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Gender and Anticipatory Labour in the Gig Economy: How Employability Is Unequally Performed by Women and Men on Project-Based Platforms

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ABSTRACT

Work mediated by digital labour platforms is often framed as flexible and autonomous, yet accessing paid tasks commonly requires extensive unpaid effort. Drawing on 65 qualitative interviews with Australian workers on project-based platforms (including Airtasker, Fiverr and Freelancer), we develop the concept of anticipatory labour: the unpaid, future-oriented work through which workers search for tasks, evaluate jobs and clients, and negotiate terms before any paid work begins. Anticipatory labour is not peripheral but constitutive of participation in platform labour markets, demanding sustained time, attention and emotional energy amid uncertainty and competition. We show that anticipatory labour is gendered. While all workers engage in these practices, women perform more anticipatory labour and experience it more intensely, often alongside unpaid domestic and care labour. Women's anticipatory labour is also more affectively charged, shaped by hope, anxiety and self-doubt as they manage risks to reputation, safety and future employability. Men, by contrast, report less anticipatory labour and more confidence in securing work. We argue that anticipatory labour operates as a mechanism of platform governance, shifting responsibility for employability onto workers and converting unpaid time and emotion into the conditions of participation in the gig economy. In doing so, platforms reproduce gendered inequalities while sustaining the promise of flexibility.

1 | Introduction

Contemporary capitalism often presents flexible work and entrepreneurialism as a natural fit for women, positioning them as adaptable, self-managing workers (Allen and Finn 2024; Luckman 2016). At the same time, women's engagement with these forms of work is too often shaped by constrained labour market options and disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care (Craig and Churchill 2021a, 2021b), leading many to turn to such arrangements as a means of reconciling paid work and family life (Foley et al. 2018; Warren 2021). The gig economy builds on these narratives by presenting itself as an 'idyllic' and 'boss-free' workplace of the future, promising autonomy, flexibility, and self-determination (Ravenelle 2019, 5). Digital platforms, in turn, actively target women through messages of flexibility, financial independence and autonomy (James 2022, 2024b). In practice, however, women's experiences of platform work reveal the persistence, and in some cases intensification, of inequalities familiar from the analogue labour market, including the gender pay gap (Churchill 2024), work–family conflict (James 2022; Kincaid and Reynolds 2023; Warren 2021), and discrimination and harassment (Kwan 2022). These patterns cannot be explained by paid work alone; they also depend on the unpaid labour and time through which workers compete for jobs, which is effort that is likely to be unevenly distributed, given gendered responsibilities for care.

Yet research on platform labour has largely focussed on what happens within paid tasks, overlooking the unpaid labour required to become, and remain, employable on platforms in the first place. On project-based platforms such as Airtasker and Freelancer, workers must search for opportunities, assess clients and tasks, craft bids, and negotiate terms before any paid labour begins and often without any guarantee that this effort will yield work. We conceptualise this largely invisible work as anticipatory labour: the ongoing temporal and affective labour through which workers sustain employability under conditions of uncertainty. Anticipatory labour encompasses the effort of preparing for and pursuing future tasks—work that is indispensable to securing income yet remains uncompensated and structurally precarious.

We argue that anticipatory labour is a central mechanism through which platform governance organises inequality, and that it does so in gendered ways. Drawing on 65 qualitative interviews with Australian workers on project-based platforms including Airtasker, Fiverr, and Freelancer, we show that women undertake disproportionately more anticipatory labour, frequently alongside unpaid care, and experience it through anxiety, self-doubt and hope. Men, by contrast, report markedly less of this labour and describe engaging platforms with greater confidence and security. By foregrounding anticipatory labour, we extend accounts of platform governance beyond algorithmic management of paid tasks to the temporal and affective organisation of unpaid time. Platforms convert anticipation into a mode of control that individualises risk and responsibility for employability, thereby reproducing and compounding gendered inequalities.

This article proceeds with an overview of the gendered dynamics of platform labour before detailing the concept of anticipatory labour. We then outline our methods and present findings on how workers search for, evaluate, and negotiate work. By foregrounding the unpaid, affective, and temporal dimensions of employability, the article contributes to sociological debates on gendered precarity, digital governance, and the reorganisation of work under platform capitalism.

