

Philippines: When apps are gamified, workers rarely win

First of 2 parts

Friday 14 February 2025, by [ILAGAN Karol](#) (Date first published: 13 December 2024).

Gig work is full-time work in the Philippines. Food-delivery and ride-hailing workers, whose daily routine is dictated by an algorithm, struggle with uncertain pay, indebtedness, and the physical toll of chasing incentives.

On a Thursday afternoon, just after the lunch rush, a pack of motorcycles pulled into a narrow alleyway in a Metro Manila city. The riders parked their bikes in front of a makeshift rest area. The space resembled a typical Pinoy “tambayan.” Equipped with a wall fan, and a water and a charging station, it’s enough for the weary riders to rest and recharge before the “merienda” and dinner orders trickle in.

A former security guard, a factory worker, and a barangay staffer were all brought here together by an app. Every day, they crisscross the bustling city, wait at their designated spots in restaurants and cafes, and bring food to customers right at their doorstep.

The security guard, Rico, not his real name, joined GrabFood in 2019. The platform gave him a way out of his rigid and gruelling job as a bank security guard. (GrabFood is one of the more popular food delivery services in the Philippines. It’s one of the services offered by the superapp Grab.)

Melinda, also not her real name, joined the platform because it gave her the flexibility she needed as a mother of two. It promised better pay, too.

Another rider, Lara, said she was doing OK with her previous job in a barangay, but she got enticed when Grab came in. The idea of not having a boss was undeniably appealing to her.

Having no boss, the freedom to choose their own working hours, and the promise of a higher income have become a major draw for Rico, Melinda, Lara, and many more Filipinos to join the growing gig economy.

The term “gig” used to refer to a band’s performance typically scheduled after work hours or on a weekend. Now it has expanded to a wide variety of tasks, often done through digital platforms 24/7. Gig work is driven by a confluence of several factors.

Customers – those who can afford – increasingly want convenience and services on-demand.

Workers, meanwhile, are seeking alternatives from the traditional 9-to-5 job.

Companies, on the other hand, aim to cut costs.

Digital platforms now come in to bridge all these needs. They capitalize on this trend by connecting

merchants like restaurants and cafes to us, the customers, and in between are the so-called gig workers.

In the gig economy, workers take on task-oriented and time-bound service jobs without signing a long-term contract. This allows workers to choose when and where to work, making it an ideal side hustle for those with regular jobs.

From October 2023 to June 2024, the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) interviewed dozens of workers for this report. The benefits are indeed undeniable for riders and drivers who treat this kind of work as a sideline to earn extra income in their spare time. But for many Filipinos, gig work is not simply a “raket” – it has become their main source of income.

This is a big deal especially when unemployment and underemployment persist. But because tech-driven services have far outpaced existing rules and regulations, workers are often disadvantaged.

Food-delivery and ride-hailing workers in the Philippines, whose daily routine is dictated by an algorithm, struggle with uncertain pay, indebtedness, and the physical toll of chasing incentives.

The risks of gamification

Lara, the former barangay worker, earned more than P1,500 the day before she was interviewed by PCIJ. For the 22 deliveries she made that day, she earned P1,372, plus P200 in incentives for making a certain number of trips, and a P20 tip, for a total of P1,592.

The minimum daily wage in Metro Manila was P610 at the time. At first, it would seem that Lara earns a lot, but after all expenses – gas, food, maintenance, etc. – her take-home pay could be lower.

In cases where they do earn more than the minimum wage, the riders complain about the gruelling 12-15 hours they had to hurdle.

For customers, it might seem as simple as thinking about what we want for lunch, opening the app, searching for a restaurant, choosing from the menu, and in a few minutes, a rider will be assigned to get your food for you. But there’s a lot more going on behind the scenes than we realize.

At the heart of these apps are algorithms that suggest merchants to customers, assign riders and drivers to passengers, and compute fares and incentives. This innovation makes things efficient and convenient for everybody. But it’s also intended to make money.

Our research shows that platforms like GrabCar, GrabFood, MoveIT, Joyride, and Angkas implement various incentive schemes designed to encourage workers to complete more orders and bookings every day. These incentives are offered on top of their standard pay, functioning as “bonuses” awarded to workers who meet specific delivery or ride targets – much like a game.

And because companies can restructure or reduce fares or for example, more recently, deduct the senior citizen and person with disability discounts from the workers’ pay, many workers really go for the app’s incentive program.

