

Beyond the Dyad: The Multi-Stakeholder Psychological Contract Framework for Digital Labour Platforms

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Abstract

Digital labor platforms have significantly transformed employment relationships by replacing traditional managerial oversight with algorithmically mediated coordination systems. Although psychological contract theory has long provided a powerful framework for understanding perceived obligations between employees and organizations, its foundational assumption of a dyadic employment relationship limits its applicability in platform work environments characterized by multiple interacting stakeholders. This conceptual paper reconceptualizes psychological contracts in digital labor platforms through the Multi-Stakeholder Psychological Contract (MSPC) framework. Based on HRM theory, platform work research, and new research on algorithmic management, the paper proposes that psychological contracts are made and evaluated through a network of relationships between platform companies, consumers, algorithmic systems, regulatory bodies, and worker communities. Building on this perspective, the paper introduces the psychological contract complexity continuum and advances four formal propositions that explain how workers cognitively integrate multi-actor signals, how algorithmic opacity shapes breach perceptions, how institutional regulatory shifts reframe contractual referents, and how collective embeddedness moderates contract evaluation. Implications for HRM theory, organizational practice, and future research are discussed.

Keywords

Psychological Contract, Digital Labor Platforms, Algorithmic Management, Multi-Stakeholder Governance

1. Introduction

The nature of employment relationships has undergone profound transformation

in recent decades. Technological advancements, digital infrastructures, and new organizational forms have transformed the coordination and governance of work. Among these developments, digital labor platforms represent one of the most significant changes in contemporary labor markets. Platforms such as ride-hailing, delivery, and online freelancing systems organize work through technological infrastructures rather than traditional managerial hierarchies. Human resource management (HRM) research has long examined employment relationships through frameworks that emphasize reciprocal expectations between employees and organizations. One of the most influential of these frameworks is psychological contract theory, which conceptualizes employment relationships as subjective beliefs regarding mutual obligations between workers and their employers (Rousseau, 1995). Psychological contracts shape employee attitudes and behaviors, including trust, commitment, and perceptions of fairness. However, the structural assumptions underlying psychological contract theory reflect traditional employment contexts characterized by stable organizational boundaries and identifiable managerial actors. Digital platform environments increasingly challenge these assumptions. Platform workers interact with multiple actors simultaneously, including platform firms, customers, algorithmic systems, regulatory institutions, and worker communities. Each of these actors influences expectations regarding compensation, autonomy, fairness, and treatment at work. Recent studies elucidate the way digitally mediated environments allocate governance among technological systems and external stakeholders, consequently transforming employment relationships and workers' perceptions of reciprocity and obligation (Kellogg et al., 2020; Vallas & Schor, 2020; Duggan et al., 2021).

Despite the growing importance of platform work, existing psychological contract research has only partially addressed these developments. Much of the literature continues to assume a dyadic employment relationship between employee and organization, thereby limiting the theoretical capacity to explain employment relationships characterized by multi-stakeholder governance structures. Critically, existing theory provides no mechanism to explain how workers cognitively integrate potentially conflicting signals from multiple distinct principals or which principal dominates perception under different contextual conditions. To address these gaps, this paper develops the Multi-Stakeholder Psychological Contract (MSPC) framework and advances four formal propositions that specify the mechanisms underlying MSPC formation, breach, and moderation.

This paper makes four primary contributions. First, it extends psychological contract theory by conceptualizing employment relationships as multi-stakeholder governance systems. Second, it theorizes the principal salience mechanism through which workers attribute and weight obligations across multiple principals. Third, it explains how algorithmic opacity generates breach perceptions via informational justice violation. Fourth, it introduces the psychological contract complexity continuum with formal propositions specifying how contextual factors govern movement along this continuum.