2 | Gender and Platform Work

The organisation of platform labour is deeply gendered. Across national contexts, men and women participate in the gig economy under different structural, cultural and household conditions, which shape not only *what kinds of work they do* but also *how they do it*. Women are concentrated in feminised segments of the gig economy where they are more likely to work on care and project platforms and more likely to do feminised-typed tasks, such as creative, administrative and care tasks, while men are over-represented on delivery and driving platforms and tend to more technical and manual labour type tasks (Churchill and Craig 2019; Pesole et al. 2018). This reflects patterns in the analogue labour market, where men and women tend to do different kinds of work, and men's paid work is usually valued more highly (Churchill and Craig 2019). These patterns also shape why men and women take up gig work in the first place and the conditions under which they do it. For men, participation in the gig economy is primarily financially motivated, that is the money earned from the gig economy is often a main or supplementary source of income (Ma et al. 2022; Goods et al. 2019). For women, income is an important motivator (Churchill and Craig 2019), but not the only factor, as care responsibilities and household demands also push them into the gig economy (James 2022; Churchill and Craig 2019; Gerber 2022). The flexibility and schedule control afforded in the gig economy are critical for some women in reconciling paid work with caregiving, especially in contexts where affordable childcare and flexible employment remain limited (Hunt and Samman 2019; Warren 2021). However, in reality, the flexibility and schedule control of working in the gig economy also result in blurred temporal boundaries between paid and unpaid labour. Mothers, in particular, report scheduling their work around school hours, childcare availability and domestic routines, using late evenings or fragmented time to maintain visibility on platforms (James 2022).

Women's everyday experiences of gig work are further shaped by structural and platform-mediated inequalities in pay, visibility, and treatment. Across the gig economy, research has found that women earn between seven and 23% less than men, depending on the platform type (Cook et al. 2018; Foong et al. 2018; Litman et al. 2020; A. Adams 2020). These disparities reflect platform gender segmentation (Churchill 2024), but they are also reinforced through platform design. Rating systems, visibility metrics, and client interactions reproduce bias by rewarding constant availability and penalising those balancing care or resisting harassment. Women report receiving fewer offers and lower ratings even with equivalent experience (Barzilay and Ben-David 2017; Hannák et al. 2017), often concealing their gender or adopting defensive strategies to maintain safety and income (Hyperwallet 2017; Ma et al. 2022; Kwan 2022; Amir Anwar 2022). In this way, platforms individualise structural inequalities through systems that valorise flexibility while amplifying discrimination and affective risk, such as the heightened emotional and relational vulnerability workers face when employability depends on continuous management of client relationships, including potentially hostile or discriminatory interactions, which can impact platform workers' future visibility on platforms and income.

The gig economy thus constitutes a contradictory space for women: a site of both possibility and precarity. Many women join digital platforms seeking autonomy and temporal control, yet they encounter intensified forms of insecurity, discrimination and self-responsibilisation. Mothers, in particular, must manage not only the instability of client demand but also the moral and emotional demands of care and visibility. Missing a task or failing to respond quickly can reduce platform ratings and, as a consequence, future opportunities, which results in what James (2022, 13) describes as ‘dropping out of the algorithm’.

3 | Anticipatory Labour and Gender

Anticipatory labour refers to the unpaid, future-oriented work required to stay employable on digital labour platforms. Unlike

the unpaid labour typical of food delivery platforms, where workers passively wait for food to be prepared (Pulignano and Marà 2021), anticipatory labour demands continuous, proactive effort. It encompasses three interconnected practices, *searching, evaluating,* and *negotiating*, through which workers increase their employability and manage uncertainty. *Searching* refers to the continual effort to locate and remain visible for potential work; *evaluating* involves assessing the suitability, risks, and reputational implications of jobs and clients; and *negotiating* encompasses the communicative and emotional labour of setting terms, managing expectations, and sustaining client relationships. Some of these practices overlap with what Bucher et al. (2020) term *anticipatory compliance*, the adjustments workers make to align with algorithmic management. Yet, whereas anticipatory compliance describes alignment with algorithmic control, *anticipatory labour* captures a broader, relational process that also includes client- and self-facing work and the gendered affective labour of remaining employable. These activities are not peripheral but constitutive of platform participation, revealing how responsibility and control are reconfigured through platform design.

Each dimension of anticipatory labour contributes to how workers make themselves employable on digital platforms. *Searching* for work is not a neutral activity: workers must remain constantly visible and responsive, regularly checking platforms, updating profiles, and replying quickly to messages. This ongoing presence signals availability and commitment, which platforms reward through higher algorithmic rankings. *Evaluating* opportunities and one's own abilities also involves more than deciding whether a job is worthwhile. Workers assess which tasks and which clients are least likely to result in conflict, low ratings, or penalties. In doing so, they monitor and adjust their own behaviour to fit the client's and the platform's expectations, aligning their choices with rating systems that define some decisions as 'good' and others as risky or undesirable. *Negotiating* with clients similarly requires effort that often goes unpaid, including managing emotions, setting expectations, and maintaining a polite and flexible tone. Through this work, workers signal trustworthiness, adaptability, and reliability.