The implications are potentially serious. It could pose health risks and occupational danger to the workers and by extension, customers.

These incentive programs may also discourage workers from “multi-homing” or the practice of working on different platforms, which further limits their flexibility and earning potential.

Passenger Service

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Angkar App

Wallet Wallet

Driver Earning

Basic Troubleshooting

Documents

How to book angkar

What is the Daily Incentive program

Daily Incentives

1. What is the Daily Incentive program?

The Daily Incentive program is designed to provide drivers with additional daily income. This program operates during specific time periods, including the AM peak, Mid peak, PM peak, and midnight peak.

2. Who can participate in the Daily Incentive program?

Any driver can participate in the Daily Incentive program by filling out the opt-in form for the target incentives. To be eligible, drivers must opt-in through the form.

3. How are the Incentive metrics communicated to drivers?

Drivers will receive the Incentive metrics through SMS. The SMS will provide the necessary details about the criteria and targets for earning incentives during each time period.

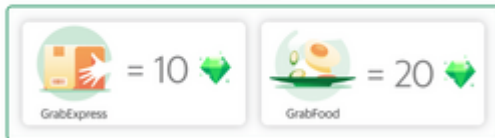
4. Are all drivers eligible for the Incentives automatically?

No, only drivers who fill out the opt-in form are eligible for the Daily Incentive program. Opting in is a necessary step to participate and potentially earn additional income.

Understanding GrabFood Gems

GEMS ang basehan ng iyong GrabFood incentives. Bawat araw, may makukuha na MISSIONS ang mga riders na magasabi kung ano ang target GEMS para sa araw na iyon.

Bawat completed trip ay may katumbas na GEMS, kahit anong oras mo ito magawa. Pwede mo paghaluin ang GrabFood at GrabExpress (i-check dito para sa GrabExpress GEMS details) trips para makakuha ng mas maraming trips at GEMS!



May specific amount equivalent ang GEMS na pwede mo i-cash out. Masaring magbago ang dami ng GEMS at corresponding incentive amount na iyong matatanggap kada linggo.



Ang Ka-Grab Rewards Plus ay isang rewards program na nagbibigay ng benefits para sa mga driver-partners. Iti ay inilunsad ng Grab bilang pagbibigay-pagpapalaya sa mga drivers na araw-araw nagpapalakas, para sa kanilang mga partner at representasyon sa mga mananagay.



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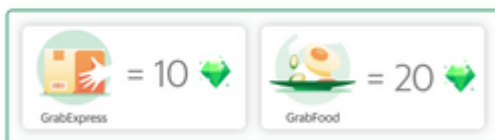
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Out-of-town drivers

Arnold (not his real name) spent two decades as an overseas Filipino worker. Now, he drives a GrabCar. The car is owned by his sibling to whom he remits a P1,000 “boundary” (a quota fee) daily.

Arnold is from Batangas, a province south of Manila. To save on costs and complete as many trips as he can, he sleeps in his car and goes home to the province only during Wednesdays, his coding day. There are others like him who by now already know most of Metro Manila by heart and the places where they can park their car and not get towed, take a bath, and rest.

Arnold says he is looking for a place to rent. The problem however is finding parking space too.

“Kasi mahirap naman tutulog ka nang sarap na sarap ‘yung tulog mo. Hindi na sasakyan naman eh, iiwan mo lang kung saan, ah, hindi safe. Para hindi ka rin makatulog ng, ano, hindi kagaya dito,

kahit na, dito na, tulog sa kalsada," he said.

Because he practically lives in his car, he gets to drive whenever he can. Admittedly, sleep is far from comfortable.

Arnold is able to reach his target income, including the P1,000 boundary a day. Not all drivers own their vehicle. Many drive other people's cars and remit a boundary at the end of the day. Another setup is called "boundary-hulog" where a driver pays both boundary and "hulog" for the car so they get to own it after a few years.

Silver, gold, platinum

With GrabCar, drivers can reach higher tiers – silver, gold, or platinum – based on the number of rides they complete. The higher the tier, the lower the "kaltas" or the commission Grab deducts from their earnings, with the standard rate being 21%.

A driver needs to make 450 rides a month to reach platinum, the highest tier; 400 for gold, and 250 for silver.

