

Vulnerable Flexibility: An Analysis of the Representation of Gig Workers' Sustainability in Indonesian Digital Media

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Abstract

The digital transformation of Indonesia's economy has generated a new labor ecosystem known as the *gig economy*, where online drivers, logistics couriers, and digital freelancers perform flexible yet precarious work through algorithmic platforms. While this model offers autonomy and efficiency, it also constructs new forms of dependency, income instability, and the absence of social protection. Beyond the economic dimension, the gig economy also represents a profound cultural shift in how work, identity, and value are defined in the digital era. This study examines how the sustainability of gig workers' livelihoods is represented within Indonesia's digital media landscape, analyzing tensions between dominant narratives of digital competitiveness and counter-narratives of injustice, exhaustion, and collective resistance. Using a qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, the research employs Fairclough's three-dimensional framework textual, discursive, and socio-political to analyze online news, social media posts, and protest videos from 2023 to 2025. The findings reveal that public narratives often glorify flexibility as a sign of progress while obscuring the cultural and structural vulnerabilities faced by gig workers. Conversely, counter-narratives generated by workers express cultural solidarity and digital resistance against algorithmic exploitation. By situating the gig economy within Indonesia's socio-cultural context, this study argues that sustainability in digital labor must also involve cultural recognition and decolonial perspectives on work, identity, and justice. Hence, policy reforms must integrate workers' lived experiences, media narratives, and cultural meanings to ensure fair and sustainable digital transformation.

Keywords: Gig economy, algorithmic management, social protection, cultural representation, decolonial work, Indonesia.

1. Introduction

The transformation of the digital economy in Indonesia has triggered a major shift in the way humans work, interact, and interpret work itself. The emergence of digital platforms such as Gojek, Grab, Shopee Express, and various other freelance applications has given birth to a new form of work known as the gig economy (Meilinda et al., 2023). This form of work is often praised for its flexibility in allowing workers to determine the time, location, and rhythm of work according to personal preferences. However, Standing (2023) argues that behind the image of flexibility, there are fragile

realities: income uncertainty, the absence of social protection, and dependence on algorithmic systems that regulate incentives, rankings, and job visibility. This phenomenon is then referred to as the paradox of vulnerable flexibility.

In the Indonesian context, the platform-based work model has developed rapidly and has become the cornerstone of the urban economy. According to the Platform&AN report (2022), more than ten million workers depend on a digital work system that is not regulated by formal employment mechanisms. The government, through various national digital transformation policies, views this sector as an important part of innovation and job expansion (Ministry of Agriculture, 2023). However, the position of gig workers is still legally ambiguous: they are called "partners," not employees, so they are not entitled to social security, leave, or employment law protections (Stevania & Hoesin, 2024). This ambiguity creates a structural gap that allows for the occurrence of new forms of technology-mediated labor exploitation (Domínguez et al., 2023).

Furthermore, digital work is not only an economic phenomenon, but also a cultural process that shapes the way society interprets values, time, and identity (Levin & Mamlok, 2021). On social media, narratives about "freedom of work" and "digital entrepreneurship" compete with worker testimonials highlighting burnout, algorithmic pressure, and life's uncertainty. This representation builds an arena of discourse where the meaning of work, dignity, and social justice are fought for (Daradkeh, 2023). In other words, the gig economy in Indonesia is a cultural space that brings together the rhetoric of modernization with the reality of data colonialism where daily life becomes a source of economic value extraction without adequate social recognition (Yasih, 2023).

From a cultural and decolonial perspective, the issue of flexibility cannot be separated from the power relations that govern who is entitled to job security and who is marginalized by the global technological system (Deridder et al., 2022). Meanwhile, Lim (2020) highlights the emergence of digital solidarity in Indonesia as a form of cultural resistance to this inequality (Asmiatin, 2024). In the midst of this contradiction, gig workers in Indonesia are not only fighting for the economy, but also for cultural recognition and the sustainability of a dignified life (Yasih, 2023).

