

GIG ECONOMY: THE FUTURE OF WORK OR THE ILLUSION OF FREEDOM? A DATA-DRIVEN ANALYSIS

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Abstract: *This article examines the gig economy as a significant economic phenomenon reshaping labor market structures and dynamics in the digital age. Driven by technological innovation, shifting demand patterns, and the economic disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, platform-mediated work has introduced flexible, project-based employment models that challenge traditional employment frameworks. From an economic perspective, the gig economy reduces transaction costs, enables labor market adaptability, and fosters entrepreneurship. However, it also contributes to the erosion of job security, weakens collective bargaining power, and increases income volatility—raising critical questions about its macroeconomic and distributive implications. Methodologically, the paper combines theoretical analysis—grounded in Dual Labor Market Theory, Agency Theory, and the concept of the precariat—with a bibliometric mapping of global research trends using VOSviewer and empirical data from international economic institutions. Findings indicate a dual effect: while gig work can enhance labor force participation and economic efficiency, it simultaneously intensifies precarity and creates regulatory asymmetries. Emerging policy responses, including the EU Platform Work Directive and national reforms, highlight efforts to balance labor flexibility with legal and economic protections. The study concludes that the gig economy is not merely a labor trend but an evolving economic model with far-reaching consequences for labor markets, income distribution, and the future of work. Policymakers must address structural imbalances to ensure that economic innovation does not come at the expense of equity and sustainability.*

Keywords: *Gig economy; digital labor platforms; labor market transformation; precarity; labor economics; platform work; workforce flexibility.*

JEL Classification: J08; J24; J62

1. Introduction

The gig economy has emerged in recent decades as a disruptive paradigm within the global labor market, reflecting a significant shift from traditional employment arrangements toward more flexible, digital, and often temporary forms of work.

Accelerated by digitization, globalization, and crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the gig economy promises autonomy and freedom for workers. However, it simultaneously raises concerns regarding job stability, equitable labor conditions, and social protection. At the core of this transformation lies a fundamental tension: while gig work offers adaptable employment opportunities and supplementary income, it also contributes to the erosion of social security, increased labor fragmentation, and the amplification of precariousness.

Gig workers often operate in legal and institutional grey zones, as digital platforms accumulate market power and influence. This article proposes an interdisciplinary and mixed-method approach to explore the gig economy. First, it examines theoretical underpinnings—including Dual Labor Market Theory, Agency Theory, and the concept of the precariat—to understand the organizational mechanisms and power relations that define gig work. Second, a bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer maps dominant themes in the international literature, highlighting key research clusters. Third, quantitative data from different sources are used to assess the global expansion of gig platforms, worker perceptions, and labor market implications. Through the triangulation of theory, empirical data, and bibliometrics, this article seeks to answer a central question: is the gig economy a sustainable model for the future of work, or a digitally refined form of labor prevarication?

2. Theoretical Framework

The evolution from traditional employment to the gig economy represents a significant shift in the modern labor landscape. This transition has been driven by multiple forces, including digitalization, shifting consumer preferences, changing social norms, and crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the adoption of flexible work models. Research indicates that digital labor platforms have become essential mechanisms for enabling independent, project-based work (Joo & Shawl, 2021; Albanezi, 2024).

The gig economy offers both opportunities and challenges for workers and employers. On one hand, it provides flexibility, autonomy, and income diversification for some workers (Adamson & Roper, 2019; Choudhary & Shireshi, 2022). On the other hand, it is associated with increasing financial insecurity, limited access to social benefits, and fragmented job structures that contribute to labor precarity (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019; Ghorpade et al., 2024). Workers often face low and unstable pay, uncertain working conditions, and a lack of collective representation (Bucos, 2023; Wood et al., 2018).

While some scholars argue that the gig economy can foster innovation and economic growth, others emphasize its potential to erode labor standards and exacerbate inequality (Choudhary & Shireshi, 2022; Raffini, 2018). These debates underscore the urgent need for adequate regulatory responses that safeguard decent working conditions. Insufficient regulation may lead to the entrenchment of social and economic disparities with long-term macroeconomic consequences.

