices, trust, and gig-worker continuance: A mixed-methods study of platform work	China, Pakistan, Turkey, Australia	Sequential mixed methods; purposive follow-up sampling	A
Study 02	Felix et al. (2023)	Algorithmic management, preferences for autonomy/security and gig-workers' wellbeing: A matter of fit?	Brazil	Grounded-theory interviews; theoretical and snowball sampling	A
Study 03	Nisula et al. (2025)	An empirical study on knowledge workers' subjective perspectives on digital platform work	Finland, UK	Qualitative interviews; criterion sampling	B
Study 04	López-Martínez et al. (2023)	Are You Really Your Own Boss? Flexi-Vulnerability and False Consciousness of Autonomy in the Digital Labor Culture of Riders	Spain (Region of Murcia)	Mixed methods; semi-structured interviews; sampling not specified	A
Study 05	Wadhwa et al. (2026)	Behind the app: exploring the motivations and barriers of restaurateurs and gig workers in online food delivery	India	Semi-structured interviews; qualified sampling (author term)	A
Study 06	Park (2025)	Beyond Compliance: Tracing the Evolution of Algorithmic Dependence in Platform Work	Not reported	Mixed methods; semi-structured interviews; sampling not reported	A
Study 07	Saksida et al. (2026)	Casually cynical or trapped? Exploring gig workers' reactions to psychological contract violation	Not reported	Mixed methods; online-community recruitment; snowball sampling	C
Study 08	Nagre et al. (2025)	Changing workplace demographics: a gig economy and the role of employer branding	India	Interpretive phenomenology; purposive sampling	A
Study 09	Jiang et al. (2025)	Control or Empowerment: Toward a Research Agenda on the Duality of Algorithmic Management	China	Grounded-theory scale development; semi-structured interviews with delivery and ride-hailing workers; qualitative sampling method not specified	A
Study 10	Daufenback et al. (2025)	Delivering food, working with hunger: a qualitative study on food delivery workers from Brazil during COVID-19	Brazil	Descriptive exploratory study; purposive recruitment at waiting sites	A
Study 11	Yee and Singh (2022)	Exploring People's Intention to Become Gig Workers: A qualitative study among professionals engaged as gig workers in the ICT sector in Kuala Lumpur	Malaysia	Semi-structured interviews; purposive sampling	C
Study 12	Gandhi et al. (2019)	Exploring People's Intention to Become Platform-based Gig Workers: An Empirical Qualitative Study	Indonesia	Qualitative interviews; criterion sampling	D

Table A2. *Cont.*

Study ID	Author (Year)	Article Title	Country/Region	Qualitative Design and Sampling	Category
Study 13	Centeno Maya et al. (2022)	Food delivery workers in Mexico City: a gender perspective on the gig economy	Mexico	Mixed methods; street-intercept recruitment; method unnamed	A
Study 14	Alawadhi and Lugo-Ocando (2026)	Freelance Journalism in the Emirati Media Ecosystem: Between Working Precarity, Forced Reality, and [Limited] Personal Choices	UAE	Semi-structured interviews; stratified purposive sampling	A
Study 15	Nawaz et al. (2020)	Freelancers as Part-time Employees: Dimensions of FVP and FJS in E- Lancing Platforms	Pakistan	Grounded-theory interviews; purposive sampling	A
Study 16	Dasanayaka et al. (2026)	From Learners to Earners: The Role of Education in Shaping Online Freelancers within the Gig Economy	Sri Lanka	Inductive qualitative interviews; snowball sampling	C
Study 17	Lin et al. (2026)	From standard employment to freelancing: mobilizing career capital and bonding social capital	Taiwan	Qualitative interviews; purposive and snowball sampling	A
Study 18	Kim et al. (2026)	Health and health management among motorcycle-based food delivery workers in South Korea: a qualitative interview study	South Korea	Qualitative interviews; purposive and snowball sampling	A
Study 19	Cortellazzo and Vaska (2025)	HRM practices in app work: exploring training and feedback in the food delivery ecosystem	Several European countries (not individually specified)	Exploratory interviews; purposive and snowball sampling	C
Study 20	Tiwari et al. (2024)	Investigating the primary factors of work happiness in gig workers	India	Sequential mixed methods; snowball sampling	A
Study 21	Kariveliparambil et al. (2026)	Invisible burdens of platform work: a qualitative study of food-delivery riders' lived experiences in urban India	India	Phenomenological interviews; purposive and snowball sampling	A
Study 22	Lippert et al. (2023)	Job Crafting in the Era of Algorithmic Management	Germany	Qualitative interviews; waiting-site and online-group recruitment	A
Study 23	Affolter et al. (2024)	Living one's calling independently: the role of online labor platforms for different dynamics of calling enactment	Switzerland	Grounded-theory interviews; purposive screening	A
Study 24	Blaising et al. (2020)	Making it Work, or Not: A Longitudinal Study of Career Trajectories Among Online Freelancers	United States, South Africa, Philippines, Jamaica, Nigeria	Longitudinal interviews; targeted/snowball and purposive follow-up	A
Study 25	Dzitse and Cobbinah (2026)	Navigating Socio-Economic Transitions: Experiences of Chinese Women in Ride-Hailing Services	China	Semi-structured interviews; purposive and snowball sampling	E
Study 26	Ghimire (2026)	Nursing Outside the Lines: Identity, Policy, and the Rise of Gig Economy Nursing	Australia	Reflexive thematic analysis; eligibility-based volunteer recruitment	E