Food delivery has a similar incentive scheme. In rider parlance, they call it "butas." On their phone screens, there are round icons that can be unlocked by earning gems. One ride earns 10 gems. The more rides they take, the more gems, the higher the incentive.

In 2019, the riders interviewed said they could easily earn P800 in incentives a day. But Grab has changed this scheme several times. The same number of rides would earn them a lower amount now.

Riders also try to reach a higher tier to earn other rewards such as insurance, which at the time of the interview, was provided to those who have gold and platinum status. Similar to GrabCar, workers first enter as members, and can then move up to the silver, gold, and platinum tier. To reach platinum, a rider must make 480 rides in one month.

"Mangyayari hindi ka na matutulog kasi isang buwan, 480 rides," Rico said.

"Ako po sa personal, ilang beses ko po naranasan na tumatakbo po ako, minsan hindi, nakaidlip, nasa gutter na po ako," Carlos said.

"Saka minsan, minsan nga, pag nagbibiyahe ko, naka-pikit lang ako yun," Lara said.

"Pinipilit na bumiyaha para mahabol yung... target na incentives. Yung gems," Rico said.

Now, the riders said this number is hard to reach especially if they serve an area outside the most busy cities like Makati, for instance.

Grab: 'Safety first'; Joyride, Angkas: mum on issue

PCIJ reached out to Grab about the incentive program. We asked how the company ensures that the app's algorithm does not cause harm or encourage behavior that might pose risks to its workers.

Grab said it has always prioritized passenger safety.

"... we have implemented several measures to safeguard our drivers and passengers. Our platform includes features that monitor driver activity and prompt breaks if prolonged driving hours are detected. Safety features are part of our commitment to preventing fatigue-related incidents," Grab said in writing.

Grab also said that it “continuously assesses and evaluates the safety records of our drivers to ensure that only drivers with excellent driver safety records are allowed to service commuters.”

PCIJ also asked the company if it has tested these kinds of incentive programs and their potential impact on workers before implementing them. For instance, does the company track the number of hours workers spend on the road?

According to the response: “Our incentive programs are designed with the well-being of our driver-partners in mind. We regularly review and refine these programs to ensure they promote safe and sustainable driving practices. While specific operational details are confidential, we assure you that our policies are aligned with the industry’s best practices and regulatory requirements.”

Angkas had initially entertained our request for an interview but did not grant one eventually.

Joyride has not responded to a similar request as of press time.

Fairwork Philippines findings

A 2023 study published by Fairwork Philippines, a project led by the De La Salle University with the Ateneo de Manila University, University of the Philippines Diliman, and partners from the University of Oxford, reflects PCIJ’s findings.

The report evaluated Angkas, Borzo, GrabCar, Grab Food and Grab Express, FoodPanda, Joyride, Joyride Car, Lalamove, Maxim, and TokTok, and how these platforms meet the five principles of “fair work.”

The five principles of “fair work,” composed of fair pay, fair conditions, fair contracts, fair management and fair representation, were developed through an extensive literature review of published research on job quality and meetings at UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the International Labor Organization and in-country meetings with local stakeholders.

The table below shows what each principle corresponds to. A platform is awarded a first point if evidence suggests that it does meet the condition. The second point under each principle can only be awarded if the first point for that principle has been awarded. If there is no verifiable evidence available that meets a given threshold, the platform is not awarded that point. A platform can score a maximum of 10 points.

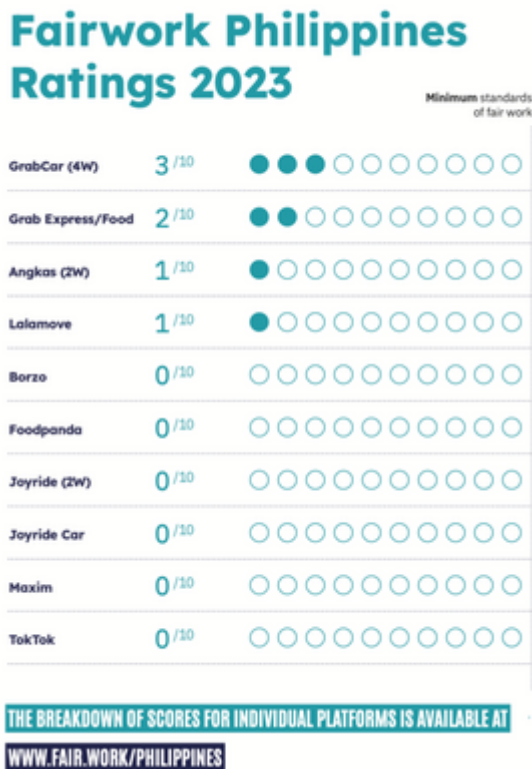
Only GrabCar, Grab Express, GrabFood, Lalamove, and Angkas managed to earn points but even these are too few for the workers in these companies to be considered as receiving fair work.