On project-based platforms such as Airtasker, Fiverr, and TaskRabbit, these forms of activity are essential to securing paid work. Unlike on-demand systems such as Uber, where algorithms automatically assign tasks, workers on project-based platforms must actively draw work towards themselves through continuous engagement and self-promotion (van Doorn 2017). Platform metrics, such as ratings, bids, response times, and activity levels, translate this ongoing attention and emotional effort into measurable value, while engagement data feed the algorithms that shape future visibility and opportunities (Rosenblat and Stark 2016; Gill and Kanai 2018). In this way, anticipatory labour turns employability into an ongoing performance and a tool of platform governance: through unpaid, continuous effort, workers help maintain the systems that monitor, rank, and evaluate them (Duffy 2017).

Anticipatory labour is experienced unevenly, shaped by gendered inequalities in time, structure, and emotion. Women devote more time and affective energy to staying employable because platform systems collide with the gendered organisation of work and care. Labour market segmentation channels women into feminised aspects of the gig economy, for example, creative, administrative, and service work, which are typically lower paid, client-facing, and increasingly susceptible to a globalised and automated world (Churchill 2024; Churchill and Craig 2019). These forms of work demand constant responsiveness, communication, and emotional engagement, extending expectations historically tied to service and reproductive labour into digital spaces (Nielsen et al. 2025). At the same time, care responsibilities fragment women's working hours, making availability unpredictable and contingent (Craig and Churchill 2021a, 2021b; Gerber 2022; James 2022, 2024a, 2024b). This temporal instability clashes with platform algorithms that reward continuous presence and fast responses, increasing insecurity and emotional pressure. Prior experiences of discrimination also heighten self-scrutiny and caution, compelling women to spend more time evaluating potential jobs and negotiating pay, boundaries, and conditions to protect themselves and their reputations.

These structural and temporal pressures produce distinct emotional effects. To remain employable, women must manage the affective demands of hope, alertness, and anxiety that accompany the constant searching, evaluating and negotiating. They perform this kind of labour to attract clients, sustain responsiveness despite interruptions, and absorb the stress of potential rejection or poor ratings. Platform infrastructures that reward immediacy and continuous presence thus amplify gendered asymmetries in time and feeling. Women must compensate through intensified searching, repeated bidding, and emotional resilience. Women's greater anticipatory load is therefore not a reflection of individual disposition but a structural consequence of how platform architectures valorise uninterrupted engagement (Gregg 2011).

The following sections trace how these dynamics play out empirically in the practices of searching, evaluating, and negotiating, revealing the everyday forms through which gendered anticipatory labour is reproduced.

4 | Data, Methods and Sample

4.1 | Data and Methods

This article draws on 65 semi-structured qualitative interviews with Australian-based platform workers (37 women and 28 men), conducted between March and September 2024. Participants were recruited through two main channels: (1) social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram, and (2) digital labour platforms, specifically Airtasker, Fiverr and Freelancer. On social media, an advertisement invited people who identified as platform workers with care responsibilities to take part in an online study in exchange for a $75 AUD gift card. A similar advertisement was placed directly on the digital labour platforms, where participants were paid through the platform following completion of the interview. The characteristics of participants recruited through both methods were comparable. Participants were administered an online

questionnaire before the interview to collect key demographic variables, such as age, educational qualifications, tenure in the gig economy, and average weekly earnings (see Table 1).

Interviews ranged between one and 2 hours in duration and were all conducted online. The interview schedule captured participants' entry into the gig economy, including motivations and work history in the analogue labour market; work history in the gig economy and experiences with platforms; their day-to-day experiences, including how they searched for work, negotiated and working conditions; pay and financial security; work-life balance; incidence of harassment and bullying; satisfaction with working in the gig economy and platforms. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and analysed using an inductive thematic analysis informed by grounded theory principles (Charmaz 2004; Braun and Clarke 2006). Each transcript was coded line by line to generate descriptive codes, which were iteratively refined into broader thematic categories through constant comparison across cases. The three dimensions of *anticipatory labour* were developed through this iterative analysis, capturing how workers imagined, prepared for, and emotionally managed future work opportunities.

4.2 | Platform Characteristics

The study draws on three project-based labour platforms that vary in scale, scope, and mode of work: Airtasker, Fiverr, and Freelancer (see Table 2). Airtasker (est. 2012) operates primarily in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, with an estimated two million users and annual revenues of around AUD $59 million. It facilitates geographically bounded, one-off tasks such as cleaning, moving, and home maintenance. Fiverr (est. 2010) is a global digital marketplace with approximately 400,000 active sellers and a multi-million buyer base, generating AUD $551 million annually. It specialises in creative and technical services, including design, writing, and digital marketing. Freelancer (est. 2009) is an online labour platform, with over 79 million registered users and AUD $53 million in annual revenue. It enables short-term, project-based digital work across thousands of categories, concentrated in IT and software development, design, and content production.