This research departs from the assumption that sustainability in digital work is not only an economic issue, but also a matter of social representation and institutional recognition. The narrative built by digital media plays an important role in determining how the public understands digital work, whether as a symbol of progress, or as a new form of social inequality (Swastiningsih et al., 2024). Therefore, this study aims to analyze the representation of the sustainability of gig workers' lives in Indonesian digital media, focusing on the tension between dominant narratives that praise flexibility and counter-narratives that highlight vulnerabilities as well as social justice demands.

The approach used is Critical Discourse Analysis developed by Norman Pešić (2022). This approach allows researchers to explore the relationship between texts (news, social media posts, protest videos), discursive practices (media production and consumption), and broader social contexts (employment policy, digitalization discourse, and economic structure). Data sources were taken from national news portals, social media accounts of the worker community, and digital archives of protests during the 2023–2025 period (Rakhmani et al., 2023).

The novelty of this research lies in the effort to integrate three domains: employment, culture, and digital decoloniality. While previous studies have tended to focus on economic and legal aspects, this study emphasizes the cultural dimension of digital work, namely how gig workers build identity and solidarity through online narratives. Thus, this study not only contributes to the digital employment discourse, but also broadens the understanding of how technology, culture, and power intertwine in contemporary working life in Indonesia.

2. Research Method

This study uses an interpretive qualitative approach with the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) method developed by Norman Fairclough (1995) in (Safitri et al., 2025). This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to read social phenomena not only as a series of events, but as a practice of meaning, namely how language, media, and power work together to shape social reality. In the context of the digital economy, language is not just a means of communication, but an ideological mechanism that naturalizes the power relationship between platforms, workers, and the public (May & Perry, 2022).

2.1 Research Design and Approach

Epistemologically, this research is based on a constructivist-critical paradigm, which views social reality as the result of a construction negotiated through language and representation (May & Perry, 2022). Thus, this study does not intend to measure the phenomenon, but to understand how "flexibility" is represented both as a narrative of progress and as a form of vulnerability experienced by gig workers. CDA is used to trace the tension between the dominant narrative (hegemonic discourse) and counter-narrative (resistant discourse) that is developing in Indonesian digital media (May & Perry, 2022).

2.2 Location and Context of the Research

The research context is focused on the digital space which is the main arena for the formation of public opinion about the work of platforms, namely national online media, social media (Instagram, YouTube, X/Twitter), and gig worker community channels. The selection of this context is based on the observation that the issue of welfare and sustainability of work in the digital era is widely discussed in the virtual public space. The data was taken from the period from January 2023 to June 2025, which is the phase in which the debate on the protection of digital workers increased significantly after the release of the Fairwork Indonesia 2023 report and the preparation of the Digital Manpower Bill by the Ministry of Manpower of the Republic of Indonesia.

2.3 Data Collection Sources and Techniques

The research data are qualitative-documentary collected from three main source categories:

1. National online news that contains coverage of gig workers, digital protests, or employment policies. Portals such as Kompas.com, Tirto.id, BBC Indonesia, and Katadata.co.id are used as primary sources because they have high journalistic credibility.

2. Social media content, especially video uploads, testimonials, and narratives produced by worker communities such as Ojol Nusantara and the Driver Online Community.
3. Policy documents and reports of official institutions, including publications from the Ministry of Manpower of the Republic of Indonesia (2023), ILO (2023), OECD (2024), and Fairwork Indonesia (2023–2024).

The data selection was carried out by purposive sampling, i.e. only texts that explicitly display discourse on the flexibility, vulnerability, or sustainability of gig workers' lives were further analyzed.

2.4 Data Analysis Techniques

The analysis was carried out in three stages as per the Fairclough CDA framework (May & Perry, 2022):

1. Text Analysis

At this stage, the researcher identified the word choices, metaphors, diction, and sentence structures used in the text to understand how "flexibility" is symbolically constructed. For example, how terms such as partner, freedom of time, or self-employed are used to cover power relations (Nugroho et al., 2023).

2. Discursive Practice Analysis

This stage traces how text is produced, disseminated, and consumed in the digital space. For example, how mainstream media coverage often quotes corporate narratives, while workers speak out more through social media (Nugroho et al., 2023). Researchers compared how different narratives shape public perceptions of digital work.