Table A2. *Cont.*

Study ID	Author (Year)	Article Title	Country/Region	Qualitative Design and Sampling	Category
Study 27	Sharma et al. (2026)	Perils of people working through algorithmic management systems: uncovering the hidden workplace struggles	India	Qualitative interviews; purposive sampling	A
Study 28	Bellesia et al. (2019)	Platforms as entrepreneurial incubators? How online labor markets shape work identity	Europe, Asia, and United States	Exploratory field study; platform outreach; theoretical sampling	A
Study 29	Gürsoy et al. (2026)	Reassessing Job Demands-Resources Theory in the Context of the Gig Economy: An fsQCA Study	Turkey	Interviews and focus group; purposive and convenience sampling	A
Study 30	Cameron et al. (2021)	Risky Business: Gig Workers and the Navigation of Ideal Worker Expectations During the COVID-19 Pandemic	United States	Qualitative interviews; online ads and worker communities	A
Study 31	Agarwal et al. (2024)	She has got a gig: affordances of on-demand work apps for marginalised women enduring time scarcity	India	Sequential mixed methods; snowball sampling	A
Study 32	Ming et al. (2025)	Social risks, platform economy, and welfare regime: evidence from platform workers' views in Hong Kong	Hong Kong	In-depth interviews; purposeful sampling and snowball sampling	A
Study 33	May et al. (2022)	Socioeconomic and Psychosocial Adversities Experienced by Freelancers Working in the UK Cultural Sector During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Study	UK	Qualitative interviews; convenience recruitment via networks	A
Study 34	Ķešāne and Spuriņa (2024)	Sociological Types of Precarity Among Gig Workers: Lived Experiences of Food Delivery Workers in Riga	Latvia (Riga)	In-depth interviews; purposive street/social-media sampling	B
Study 35	Wan (2026)	Subjective Experiences of Decent Work and Future Aspirations Among Rural-Migrant Food-Delivery Riders in China	China	Consensual qualitative research; maximum-variation purposive sampling	A
Study 36	Nanda (2026)	The algorithmic personalization paradox: gig workers' lived experiences of supportive coaches and micromanaging bosses	Not reported	Interpretivist interviews; purposive and snowball sampling	A
Study 37	Sannon and Cosley (2022)	Toward a More Inclusive Gig Economy: Risks and Opportunities for Workers with Disabilities	United States	Grounded theory; Reddit recruitment; theoretical sampling	A
Study 38	Lee and Mitson (2025)	Understanding Gig Workers' Perceptions of Organizational Authenticity and Transparency Through AI Management	United States	Qualitative interviews; Reddit-based eligibility screening	A

Table A2. *Cont.*

Study ID	Author (Year)	Article Title	Country/Region	Qualitative Design and Sampling	Category
Study 39	Švagan (2023)	Understanding the paradox of high job quality evaluations among platform workers	Slovenia	Semi-structured interviews; maximum-variation purposive sampling	C
Study 40	Low et al. (2024)	Unveiling the upsides of low-skilled physical gig work: insights from the gig workers' perspective in Malaysia	Malaysia	Sequential mixed methods; judgmental sampling	C
Study 41	Díaz-Avendaño et al. (2026)	Vulnerability and adaptive resilience in global platform work: Cross-cultural insights from tutors across emerging and developed economies	19 countries across Africa, Asia, Europe, the Americas, and Oceania	Cross-cultural grounded theory; maximum-variation purposive sampling	A
Study 42	Subasinghe et al. (2026)	What keeps gig workers motivated? A typology of the intrinsic-extrinsic motivation interplay in the digital gig economy	Sri Lanka	Qualitative interviews; snowball sampling	A
Study 43	Sun et al. (2025)	'While Strictly Speaking It Is Illegal, You Can Work as Long as You Want': How Platform Facades Enable Gig Workers to Comply With, Bend and Break Migration Rules	Australia	Qualitative case study; purposive and snowball sampling	A
Study 44	Jabagi et al. (2021)	Who's the Boss? Measuring Gig-Workers' Perceived Algorithmic Autonomy-Support	Not reported	Scale development; cognitive interviews; convenience sampling	C

Category A: study-level saturation evidence is reported in Table 4; the remaining 12 studies are documented below. Note: Categories A–E represent the reporting classifications defined in Table 3: A = operational saturation criterion; B = limited operational detail; C = general saturation claim; D = prior sample-size justification without study-specific saturation evidence; E = alternative sample-adequacy rationale.

Table A3. Study-Specific Basis for Classification of Categories B–E.

Category B–E: Study-Specific Basis for Classification (12 Studies)		
Study ID	**Category**	**Basis for Classification**
Study 03	B	Saturation observed across responses; limited assessment detail without a clear stopping criterion
Study 34	B	Study-specific variation in saturation reported; operational stopping criterion not clearly specified
Study 07	C	Theoretical saturation claimed without a stated operational criterion
Study 11	C	Saturation point stated at participant five; no operational criterion
Study 16	C	Saturation asserted without a reported operational criterion
Study 19	C	Thematic saturation claimed without a reported assessment procedure
Study 39	C	Saturation point reported without an operational criterion
Study 40	C	Data saturation claimed as a stopping reason without an operational assessment description
Study 44	C	Theoretical saturation was reported after 10 cognitive interviews; no study-specific assessment procedure or criterion was described
Study 12	D	Sample size justified through the prior literature; no study-specific saturation assessment
Study 25	E	Study-specific adequacy justification based on research focus and participant characteristics
Study 26	E	Information power and interpretive depth used to justify adequacy

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