4.3 | Participant Characteristics

The demographic data reveal several notable gender differences among gig workers in the sample (see Table 1). Men and women in the sample were working age, ranging between 18 and 64 for men and 22 to 62 for women. Women in the sample were slightly more likely than men to hold a tertiary qualification (52% vs. 48%) but were less likely to be married (48% vs. 52%). Women were also considerably more likely to have a child under 17 (57% vs. 42%) and to have other caring responsibilities (54% vs. 45%), suggesting a greater overall caregiving load. Men, however, reported higher rates of long-term health conditions

TABLE 1 | Participant characteristics.

	Men	Women
Age range	18–64	22–62
% Holds a tertiary qualification	48.0	52.0
% Married or partnered	52.0	48.0
% Has a child under the age of 17	42.0	57.0
% Has other care responsibilities	45.0	54.0
% Has long-term health condition or chronic illness	57.0	43.0
Primary motivation for working in the gig economy		
% Who nominate care-related reasons	0.0	19.0
% Who nominated need for flexible work	18.8	28.5
% Who nominated schedule control	12.5	14.3
% Who nominated gig economy is main income	31.3	14.3
% Who nominated gig economy supplementary income	37.5	23.8
Tenure		
% Worked in gig economy 0–3 months	6.3	4.8
% Worked in gig economy 4–6 months	6.3	0.0
% Worked in gig economy 7–12 months	18.8	4.8
% Worked in gig economy 1–2 years	6.3	33.3
% Worked in gig economy 2 or more years	62.5	57.1
Average weekly hours worked	22.0	14.0
% Who reported often/always difficulty concentrating due to family responsibilities	43.0	80.0

Source: Qualitative dataset.

TABLE 2 | Platform characteristics.

Platform characteristics	Platforms		
	Airtasker	**Fiverr**	**Freelancer**
Year of operation	2012	2010	2009
Workforce size	2M	400k	80M
Revenue	AUD $59M	AUD$ 551M	AUD$53M
Top 3 task segments	1. Moving & removals	1. Graphic design	1. IT and software development
	2. Cleaning & housekeeping	2. Writing & content creation	2. Design, media
	3. Furniture assembly/ Handyman	3. Digital marketing & social media	3. Writing & content

Source: Airtasker, Fiverr and Freelancer websites.

(57% vs. 43%). Motivations for gig work differ by gender: while women more often cited caring responsibilities (19%) and flexibility (28.5%) as their main reasons, men were more likely to view gig work as their main source of income (31.2%) or as a way to supplement earnings (37.5%). A majority of both genders had worked on platforms for more than 2 years. Men worked substantially more hours per week (22 vs. 14 h), but women reported greater work–family conflict: 80% of women said family responsibilities made it difficult to concentrate on work compared with 43% of men.

5 | Findings

In this section, we examine three dimensions of anticipatory labour: (1) searching, (2) evaluating, and (3) negotiating. While both men and women talk about these dimensions in the interviews, women were more likely to engage in all three forms of anticipatory labour.

5.1 | Searching for Work

Searching is fundamental to earning a living on project-based platforms. It involves scrolling through dynamic lists where new tasks are added, and completed tasks are removed. As Emily, a 47-year-old white woman working on Airtasker and Freelancer, expresses: 'It's very hard...to get your foot in the door and be assigned a task'. Many participants commented on how there were more workers than work or tasks on platforms in recent years, intensifying the competition amongst workers. While both men and women searched for tasks on digital platforms, there were clear gendered differences in how they searched.

Women seemingly invested more time, energy and effort searching for work than men, which was a deliberate strategy to improve their employability on platforms. Many made explicit mention of the hours they spent searching for work on platforms, looking for suitable work, like Emily, who estimated upwards of 3 hours a day. They searched task listings throughout the day and into the evening, even though they acknowledged that some periods were filled with more task listings than others, for example mornings, after work (i.e., after 5 p.m.). Like Layla, a 29-year-old woman of colour who scrolled Airtasker every two hours, many women spoke of feeling the need to be constantly attached to their phones, searching platforms for work, in case they missed out. She commented, '...this kind of hustle lifestyle and mindset is always there'. This 'hustle' imperative reflects wider postfeminist discourses that frame women's continuous self-directed effort as empowerment and employability-building, even when it is unpaid and unlikely to yield secure returns (Allen and Finn 2024).

Some combined searching with other kinds of labour, such as their paid jobs in the non-digital, analogue labour market. For example, Amelia, a 32-year-old white woman who works on Airtasker, searched for work on digital platforms while working in her analogue job: '...when they pop up, you just gotta do it straight away. Otherwise, you miss out'. Charlotte, a 35-year-old white woman who worked on project-based and care platforms continued to search for work during evenings and often during dedicated 'family time'.