3. Social Practice Analysis

The final stage places the findings of the discourse in a broader socio-political context, including the dynamics of labor regulations, national digital transformation, and local cultural values such as mutual cooperation and community solidarity (Nugroho et al., 2023). This analysis helps to reveal how the meaning of "flexible working" is intertwined with the ideology of development and digital decoloniality in Indonesia.

During the analysis process, the researcher used source triangulation techniques to improve the validity of the data by comparing media texts, worker narratives, and policy documents. Analysis is carried out hermeneutically, namely by interpreting the meanings that arise from the relationship between language, context, and power (Dewi & SH, 2025).

2.5 Research Validity and Ethics

To ensure the credibility of the findings, this study applies the principle of analytical transparency, i.e. every interpretive decision is recorded in the research log. Public data is used with attention to digital ethics: the identity of individuals on social media is disguised, and each quote is taken only from content that is public (Dewi & SH, 2025). In the spirit of decolonial research, researchers also maintain a reflective position of not simply analyzing workers as objects, but understanding them as cultural subjects who actively interpret and negotiate the meaning of their own work (May & Perry, 2022).

2.6 Conceptual Framework of Analysis

As an analytical guide, this study adapts the framework of Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model combined with the theory of cultural representation of Stuart Hall (1997) and the digital decolonial theory of Couldry & Mejias (2019) in (June, 2023). With this framework, each text is seen as:

1. A product of the discursive practices of the media,
2. Part of the digital socio-economic structure, and
3. A space of cultural resistance where gig workers negotiate their identity as well as dignity.



Figure 1. Framework for Analysis of Representation of Flexibility and Vulnerability in the Gig Economy in Indonesia

This image shows the conceptual flow of research based on the Critical Discourse Analysis model integrated with cultural representation theory and digital decolonial perspectives (Jun, 2023). This diagram presents the three main dimensions of text analysis, discourse practice, and social context that are dialectically interconnected in reading the construction of the meaning of "flexibility" and "vulnerability" in Indonesia's gig economy.

3. Results and Discussion

The results of this study show that representations of digital work in Indonesian media are shaped by the battle between two major currents of discourse: the dominant narrative about flexibility and efficiency, and the counter-narrative about vulnerability and social struggle. These two currents form an ambiguous working image of a platform that on the one hand promises freedom, on the other normalizes the uncertainty of workers' lives (Ahlstrand, 2021). Analysis of critical discourse on online news, social media uploads, and public statements of gig workers shows that the meaning of "flexibility" is not neutral, but rather the result of an ideological construction that reflects the structure of digital power in Indonesia (Rautajoki, 2024).

3.1 The Dominant Narrative: Flexibility as Progress

At the textual level, mainstream media discourse portrays the work of platforms as a symbol of progress and inclusion of the digital economy. Terms such as "future job", "self-employment", and "freedom of time" are used consistently in media coverage such as Kompas.com and Katadata.co.id throughout 2023–2024 (Rauscher, 2021).

This narrative emphasizes the value of productivity and mobility as a sign of success, in line with the discourse of digitalization-based national development. In Fairclough's framework, this is a form of "naturalization of discourse", where flexibility is understood as a natural thing, not the result of policies that shift social responsibility from the state to the individual (Bastos et al., 2022).

However, behind the rhetoric of efficiency, there is a denial of the material condition of vulnerable gig workers. The absence of social security, uncertain working hours, and algorithms that determine incentives show that flexibility actually creates new dependencies (Fathurrahman, 2021). There are 70% of online drivers experiencing extreme fatigue due to dynamic targets set by algorithmic systems (Samsinar et al., 2024).

3.2 Counter-Narrative: Digital Vulnerability and Solidarity

Counter-narratives emerge strongly in the social media space, especially through worker community accounts such as the Driver Online Community, Ojol Nusantara, and internal Telegram forums. Video uploads, testimonials, and digital posters circulating on social media show a different reality: workers are not only looking for income, but also recognition and dignity (Akbar et al., 2025).

The language used in this post reflects frustration with the system that is perceived as unfair, such as the phrase "we are free but tied to the system", or "our working hours are determined not by us, but by data". This kind of narrative becomes a form of discursive resistance, in which gig workers use digital spaces to challenge the dominant image constructed by the media and companies (Akbar et al., 2025).