Table 3 Fairwork: Scoring System

Principle	First point	Second point	Total
Principle 1: Fair Pay	Ensures workers earn at least the local minimum wage after costs	Ensures workers earn at least a local living wage after costs	2
Principle 2: Fair Conditions	Mitigates task-specific risks	Provides a safety net	2
Principle 3: Fair Contracts	Provides clear and transparent terms and conditions	Ensures that no unfair contract terms are imposed	2
Principle 4: Fair Management	Provides due process for decisions affecting workers	Provides equity in the management process	2
Principle 5: Fair Representation	Assures freedom of association and the expression of collective worker voice	Supports democratic governance	2

Maximum possible Fairwork Score 

Fairwork Philippines' scoring system. Read the full report here. [Credit: Fairwork Philippines]



A screenshot of Fairwork Philippines 2023 report showing how platforms fare in meeting minimum standards of fair work. Check out the full report here. [Credit: Fairwork Philippines]

While these platforms offer workers the opportunity to secure their families' needs in the context of poor employment alternatives in the country, they face "multiple occupational health and safety risks" daily on the road, along with shortcomings in terms of basic safety protections from accidents, illnesses and death, the report found.

Similar to our research, Fairwork Philippines found that "(g)ig workers tend to stretch their working hours to secure more gigs to earn what they need to remain afloat amid fluctuant rates, opaque pay

structures, rigid ratings, and increasing competition.”

In addition, the report emphasized that workers are compelled to do this not only as a “free” choice, but also due to unfair or predatory pay and incentive structures. “The lack of measures to protect workers’ safety heightens their vulnerability, and the absence of safety nets implies that any sudden inability to work redounds to livelihood insecurity,” the report said.

Inherent ‘asymmetries’

According to a Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) research, the problems encountered by the riders and drivers are caused by “asymmetries” inherent in many apps or platforms.

These asymmetries give rise to “structural inequalities,” where companies - like Grab, Angkas, Joyride, and FoodPanda - benefit the most. They are followed by merchants - like our go-to restaurants and cafes - and then, us, the customers.

At the bottom would be workers, who also grapple with having the least information and understanding about how things work on the platform such as how fares are calculated, why they are getting pick-ups that are too far, how to contest low ratings, resolve disputes, address account suspension and termination.

Structural inequalities in platform work, by role (Heeks & PIDS)

Asymmetry	Platform	Client	Worker
Value	Carries minimal marginal costs since the majority of the costs are shifted to clients and workers.	Bears the costs in unpaid work and technical infrastructures.	Shoulders the cost in acquiring knowledge, training, and skills acquisition, providing own technical infrastructures, social protection, insurance, and pension.
Risk	Is at risk of worker’s poor quality of work or incomplete work.	Invests in bidding and doing tasks.	
Resource	Needs knowledge and skills to gain employment. In developing countries, those in the elite group usually have these resources, allowing them to gain opportunities from the digital economy Is subjected to: Within-country inequalities (most prominent in developing countries) due to the lack of knowledge, skills, and technology of people in rural areas relative to urban residents, for example. Between-country inequalities, where workers in the Global North receive higher pay than those in the Global South.		

Information	Has complete access to information, controls the terms of service, context of work, and organization design, remains invisible to workers or clients, and is barely held accountable.	To some extent, clients have more access to information, relative to workers	Lacks information of and communication with the client and the purpose and process to accomplish the work. Lacks information about the client and the purpose and process of the work to be done. Lack of communication with clients and platforms to gain feedback and improve performance. Lacks understanding about work processes, including reasons for rejection of work, account suspension, or termination, and lacks clarity for career development.
Power	Controls how the work is organized, including terms of service, work context, and management and technology system.	Has the advantage to rate workers without being rated themselves. Can dictate the nature, payment, and conditions of work, and accept or reject work.	Unstable employment and issues on employment status expose them to lack of access to social protections and labor rights. Lack of dispute mechanisms to resolve concerns raised by workers.