2. Psychological Contracts in Contemporary HRM Research

Psychological contract theory remains one of the most influential frameworks for understanding the social and relational foundations of employment relationships. Since the foundational work of Denise Rousseau, psychological contracts have been conceptualized as individuals' beliefs regarding the reciprocal obligations that exist between themselves and their employer (Rousseau, 1995). Over the past three decades, a substantial body of research has examined the formation, maintenance, and consequences of psychological contracts across diverse organizational settings (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Guest, 2004; Zhao et al., 2007). When workers perceive that organizational obligations are fulfilled, positive relational outcomes emerge, including trust, organizational commitment, and cooperative behavior (Conway & Briner, 2009; Tomprou et al., 2023). Conversely, perceived violations of psychological contracts trigger negative reactions such as dissatisfaction, withdrawal behaviors, reduced engagement, and turnover intentions (Zhao et al., 2007). Early research distinguished between transactional contracts and relational contracts (Rousseau, 1995).

Despite these advances, a central assumption underlying most psychological contract research is the presence of a clearly identifiable employing organization as the primary contracting party. This assumption becomes increasingly problematic in contemporary labor markets characterized by flexible work arrangements, technological mediation, and decentralized governance structures (Ashford, Caza, & Reid, 2018; De Stefano, 2016; Cappelli & Keller, 2013). Scholars have increasingly called for the extension of psychological contract theory to accommodate these emerging arrangements (Guest, 2009; Juego et al., 2024; Rahman & Thelen, 2019). An additional theoretical gap warrants attention. Traditionally, psychological contract theory has assumed that intentional agents, capable of making and breaking promises, attribute contractual obligations (Rousseau, 1995). Algorithmic management systems complicate this assumption because they lack intentionality in the conventional sense. Yet research consistently demonstrates that workers form obligation beliefs in response to algorithmic outputs (Möhlmann & Zalmanson, 2017). We address this tension by drawing on research into anthropomorphism and perceived agency in automated systems (Nass & Moon, 2000; Sundar, 2020), arguing that workers attribute quasi-intentional agency to algorithmic systems when these systems consistently govern material outcomes such as earnings, task visibility, and account standing. This attribution process renders algorithmic systems functionally equivalent to contracting agents in the worker's psychological contract schema.

3. Platform Work and Algorithmic Management

Digital labor platforms have emerged as one of the most significant transformations in contemporary labor markets, reshaping how work is organized, coordinated, and governed. Unlike traditional organizations that rely on hierarchical managerial structures, digital platforms operate through technological infrastructures

that mediate interactions among workers, clients, and organizations (Kenney & Zysman, 2020; Srnicek, 2017; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016).

A defining feature of platform organizations is the reliance on algorithmic management—the use of computational algorithms and data-driven decision systems to allocate tasks, evaluate performance, and control labor processes (Lee et al., 2015; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Kellogg, Valentine, & Christin, 2020). Platform work environments replace many interpersonal supervisory interactions with automated decision processes that may appear opaque or difficult to interpret. Research on algorithmic management indicates that this opacity significantly influences worker perceptions of fairness, transparency, and organizational legitimacy (Möhlmann & Zalmanson, 2017; Kellogg et al., 2020).

In addition to algorithmic governance, platform work environments incorporate customer-based evaluation systems that further influence worker outcomes. Rating systems in which customers evaluate workers after each service interaction play a critical role in determining worker reputation and continued access to work opportunities (Gandini, 2016). Platform workers are often classified as independent contractors rather than employees, which means they operate outside many institutional protections associated with standard employment relationships (De Stefano, 2024; Woodcock & Graham, 2025). Taken together, these developments suggest that platform work environments are characterized by distributed governance structures in which multiple actors simultaneously shape employment experiences. Workers, therefore, interpret their employment experiences through signals generated by several actors rather than a single organizational authority (Ashford, Caza, & Reid, 2018).

4. Reframing Psychological Contracts: The Multi-Stakeholder Perspective

Digital labor platforms distribute authority across technological infrastructures, customer evaluation systems, and institutional regulations, creating employment environments characterized by multiple interacting actors rather than a single employing organization (Gandini, 2016; Guest, 2009). To address these developments, we propose the Multi-Stakeholder Psychological Contract (MSPC) framework, which treats psychological contracts as constellations of interconnected relational expectations involving multiple stakeholders who collectively shape employment experiences. **Figure 1** presents the complete MSPC framework.