Searching for work in this way was a form of 'hope labour' (Kuehn and Corrigan 2013) in which participants were hopeful that carrying out extensive work searches would lead to future work, as Yasmin opines:

> So, I do feel like the hustle is there and it's something that you constantly must chip away at. It's not oh, like it'll come, it'll come. No, you must stay proactive and look for these opportunities.

But it also came with a sense of hopelessness as Charlotte conveys:

> So, I do feel like you do waste a lot of time. It's a bit like Facebook, you know, you scroll, scroll, scroll. Yeah, it's like that if you will waste a lot of time, looking for jobs or even applying for jobs, but you won't get a lot...

Searching for work was deeply entangled with women's unpaid care responsibilities at home. Many women described undertaking searches while caring for children or elderly relatives, often using fragmented moments throughout the day, for example, during school drop-offs, nap times, or late evenings, scrolling through task lists to remain visible on platforms. For mothers, in particular, anticipatory labour was performed

through multitasking and time-splitting, which reinforced the sense of being perpetually 'on call' to both clients and family members. This was often resented by male partners, especially when women were searching for work in the evenings, when there was an implicit expectation that they were to be present with their partner.

In contrast, men did not spend as much time searching for work on digital platforms as women. When asked how they approached searching for work, many men responded that they had 'no strategy' for looking for work, reflecting the generally relaxed approach men had to finding work on digital platforms. James, a 38-year-old white man working on delivery and marketplace platforms, typifies how men in the gig economy approach searching for work on digital platforms:

> I will go and take like a couple of hours in the afternoon and search for work. I'll go sit at a pub. I'll have a beer, and I'll just sit there on my phone, just applying for jobs for the following week or that weekend.

This was like the experiences of other men in the study. They did not continuously scroll through task listings all day. Men searched in short bursts of time, usually in the mornings. Many spoke of not having to search for too long or search at all, as Michael, a 41-year-old white man who works on Airtasker and Uber, reflected, 'So instead of me chasing work, sometimes they're chasing quotes for me to do the work'. There was less time and effort invested overall by men and, as a result, less risk.

Gendered search strategies reflected both the segmentation of platform labour markets and the spatial organisation of digital work. The kinds of tasks most available to women on project-based platforms, such as clerical, administrative, and creative services, tend to be remotely deliverable and therefore embedded in highly globalised labour markets, where workers compete across borders, and labour supply can rapidly outpace demand (Stephany et al. 2020). This contrasts with more physical, local, and task-specific jobs dominated by men, such as deliveries or house maintenance and repairs, which are tied to local demand and typically involve fewer formal entry requirements beyond physical presence. As these forms of work must be performed on site and often require access to specific material resources (e.g., a vehicle or tools), demand is more geographically bounded and less easily met through global labour markets. Consequently, men described finding work with relative ease, while women faced scarcity and volatility, particularly after the COVID-19 lockdowns, when online administrative and creative work became both more crowded and less predictable (Stephany et al. 2020).

For women, this structural disadvantage translated into temporal intensity. To remain visible and secure 'good' jobs, they refreshed listings more often and across longer stretches of the day. As Olivia, 49, put it, task posts resemble a 'scattergun where you post a task and 4000 people come out of the woodwork and bid for it.' This heightened competition produced an atmosphere of scarcity and fear of missing out, driving women to enact more exhaustive search strategies. As Anne, 41, explained, 'You can miss jobs if you don't do that... If you're not scrolling, you're potentially missing out.' Women's continual searching can be seen as a strategy to overcome the confines placed upon them by platform architectures and gendered market segmentation that made employability itself a demanding and uneven pursuit.

5.2 | Evaluating Potential Work and Potential 'Bosses' in the Gig Economy

Women spent longer on platforms not only searching for jobs but also evaluating work and clients. Searching was not only exhaustive and expansive, but a deliberate strategy. Women sifted through tasks carefully and methodically, weighing up risks. Unlike conventional employment or self-employment, platform work exposes workers to forms of visibility and evaluation that carry distinct risks, for example, ratings, reviews, and other metrics are publicly accessible to potential clients and employers, meaning that a single poor rating could jeopardise future opportunities. This system of constant surveillance and competitive benchmarking intensified the stakes of each interaction, making careful evaluation not simply prudent but essential. As Evie, a 39-year-old white woman, notes, working in the gig economy is 'personal' because there is a 'risk to reputation', which means she needed to be prudent before accepting work because 'this is my income, and a bad interaction could put that in jeopardy'. Similarly, women like Anne had to weigh up the pros and cons of each job and whether it would be the right 'fit':

> ...from my experience, I will pick out the jobs that I bid on because I don't wanna be more stressed out or not be able to complete a job because there's not enough information to bid on it. With platforms, you don't get the option to back out. Like if you bid on it then you're committing to do it...I do pick and choose my jobs.