The visual representations uploaded by workers are also interesting: photos of helmets and motorcycle taxi jackets stacked in front of the company's offices as a symbol of silent protest, or infographics of solidarity between fellow drivers amid rising fuel prices. These actions show the emergence of digital solidarity, where the social media space serves as an arena for the formation of collective consciousness (Benda, 2021).

Table 1. Workers' Narratives on Social Media

Representation Aspect	Mainstream Media Narrative	Workers' Narratives on Social Media
The Meaning of Flexibility	Freedom, innovation, efficiency	Uncertainty, loss of control
Actor Sentral	Platform and government companies	The gig worker community
Values Emphasized	Productivity, digital adaptation	Solidarity, social justice
Language Form	Technical, positive, normative	Emotional, reflective, critical
Communication Objectives	Promote the narrative of the digital economy	Voice experiences and demands

Source: Processed from the results of an analysis of online media and social media discourse (2023–2025).

These results confirm that the meaning of "flexibility" in the gig economy in Indonesia is formed through discursive struggle. On the one hand, the state and corporations frame flexibility as an expression of individual progress and autonomy (Yasih, 2025). On the other hand, gig workers interpret flexibility as a burden that demands resilience without social support. This tension is what

Huws (2019) calls "the new precarity of digital capitalism" a vulnerability polished with the rhetoric of freedom (Saikrishna, 2025).

3.3 Discourse Practice Analysis: Production and Consumption of Meaning

In terms of discourse practice, this study found that the news structure in online media tends to cite official sources (companies and governments), while workers' voices appear only in the context of conflict or protest (Masduki & Prastya, 2022). This creates an epistemic inequality, where the experience of workers becomes "complementary data", rather than the center of the narrative.

Meanwhile, in the social media space, workers are actually producers of alternative discourse. Through short videos, memes, and everyday narratives, they negotiate identity and solidarity. In Fairclough's analysis, this phenomenon shows a shift from "discourse consumption" to "discourse production" by the digital subaltern group (Sulianta, 2024).

This process also has a decolonial dimension. Following the view of Sudibyo (2022), digital media is not neutral, but an instrument of data colonialism that accumulates value from human activities. Thus, the gig workers' resistance to algorithms is not only an economic struggle, but also an attempt to reclaim sovereignty over meaning and life experiences.

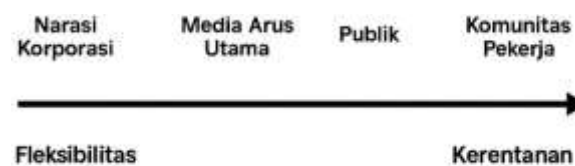


Figure 2. Discourse Spectrum of Flexibility in Indonesian Digital Media (2023–2025)

Caption: This diagram illustrates the spectrum of representations of the meaning of "flexibility" in Indonesia's digital space, from the left side (the dominant narrative of corporations and the media) to the right side (the alternative narrative of the working community). The more to the right, the language used is more reflective and critical of the structure of the digital workforce (Fadeli, 2025).

3.4 Social and Cultural Implications

The results of this study show that digital work in Indonesia is not only an economic phenomenon, but also an arena for the production of cultural meaning. When algorithms determine the rhythm of life, workers rebuild solidarity through digital narratives that affirm local values such as mutual cooperation and communal justice. Thus, a new form of "Indonesian digital work ethic" emerges in which technology is faced not only as a threat, but also as a space for negotiation of dignity and sustainability of life (Dona et al., 2025).

Moreover, these results reveal the decolonial dimension of the struggle of gig workers. Through symbolic resistance and discourse on social media, they reject status as objects of the global digital economy, and assert themselves as cultural subjects who have agency to define work, values, and the sustainability of life (Ambardie et al., 2025). This is in line with the Fairwork Report (2024) which emphasizes the importance of a social justice-based approach in understanding the work of platforms

in the Global South.