Within the MSPC framework, a stakeholder qualifies as a psychological-contract principal when the worker attributes to that stakeholder a capacity to generate, communicate, or stand behind obligations that materially govern the work relationship. A stakeholder is therefore more than an influence when its signals are interpreted as promises, commitments, entitlements, or reciprocal duties directed toward the worker. Customer ratings become contractual signals when repeated evaluations are understood to carry an obligation of fair and respectful assessment and when those evaluations affect access to work or reputation. Regulatory rules

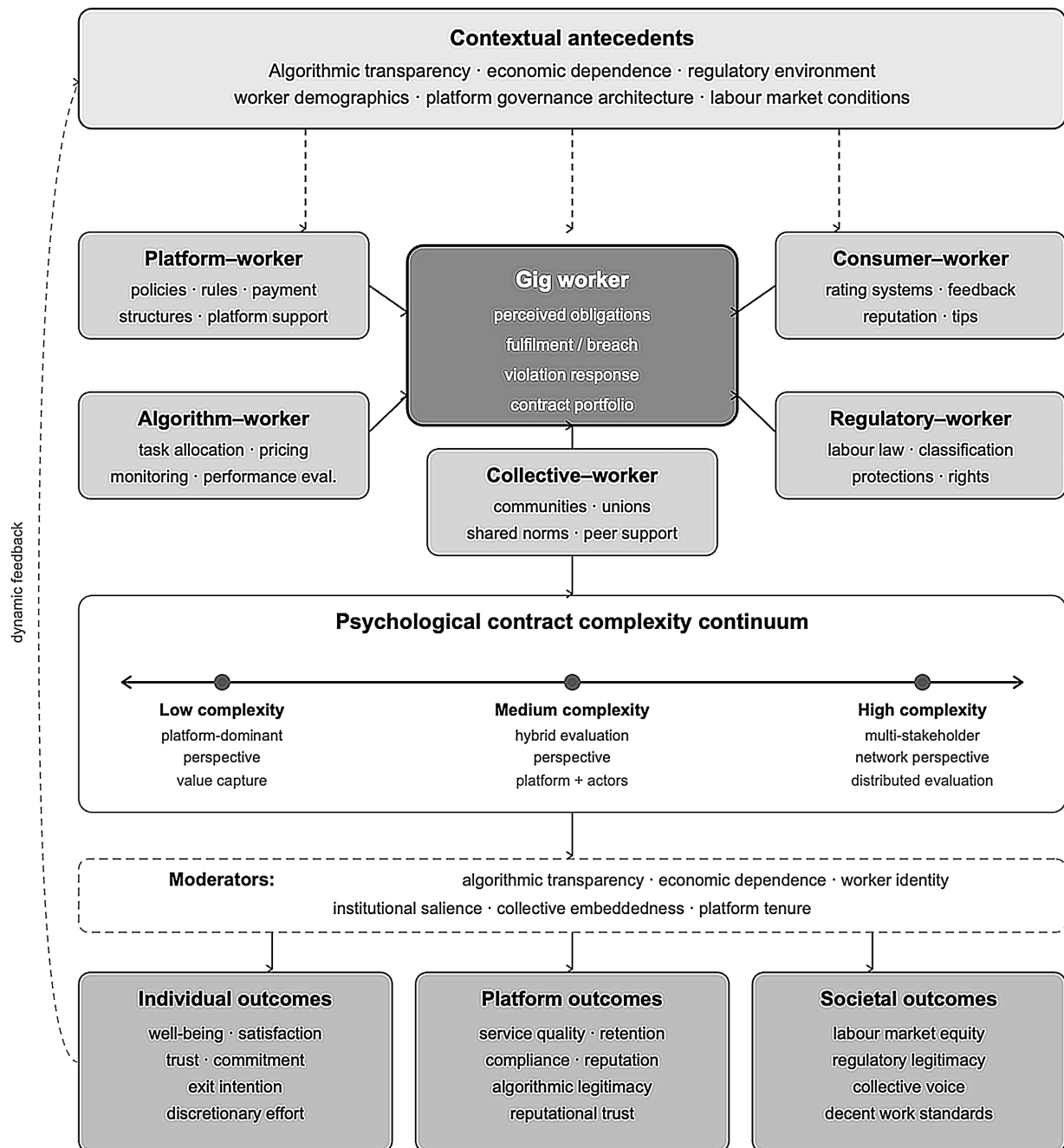


Figure 1. The multi-stakeholder psychological contract (MSPC) framework.

become contractual signals when legal protections or classifications are interpreted as entitlements that institutions are expected to uphold. Algorithmic outputs become contractual signals when workers attribute quasi-intentional agency to systems that repeatedly determine consequential outcomes and therefore expect transparent and consistent allocation, evaluation, or compensation decisions.