Later, Anne comments:

> I look at the clients that I'm potentially working for and see if they have had any negative feedback before or if I know how many times they've used the platform. Have they just signed up, or have they been for a while?

This kind of behaviour was typical of women who were much more cautious about who they might potentially be working for, reflecting their experiences in the analogue labour market, where they had often felt unsafe and disrespected in the workplace, especially by male colleagues. Previous negative experiences and interactions with clients in the gig economy also made women wary. Louise, a 59-year-old white woman who works on project-based and delivery platforms, for example, had negative experiences with clients before and was reticent to take on work she thought might end badly. The lack of protections and regulations in the gig economy meant that women felt a sense of responsibility for their experiences on digital platforms, as Priya, a 32-year-old woman of colour who works on Airtasker notes: 'I think it's on you, to kind of take responsibility and think mentally have to deal with them and be

strategic and yeah, you have, like, I feel like with me, I have to put things in place before I have to take that on'. In this way, evaluating potential work and potential clients was a way for women to exercise agency in the gig economy. As Isabelle, a 49-year-old white woman who works on Airtasker, explains, 'You're a portable worker, so to speak, you can just say, you know, I'm not available and I'm gonna go do work elsewhere.'

Women platform workers were also evaluating themselves and whether they had the appropriate skills and experience to apply for jobs, as Amelia describes: 'I will only do something I know I can do successfully'. Most of the women in the study expressed more doubt about whether they could do certain kinds of work on platforms, as Louise expresses:

> I noticed some of my, I don't know, I don't know whether it's a lack of confidence or something with appropriately selling myself on the platform. I haven't honed those skills yet. I do like when I sort of get into the things where I'm kind of getting somewhere with learning how to describe my skills and sell myself for the task.

Similarly, Priya:

> Sometimes you just don't have the ability to do things. You don't have the aptitude for it. Like I'm not good at programming. I'm not good at coding. That kind of thing is not, my gift. So even sometimes I've had jobs where they said you can learn, and we can train you. I'm not 'trainable' in that. I'm telling you straight up.

Such doubt contrasts with the ideal of the confident entrepreneurial subject that women supposedly inhabit (Luckman 2016). Scharff (2016) found that precarity and anxiety go hand-in-hand, especially when workers feel uncertain. These feelings of doubt, a lack of confidence and ultimately anxiety may reflect the gap between these expectations and the realities of the gig economy. Many therefore, applied conservatively, targeting jobs that strongly aligned with their skills or chances for success: 'I'm pitching [for jobs] where I know there's a reasonable prospect that I'll be successful with that pitch'.

Some women evaluated work and its potential to impact work and family demands. They were hesitant to accept potential work in case it impacted negatively on their work-life balance. As Anne explains:

> Sometimes I'm cooking and I'm running between the computer and the stove. It gets like that. But I try in those scenarios because there's nothing more stressful than having work that needs to be completed and a family to attend to at the same time. But I've learned the hard way, and that's why I ignore jobs that are like, "I need this photo done within the hour or this needs to be done today". But if they're only paying 20 bucks, I'm like," It's just not worth my time and energy and the stress that this is going to deliver".

Tasks that required rapid turnaround or unpredictable hours were often avoided by women in the study, as these clashed with the temporal demands of care.

Men rarely evaluated potential work, potential clients or indeed themselves or their abilities in the same ways women did. While men in the study discussed how they sometimes questioned the timing or budget of potential work, they did not express doubt or a lack of confidence. Rather, men in the gig economy inhabited an entrepreneurial disposition when applying for work. For example, Thomas, a 30-year-old white man who works on project-based and delivery platforms, would only apply for jobs in which he would make $30 or more an hour to recuperate fees. They expressed greater confidence in finding and securing work as Ethan, a 34-year-old white man who works on care and marketplace platforms, describes: '...if there's something that I know I can do and that sounds interesting and that you know pays enough to seem like it's fair then I just apply for it.' Men were not concerned with whether they were 'skilled' enough to do the tasks they applied for. William, a 64-year-old white man working on care, marketplace and delivery platforms, exemplified this approach:

> I'm not sure what other people do but I will stretch myself sometimes because I know that I can, you know, do almost anything that I put my mind to sort of achieve that...Occasionally, I'll look at something and go, ok, I'll put in a quote for what I reckon it's worth and see what happens.

There are very few tasks in the gig economy that men did not think they could apply for or undertake. For example, Henry, a 48-year-old white man working on marketplace platforms, wanted to take up photography because he saw a high number of photography-related jobs on platforms: '...people require photography services. So, perhaps, I should buy a camera and train as a photographer. So, I can do, like, basic photography.'