Source: *Heels (2017)*; PIDS

For instance, Grab driver Rolly, not his real name, got temporarily blocked from the app because he supposedly received bad ratings from a customer. A passenger complained that he still collected money from him even when he was paying through GrabPay.

“So, ang ginawa ko, nagreklamo ako kay Grab. ‘Sir, wala akong, ginanon ko sa ano, Sir, Ma’am, sabi ko sa Grab, wala po akong siningil sa kanya.’ Naka-cash... alam ko po ang obligasyon ko bilang driver. Hindi po ako, ano, maging patas naman po tayo. Ba’t ganun, sila lang pwede magreklamo? Paano kami?” said Rolly.

Rolly said a Grab representative responded to him in English, promising to look into the matter. The staffer said they would relay the information to the customer and wait for his feedback.

“Hihintayin natin yung feedback niya? Eh, kung hindi mag-feedback yan, eh di wala din. O, kung mag-feedback man yan, anong sasabihin niya? Hindi, nagbayad kami. Siningil pa rin kami. Naka-cashless kami. O, sino bang papaboran nila? Hindi naman kaming driver, sila pa rin. Kaya, totoo yun, Ma’am. Totoo nangyari sa akin yung dalawang beses,” Rolly said.

“Ganun kasi si Grab. Naka, mayroon talaga kaagad silang hatol. Kahit na, basta yung pasahero ang nagreklamo, may hatol kaagad sila sa driver. Wala silang, ano, wala silang, yun nga, wala silang equality. Kasi, yun naman po talaga, at sa totoo lang, ang platform nila, Ma’am, gumagana as ma-

boost. Para maboost po yung dami ng pasahero,” he added.

Fairwork: Grab fares better than others but still not enough

GrabCar, the two-wheel car service, actually has a better record of managing these kinds of disputes, according to the 2023 report of Fairwork Philippines. In the research, GrabCar and Grab Express each scored a point for having communication channels that were accessible to workers such as support chat and Safety Center within the app.

On their website, there’s a step-by-step guide on how to resolve a variety of concerns with instructions written in Filipino. Should the worker still need help, a form is available for further assistance.

The researchers learned from workers that the rest of the platforms are unresponsive to such concerns. If platforms do respond, they reply slowly and inconsistently, rendering any support unreliable for them.

The report also found that support communication is typically fast for concerns related to customer issues while response takes days or is hard to get for workers’ issues like unfair deactivations, penalties, and others.

The app making executive decisions like this is a common pain point among drivers.

Another frequent concern is the app’s suggested route. This is used to compute and show fares upfront. But it doesn’t always reflect the actual route taken by the driver.

For example, when the app suggests a route that goes through roads with tolls, customers can direct drivers to pass elsewhere to save on toll fees. This means the calculated fare, which will be paid by the customer, will not match the actual distance and duration of the ride.

One driver suggested that perhaps the app could give customers route options with or without toll.

Consumers also need to be better informed about how the app works.

Platforms bear risks, too

To be sure, the PIDS study also highlighted that platforms bear a lot of risks too and that not all startups are successful.

“Upfront investments are made in building the platform and losses are incurred in scaling up before network effects are achieved,” the researchers wrote.

For instance, Grab’s local subsidiary, MyTaxi PH, has incurred recurring losses in the past, resulting in a capital deficiency of P8.2 billion in 2021 and P7.7 billion in 2020.

Its 2021 financial statement obtained from the Securities and Exchange Commission noted that “these conditions, among others, indicate a material uncertainty which may cast significant doubt about the Company’s ability to continue as a going concern and therefore, that it may be unable to realize its assets and discharge its liabilities in the normal course of business.”

These losses, according to the SEC record, were incurred while the company was in the stage of aggressively growing its business through “market penetration and building brand loyalty from drivers and passengers.”

“Grab Holdings Inc., the mother company, provides financial and operational support to MyTaxi PH and is committed to continue providing such support to enable the company to continue as a going concern,” the auditors noted.

[Next: Amid legal gaps, riders and drivers push for rights in courts, on streets](#)

Karol Ilagan

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P.S.

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<https://pcij.org/2024/12/13/gig-economy-apps-gamified-workers-lose/>

- With additional research by Jabes Florian Lazaro and Rosemarie Corpin, PCIJ, December 2024

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