The MSPC framework also differs from existing multi-foci psychological contract, justice, and commitment research. Multi-foci approaches can identify separate targets of attachment, fairness judgments, or exchange, but they do not ex-

plain how obligation signals originating from different governance sources are cognitively integrated into one employment relationship when those sources jointly determine the same work outcomes. The distinctive theoretical feature of MSPC is therefore the contract portfolio: workers simultaneously hold principal-specific obligation beliefs and weight, reconcile, or experience conflict among those beliefs within a shared psychological contract schema. Treating the platform, customer, and algorithm only as separate exchange foci cannot explain how their signals interact to change which principal is salient, how breach is attributed when governance is distributed, or how conflicting obligations increase the complexity of the overall contract.

4.1. The Principal Salience Mechanism

A critical theoretical question concerns how workers cognitively integrate signals from multiple principals who may issue conflicting obligations. The MSPC framework addresses this through the construct of principal salience, the degree to which a given stakeholder is perceived as the dominant source of obligations at a particular moment. Drawing on sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) and research on multi-principal attribution in employment contexts (Lavelle et al., 2007), we propose that workers apply a hierarchical attribution schema governed by three factors: material dependency (the extent to which a principal controls access to earnings or continued work), governance visibility (the degree to which a principal's decisions are transparent and legible), and relational frequency (the regularity with which a worker interacts with a principal). When these three factors converge on a single principal, that actor dominates the worker's contract schema. When they diverge across principals, as is common in high-complexity platform environments, workers experience contract fragmentation, increasing the salience of multiple principals simultaneously.

4.2. Stakeholder Relationships in Platform Work

Five primary stakeholder relationships emerge within platform work environments that shape the formation and evaluation of psychological contracts. Table 1 summarises these relationships, their primary governance mechanisms, worker expectations, and illustrative examples.

5. The Psychological Contract Complexity Continuum

Building on the MSPC framework, we introduce the Psychological Contract Complexity Continuum to explain how workers in digital platform environments interpret and evaluate their employment relationships. Traditional psychological contract theory conceptualizes employment relationships primarily as bilateral exchanges between employees and employers (Rousseau, 1995). Platform-mediated work structures alter this assumption by distributing control, governance, and evaluation across multiple actors (Wood et al., 2019; Duggan et al., 2020).

Table 1. Stakeholder relationships within the multi-stakeholder psychological contract framework.

Stakeholder Relationship	Primary Governance Mechanism	Worker Expectations	Example in Platform Work
Platform-Worker	Organizational policies and rules	Reliable compensation, platform support, fair policies	Payment structures, driver policies
Consumer-Worker	Customer rating and feedback systems	Respectful treatment, fair evaluations	Passenger ratings of drivers
Algorithm-Worker	Algorithmic management systems	Transparent task allocation and evaluation	Dynamic pricing algorithms
Regulatory-Worker	Labour regulations and legal frameworks	Worker protections and legal rights	Worker classification laws
Collective-Worker	Worker communities and associations	Collective representation and support	Driver forums or unions

Note. The table identifies the five primary stakeholder relationships through which platform workers form psychological contracts. Each relationship involves a distinct governance mechanism, worker expectation set, and illustrative platform example. These five relationships constitute the stakeholder portfolio central to the MSPC framework.

The contract portfolio and the psychological contract complexity continuum describe different but related features of the MSPC framework. The contract portfolio is the set of principal-specific relational expectations that a worker holds at a given time, whereas complexity describes how that portfolio is cognitively organized and evaluated. Complexity is not determined by the number of stakeholders alone. It increases as a greater number of principals become salient, as salience is more evenly distributed rather than concentrated in one dominant principal, and as the obligation signals generated by those principals become more divergent or conflicting. Accordingly, a worker may have a portfolio containing several stakeholder relationships but still experience relatively low complexity when one principal clearly dominates and the remaining signals are weak or consistent with it.