5.3 | Negotiating Working Conditions

Both men and women negotiated aspects of prospective tasks, including deliverables, timeframes and pricing. These negotiations, like searching and evaluating, are highly gendered.

Women negotiated working hours with potential clients through upfront communication about their time availability to establish client-worker boundaries and demarcate working and non-working hours. For instance, Evie:

> will send people an introductory message when I first connect with them about work and say, thanks for hiring me. Here's my working hours, here's, you know, if you email me, you can expect contact within so many hours or days, et cetera setting that boundary upfront tends to help as well.

But this can involve more than just an introductory message. The competitiveness of the gig economy means that sometimes more work needs to go into negotiating the job. This can require bodily and affective labour as Priya explains:

> ...[S]o you have to kind of take it on to kind of win the client, and that can sometimes mean you have to use your charm, or you have to look a particular way or dress a particular way, or you have to think about how to influence them, how to win them over. Yeah, I've had that, that's a lot to think about and a lot to do, like, do you have enough prep work time to do this?

Women went to greater lengths to negotiate and interact with (potential) clients. This kind of work relied on more feminine, service-labour-like qualities like patience, as Marli, a 36-year-old woman, explains:

> If you don't have the patience to deal with the customer, because the client may not always be fully knowledgeable in that either. But then you sometimes have to do their job for them. So, it's also trying to understand that as well. So, you have to experience trying to be understanding and also have that flexibility.

Price negotiation on project-based platforms typically involves clients posting tasks with a proposed or estimated budget, and taskers bid on these jobs by either accepting the asking price or negotiating their rates. This enables posters to find suitable workers within their budget and workers to negotiate compensation based on their skills, experience and availability. However, workers frequently face clients wanting work done at unfairly low rates, as Charlotte commented, 'There are clients that just want [the work done] very cheap' who are not willing to pay the 'proper amount' for the task at hand. Compounding this is the dynamic pricing system, which intensifies the competition among workers, like the competitive nature of searching for work on platforms. Ultimately, this drives down task prices, benefiting the poster but not the worker. Workers described numerous instances of being undercut by fellow taskers who underbid, offering a price lower than the starting price set by the client, making it difficult for workers to compete without undervaluing their own work.

Men and women approached bidding and price negotiation differently. Men sought to resist the dynamic pricing structure by refusing to underbid or undervalue themselves, opting only for jobs that paid what they considered to be fair. William noted that while many clients seek low(er) prices through the platforms, he prefers to work with those who respect his time and are willing to pay him fairly for his skills and experience:

> ...I can't go in and low ball, like it seems a lot of people on the platforms are looking for a lower price on whatever they want done. So, I gotta go in for somebody who's gonna respect my time... and be willing to pay me for my skills and my experience...

This unwavering approach to task pricing was evident among most men in the study. They were confident about how much they could ask for and expressed a clear understanding of their own worth, as well as the value of their work. This is exemplified by Jarrod, a 44-year-old man working on marketplace platforms: 'One thing was coming to understand the value of the work and not being shy about asking for the amount of money that I thought it was worth'.

In contrast, women felt like they were underpaid and that the work they did was undervalued. One participant, Amelia, felt like she had to justify her pricing: 'I know that I am a bit more expensive than other people, and I don't have any negative [feedback] like no one's ever told me I've not done a good enough job'. Women were less certain about how to price themselves in the gig economy, which meant that they often accepted the offering price set by the client. This was particularly the case for women of colour, as Priya notes, 'I feel like if I were a part of the dominant society and I put as much effort as I put in, I would get a lot more than what I get'.

These pricing challenges were also shaped by the kinds of work women typically performed on platforms. Many were concentrated in administrative or service-based tasks that were fragmented, open-ended, and often changed at the client's request. This made it difficult to estimate time or set consistent rates. In contrast, men's work, for example, moving, deliveries, or gardening, was more discrete and easier to price. This segmentation shaped bargaining power and compounded gendered expectations around flexibility, leaving women's work both harder to quantify and more easily undervalued.

In instances where women did negotiate their price—though this occurred far less often than with men—women expressed feeling uncomfortable, particularly when charging what they considered to be 'high rates' for their work. Women's decisions about the price or fee to set were also dynamic, often influenced by their financial needs. Women felt that pricing tasks or work was related to future employability, and they attached a kind of hope to pricing.

As Anne explains that she found it challenging to maintain consistent pricing, especially since she sometimes needs to accept any job, regardless of the rate, to ensure a steady income:

> ...it's really hard to be consistent on how much you charge and how much you value what you do because you might sometimes take on a job that is not a great wage, but you just need to keep having that income coming in.