Based on the results of the analysis of critical discourse, it can be concluded that work flexibility in Indonesia's gig economy is a social construction that is full of ideological meaning. The dominant narrative promotes flexibility as a sign of modernity, while the worker counter-narrative reveals the reality of social uncertainty and exclusion (Pignagnoli, 2024). The confluence between these two currents of discourse forms a complex digital cultural landscape, where work is not only an economic issue, but also a symbol of existential struggle and cultural identity in the age of algorithms.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study confirms that flexibility in the gig economy in Indonesia cannot be understood solely as freedom of work, but as a social construct that contains a paradox between autonomy and vulnerability. The narrative of flexibility that has been pushed by governments and tech companies operates through language that exalts independence, innovation, and efficiency. However, behind the rhetoric, gig workers live in the constant uncertainty of income, time, and legal status. The seemingly liberating flexibility serves as a new mechanism of control and discipline formed by algorithms and policies of digital platforms.

Furthermore, this study confirms that Indonesian gig workers are not passive victims of the digital system, but cultural actors who actively negotiate their identity and dignity through digital narratives and solidarity. Social media spaces have become a new arena for them to build collective awareness, voice burnout, and assert their existence as part of a legitimate working society. This phenomenon indicates the birth of a new form of digital resistance that does not always appear in the form of physical protests, but through the practice of online representation and narrative. In a decolonial framework, this can be read as an attempt to reclaim the sovereignty of meaning in the midst of global algorithmic hegemony.

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be proposed. First, the government needs to expand the labor regulatory framework to be able to protect gig workers without curbing the flexibility that is the main character of digital work. The new regulations should include basic social security, protection against digital work risks, as well as a mechanism to supervise the platform's use of worker data. Second, tech companies need to adopt the principle of algorithmic transparency, so that workers understand how the system determines incentives, assessments, and distribution of work. This principle is in line with the ILO (2023) guidelines on ethics and accountability in the platform economy. Third, it is necessary to develop a digital-critical literacy-based education and training model for young workers so that they can understand the rights, risks, and opportunities in the digital work system.

From an academic perspective, further research is recommended to extend this analysis to other areas such as gender, algorithmic ethics, and social dynamics beyond urban areas. More in-depth field studies with ethnographic interviews can enrich these findings by bringing live voices from female gig workers, people with disabilities, or other marginalized groups. In addition, collaboration between

researchers, activists, and policymakers needs to be strengthened to create a more participatory and equitable approach to understanding digital work.

In the end, this research not only talks about changes in the world of work, but also about the shift in the meaning of humanity in the digital era. In the midst of the demands of efficiency and algorithmization of life, humans continue to find space to affirm their existence—through stories, solidarity, and small daily struggles. This is where it is important to return the discourse of work to the context of humanity: that work is not just an economic tool, but also a space for human beings to live with dignity, relationships, and recognition in their own history.

Acknowledgement

The author sincerely expresses his gratitude to the Ministry of Manpower of the Republic of Indonesia, especially the Labor Planning and Development Agency, for the scientific support and opportunities provided in the implementation of this research through the Indonesia Future of Labour Policy (IFLP) program. This support is not only in the form of administrative facilitation, but also through policy dialogue spaces that enrich the author's understanding of the dynamics of digital employment in Indonesia.

Gratitude was also expressed to the fellow gig worker communities in Jakarta, Surabaya, and Makassar, who have openly and honestly shared their life experiences in the midst of the challenges of the digital workforce. Their testimony is not just data, but a mirror of human resilience, creativity, and solidarity in the face of rapid economic change. Without their courage to speak up, this research would not have had the depth of meaning it does today.

Deep appreciation was also given to the Fairwork Indonesia team, the ILO Jakarta Office, as well as academics and researchers of digital culture who have provided critical and inspirational views during the process of preparing this study. Their cross-disciplinary discussions helped broaden the horizons of analysis and strengthened the decolonial perspectives used in this research.

The author does not forget to thank the academic institution where the author serves, for moral and intellectual support in developing interdisciplinary research between culture and employment. This support is an important foundation in an effort to bring together scientific approaches with real social concerns.

Finally, the author would like to express his appreciation to all parties who cannot be mentioned individually, but who have contributed in the form of ideas, constructive criticism, and the spirit of togetherness during this research process. Hopefully, this work can provide benefits for the development of a more equitable and humane labor policy in Indonesia, as well as be part of the global conversation about a just future of work.

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