At the lower-complexity end of the continuum, workers primarily evaluate fairness, obligations, and reciprocity through the platform organization itself (Kellogg et al., 2020). At the opposite end, workers interpret their employment relationships through a broader constellation of actors, customers, regulatory institutions, worker communities, and algorithmic infrastructures, simultaneously (Ashford et al., 2018). Between these two poles lies a moderate-complexity midpoint, where workers balance expectations across several actors while still recognizing the platform as a central coordinating entity (Parker & Grote, 2024). Several contextual factors govern movement along the continuum. Algorithmic transparency determines the degree to which workers understand how decisions about task al-

location and performance evaluation are made. Economic dependence on platform income anchors workers toward the low-complexity end, while diversified income sources push workers toward higher complexity. Institutional environments further shape complexity through regulatory interventions that redefine contractual referents, and the presence of worker collectives introduces shared norms that elevate the salience of the collective stakeholder relationship (Vallas & Schor, 2020). **Table 2** summarizes the three complexity levels.

Table 2. Psychological contract complexity continuum in platform work.

Complexity Level	Dominant Actor(s)	Worker Psychological Contract Perspective
Low Complexity	Platform organisation	Workers primarily evaluate fairness and obligations through platform policies, algorithmic governance, and rating systems. The platform is the dominant contractual referent.
Medium Complexity	Platform + other actors	Workers balance expectations across the platform and secondary actors such as customers or regulators. Contracts remain partially anchored to platform governance.
High Complexity	Multiple stakeholders	Workers evaluate employment experiences through a constellation of actors-customers, regulators, algorithmic systems, and worker communities-simultaneously shaping perceived obligations.

Note. The table illustrates movement along the complexity continuum from platform-dominant (low complexity) to multi-stakeholder network (high complexity) psychological contract evaluation. Column three describes the corresponding worker perspective at each level.

6. Formal Propositions

The MSPC framework generates four formal propositions that specify the mechanisms underlying multi-stakeholder psychological contract formation, breach, moderation, and evolution. This manuscript is a conceptual theory-development paper; it does not report a sample, empirical data source, analytic procedure, or empirical results. The propositions are theoretically derived and empirically testable, consistent with the standards of conceptual contribution in HRM research (Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007; Hambrick, 2007).

6.1. Principal Salience and Contract Portfolio Formation

A foundational question for the MSPC framework concerns how workers form and organize psychological contracts when multiple principals simultaneously generate obligation signals. Standard PC theory assumes a single employer as the contracting party; the MSPC framework proposes that workers maintain a contract portfolio, a structured set of relational expectations differentiated by principal, and that one principal typically achieves dominance based on the convergence of material dependency, governance visibility, and relational frequency.

Proposition 1: Platform workers maintain a psychological contract portfolio comprising distinct relational expectations toward each stakeholder principal.

The salience of a given principal within the portfolio is positively and additively associated with that principal's material dependency, governance visibility, and relational frequency. Each factor provides an independent cue of contractual relevance: material dependency signals control over valued outcomes, governance visibility makes the source of decisions cognitively identifiable, and relational frequency repeatedly activates the principal in workers' sensemaking. Convergence of these three factors on a single principal produces platform-dominant contract evaluations (low complexity), while their distribution across different principals produces multi-stakeholder contract evaluations (high complexity). Thus, a platform may remain highly salient because it controls earnings even when customers become equally or more salient through frequent and consequential evaluations.

Rationale: This proposition operationalizes the principal salience mechanism and grounds the complexity continuum in a testable cognitive attribution process. Material dependency, governance visibility, and relational frequency are treated as additive cues because each independently increases the likelihood that a stakeholder is encoded as a source of obligations; however, they may point to different principals rather than reinforcing the same one. For example, the platform may control access to earnings while customers provide the most frequent and consequential performance evaluations, producing simultaneous salience rather than a single dominant principal. It draws on multi-foci commitment theory (Lavelle et al., 2007), sensemaking research (Weick, 1995), and algorithmic management scholarship (Kellogg et al., 2020).