6 | Discussion and Conclusion

This article examined how women and men secure work in the gig economy, focussing on the unpaid, future-oriented efforts required to stay employable on project-based platforms such as Airtasker, Fiverr and Freelancer. We describe these activities as anticipatory labour: the temporal and affective work of

searching, evaluating and negotiating that takes place before any paid task begins. While both men and women engage in these practices, women undertake more of this labour and experience it more intensively. In developing this concept to explore women's experiences of unpaid labour in the gig economy, we address shortcomings in the existing literature identified by James (2022, 1), who notes that '[w]e know relatively little about the active, everyday role of women in sustaining the platform economy in practice.'

The findings show that anticipatory labour is deeply gendered. Women engage in all three forms of anticipatory labour frequently and intensively, spending hours scrolling through listings, monitoring notifications, and managing visibility across multiple platforms, often alongside paid work or caregiving. Searching and bidding typically occurred late at night or during brief intervals between domestic tasks, producing a fragmented and extended working day. Women also described a mix of hope and anxiety about whether extra effort would translate into paid work. Evaluating potential clients carried a further emotional dimension, as women sought to avoid unfair treatment or harassment in largely unregulated digital spaces.

Men, by contrast, described platform engagement as intermittent and low-stakes, something that could be taken up and put down with minimal consequence. Their accounts were marked by confidence and ease, reflecting a different relationship to time and uncertainty. This contrast matters because platform systems are built around constant responsiveness and presume uninterrupted availability as a condition of participation. That presumption is far easier to meet when time is not routinely fragmented by care and domestic labour. Anticipatory labour is therefore gendered not only in how much time workers must expend, but in the affective work required to sustain visibility under uncertainty. It entails working through hope, anxiety and self-surveillance. This echoes Howcroft et al. (2025), who show that digitalisation has reconfigured the 'ideal worker' through forms of digitalised omnipresence that reward constant connectedness and visibility. Like the connected professionals in their study, women platform workers are compelled to sustain an 'always-on' presence, but with less autonomy and greater emotional cost as care responsibilities fragment their time.

These gendered differences are not merely experiential but structural. Three intersecting mechanisms help explain them. First, platform infrastructures shift responsibility for employability onto workers and convert visibility into a condition of access to work. Those with fragmented time, most often women, must therefore exert greater effort to remain competitive (James 2022, 2024b). Second, gendered labour markets position women in feminised, client-facing, and globally competitive forms of work that demand continual communication and emotional management. Third, the organisation of care shapes when and how women can appear available, embedding platform participation within the temporal rhythms of domestic life. Together, these dynamics make women's engagement with platforms continuous, demanding, and affective, while men's participation remains more contained and detached. Platform infrastructures thus do not merely reflect gender inequalities but deepen them by making women's time and emotional labour central to sustaining employability in the gig economy.

These patterns echo longer-standing dynamics observed in research on women's self-employment and home-based work. As Luckman (2016) notes, such work has often been promoted as a 'magical solution' to combining paid and unpaid labour, even as it transfers risk and responsibility onto women. Anticipatory labour represents a digital intensification of this logic: platform infrastructures responsibilise workers in much the same way as earlier forms of self-employment, but through algorithmic visibility and competition. Like the self-employed women in Luckman's study, women platform workers remain attached to the promise of autonomy and flexibility in the gig economy even as they absorb its temporal and emotional costs—a form of what Berlant (2011) calls *cruel optimism*.

While this study offers an in-depth account of women's anticipatory labour within the Australian gig economy, it is limited by its qualitative and context-specific design. The sample is skewed towards English-speaking workers and focuses solely on project-based platforms. Women's experiences in other countries or cultural contexts may differ, particularly where care infrastructures or social protections are stronger. Future research could test the analytical utility of anticipatory labour across these contexts as well as different platform types and worker demographics, exploring intersections of class, race, and migration status. A broader empirical base would help determine whether anticipatory labour is a general feature of platform work or one specific to feminised segments of the digital economy.

In conclusion, anticipatory labour reveals how digital platforms reconfigure the sociology of work through temporality, affect, and governance. It shows that employability itself becomes a continuous, unpaid performance sustained by workers' emotional and temporal investments. For sociology, this concept extends analyses of time and social reproduction (V. Adams et al. 2009) by showing how the gendered organisation of care shapes the unpaid, future-oriented labour of remaining employable in algorithmically mediated markets, and how digital infrastructures redistribute risk and responsibility along gendered lines. By making employability a continuous, unpaid pursuit, platform infrastructures intensify the collision between care and self-management in the digital sphere, transforming availability and affect into everyday conditions of work. Women's disproportionate investment in this labour reveals not only the persistence of gendered inequalities but their reconfiguration through algorithmic systems that reward constant engagement. Understanding anticipatory labour in this way illuminates how the gig economy depends on workers' unpaid time and emotional energy—resources that remain both invisible and indispensable to platform labour markets.

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Ethics Statement

Ethics was approved by the University of Melbourne (51212).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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