6.2. Algorithmic Opacity and Psychological Contract Breach

Algorithmic management systems present a theoretically distinctive challenge for psychological contract research. Unlike human managers, algorithms do not communicate intent, provide justifications for decisions, or engage in interpersonal exchange. Building on organizational justice theory and the interactional justice literature (Bies, 1986; Colquitt, 2001), we distinguish algorithmic opacity from psychological contract breach. Opacity is an informational condition, whereas breach occurs when workers infer that a perceived obligation to provide understandable, sufficiently transparent, and procedurally meaningful explanations for consequential algorithmic decisions has not been fulfilled. The relevant obligation concerns information about how decisions affecting task allocation, performance evaluation, compensation, or account standing are reached or can be interpreted, rather than opacity itself constituting breach.

Proposition 2: In platform work contexts, algorithmic opacity, defined as the extent to which workers are unable to understand or predict algorithmic decision rules governing task allocation, performance evaluation, and compensation, is positively associated with psychological contract breach perceptions when workers perceive that the algorithmic system or platform has failed to fulfil an informational obligation to provide understandable and sufficiently transparent explanations for consequential decisions. Perceived informational justice violation me-

diates this relationship, and workers' attribution of quasi-intentional agency to algorithmic systems strengthens it.

Rationale: This proposition draws on algorithmic management research (Kellogg et al., 2020), organizational justice theory (Colquitt, 2001), and the anthropomorphism literature (Nass & Moon, 2000; Sundar, 2020) to specify a mechanism through which algorithmic governance generates breach perceptions without requiring intentionality.

6.3. Institutional Regulatory Change and Contract Renegotiation

A distinctive feature of platform employment relationships is their embedding within contested and rapidly evolving institutional environments. Drawing on institutional theory (Scott, 2001) and research on psychological contract renegotiation following organizational change (Rousseau, 1995; Tomprou et al., 2023), we propose that regulatory shifts alter the referent frame through which workers evaluate their contractual position, generating either upward renegotiation (expanded expectations) or downward revision (reduced expectations) of the regulatory stakeholder relationship.

Proposition 3: Regulatory interventions that clarify or expand platform worker protections, such as reclassification from independent contractor to employee status, minimum earnings guarantees, or access to collective bargaining, are positively associated with an upward shift in workers' regulatory-worker psychological contract expectations and a concurrent increase in perceived contract breach when platform organizations fail to adjust their governance practices in alignment with new legal standards. Conversely, regulatory retrenchment is associated with downward revision of regulatory expectations and reduced breach sensitivity toward institutional actors.

Rationale: This proposition extends psychological contract theory to incorporate institutional actors as active contractual principals whose signals are responsive to legislative change. It draws on institutional theory (Scott, 2001), psychological contract renegotiation research (Tomprou et al., 2023), and comparative platform governance scholarship (Rahman & Thelen, 2019).

6.4. Collective Embeddedness as a Moderator of Contract Evaluation

Research on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and collective worker organization in platform economies (Vallas & Schor, 2020) suggests that embeddedness in worker communities provides a buffering resource that reduces the psychological costs of contract fragmentation. Collective embeddedness offers workers an interpretive framework for making sense of conflicting signals from multiple principals, thereby reducing ambiguity and the breach perceptions that accompany it.

Proposition 4: Collective embeddedness, defined as the degree to which platform workers are embedded in worker communities characterized by shared iden-

tity, collective norms, and mutual support, moderates the relationship between psychological contract complexity (high versus low) and individual well-being outcomes (job satisfaction, burnout, and exit intention), such that the negative effects of high complexity on well-being are attenuated for workers with higher collective embeddedness. Furthermore, collective embeddedness is positively associated with the salience of the collective-worker stakeholder relationship within the worker's contract portfolio.

Rationale: This proposition specifies a boundary condition for the complexity-well-being relationship and grounds the collective stakeholder relationship in a testable moderating mechanism. It draws on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), resource conservation theory (Hobfoll, 1989), and platform labor organization research (Vallas & Schor, 2020).

7. Implications for HRM Theory

The MSPC framework offers several theoretical implications for contemporary HRM research. Platform-mediated work environments contest the bilateral assumption by allocating control among technological systems, customers, regulatory institutions, and worker communities (Parker & Grote, 2024; Gandini, 2016). The four propositions advanced in Section 6 translate this conceptual extension into testable predictions that future empirical research can examine using quantitative, experimental, and qualitative designs.

First, the framework extends psychological contract theory beyond the traditional dyadic employee-employer relationship by conceptualizing employment relationships as multi-stakeholder governance systems. This broadens the theoretical scope of psychological contract research by recognizing that contemporary employment relationships increasingly operate within networked governance structures (Ashford et al., 2018; Vallas & Schor, 2020).

Second, the MSPC framework highlights the growing importance of algorithmic management as a central mechanism shaping employment relationships in digitally mediated labor markets. Proposition 2 specifically argues that algorithmic opacity functions as a structural breach trigger through the mechanism of informational justice violation, a prediction that can be examined using experimental vignette designs that manipulate algorithmic transparency levels and measure breach perceptions and trust outcomes.

Third, the framework emphasizes the role of institutional environments in shaping employment expectations and perceptions of fairness. Proposition 3 treats regulatory actors as active contractual principals whose interventions generate predictable shifts in worker expectations and breach sensitivity, inviting comparative cross-national research across jurisdictions with varying platform labor regulatory regimes.

8. Directions for Future Research

The MSPC framework suggests promising research directions. First, researchers

could examine the principal salience mechanism in Proposition 1 more closely. Qualitative and experience-sampling methods could track fluctuations in principal salience. These approaches also show how material dependency, governance transparency, and interaction frequency influence which principal shapes contract decisions. Second, Proposition 2 calls for experiments and surveys investigating how algorithmic ambiguity affects perceptions of psychological contract breaches. For instance, using scenarios with varying levels of algorithmic transparency, researchers can evaluate how explicit explanations for task assignments or deactivations shape workers' breach perceptions, trust in the platform, and intended actions. Third, comparative analyses of regulatory systems enable rigorous tests of Proposition 3. Diverse gig work regulations support quasi-experimental designs. By tracking workers' expectations before and after regulatory changes, researchers can map regulatory contract renegotiation. Fourth, Proposition 4 highlights collective embeddedness as an outcome factor. Assessing the role of worker communities, unions, or informal online groups can reveal how such membership mitigates negative contract effects on well-being and reshapes contract portfolios.

Longitudinal studies can show how psychological contracts in platform work evolve over time. They can demonstrate how repeated breaches and renegotiations with different principals affect worker well-being and platform sustainability over time.

9. Conclusion

Digital labor platforms have changed the way work is organized. In this paper, we present the Multi-Stakeholder Psychological Contract (MSPC) framework and outline four main ideas. This framework explains employment relationships in platform work, where digital apps link workers to jobs. It shows how workers understand their obligations and expectations through relationships with groups like platforms, customers, and contractors. The framework also points out four important factors: principal salience (how much workers notice or pay attention to each group they interact with, like the platform or customers), algorithmic opacity (how unclear or difficult it is to understand the rules and decisions made by computer algorithms that guide platform work), regulatory changes (changes in laws or rules that affect how platform work is done), and collective embeddedness (how connected or involved workers feel with groups or communities of workers). These factors help explain how different parties shape the creation, breach, and adjustment of psychological contracts, meaning the unwritten expectations between workers and stakeholders.

These mechanisms show that technology now has a major role in managing today's labor markets. Algorithms-computer programs that follow set instructions to assign tasks, monitor activity, or evaluate performance-now do many jobs that supervisors used to handle. By learning how people assign responsibility to these systems, we can better understand how employment works in environments organized around platforms.

The MSPC framework provides a foundation for developing more robust Human Resource Management (HRM) theories that explain work in digital and decentralized settings. (HRM is the practice of managing people and workplace policies in organizations.) As platform economies expand, researchers and policy-makers need to understand how workers manage complex networks of relationships and obligations with different groups. This knowledge can help create fair and effective work systems.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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