One defining feature of the gig economy is its dual nature—combining labor flexibility with increasing precarity and individualization. Workers benefit from project

autonomy and self-determined schedules, but often lack continuity in employment and access to essential protections (Dorado & Peláez-León, 2021; Raffini, 2018). This mode of work organization is increasingly governed by digital and algorithmic management, which automates task allocation and performance monitoring, yet can intensify global competition and shift risks onto individual workers (Raffini, 2018).

The gig economy also reflects a deeper restructuring of labor relations through the rise of “platform capitalism.” In this context, companies act as intermediaries that efficiently match supply and demand, while circumventing traditional labor protections (Martínez, 2020). These models optimize intermediation but introduce regulatory and ethical challenges as economic risks are externalized to workers (Martínez, 2020; Dorado & Peláez-León, 2021).

In summary, the gig economy is an emergent feature of contemporary capitalism, enabled by digital platforms and characterized by temporary contracts, algorithmic oversight, labor fragmentation, and job insecurity. This paradigm both redefines traditional employment and reconfigures economic organization—posing challenges for social protection, fairness, and equity in the digital labor market (Bucos, 2023; Dorado & Peláez-León, 2021; Martínez, 2020; Raffini, 2018).

Dual Labor Market Theory, developed by Doeringer and Piore, provides a relevant framework for interpreting the segmentation inherent in gig work. This theory differentiates between a primary labor market with stability and benefits, and a secondary market marked by volatility and low protections. The gig economy replicates and extends the secondary segment by attracting workers in search of supplemental or emergency income (Sui & Ding, 2024; Barrios et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2022). It flourishes in diverse sectors—from transport to digital services—thanks to its promise of flexibility and income potential (Malik et al., 2021; Kassi & Lehdonvirta, 2018; Healy et al., 2020; Anwar & Graham, 2020).

However, persistent precariousness remains a core concern. Legal ambiguity and inadequate access to benefits continue to affect gig workers (Batmunkh et al., 2022; Peterson & Crittenden, 2024). Research advocates for comprehensive regulations that integrate gig workers more effectively into labor markets while safeguarding their rights (Kaushik, 2024; Fadhlulloh et al., 2023; Nawawi et al., 2023; Lehdonvirta, 2018).

The gig economy also aligns with Agency Theory (Jensen & Meckling), which explores the relationship between principals (platforms) and agents (workers). In this model, platforms retain control over work allocation and compensation, often limiting worker agency and introducing informational asymmetries (Berger et al., 2019; Marquis et al., 2018). Scholars note that algorithmic management tools reduce workers’ ability to negotiate or influence their work environments (Anwar & Graham, 2020; Green et al., 2018).

Despite these constraints, some workers appreciate the autonomy associated with gig work. For a segment of the workforce, flexibility remains a decisive advantage—even in the absence of formal protections (Berger et al., 2019; Barratt et al., 2020). The literature also highlights the development of informal networks and adaptive strategies, which allow some degree of worker agency under non-traditional conditions (Frenzel-Piasentin et al., 2022).

From a policy perspective, the legal status of gig workers and the rules governing platform accountability are critical to reshaping these labor relationships. As Anan

(2024), Khanal & Khanal (2024), and Sui & Ding (2024) note, the evolving nature of work necessitates legal innovation to ensure equitable outcomes and minimize systemic risks.

In conclusion, Agency Theory and Dual Labor Market Theory offer complementary insights into the structural vulnerabilities and opportunities within the gig economy. As employment becomes more decentralized and digitized, academic and policy attention must focus on ensuring that flexibility does not come at the cost of fairness, dignity, and worker protection.

3. Methodology

The study integrates three methodological components: (1) a theoretical synthesis of labor market segmentation, digital agency, and precarity; (2) a bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer to map keyword co-occurrences and research clusters in gig economy scholarship; and (3) the analysis of international statistical data to capture the evolution, structure, and socio-economic impact of the gig economy. This triangulation allows for both conceptual depth and empirical grounding.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Study of Gig Economy

In the Web of Science, 1,999 sources were identified that used the term “gig economy”. The term “gig economy” appears as the central and most frequently used keyword, serving as the main hub connecting various research topics. Blue cluster explores the structural and political dimensions of platform-based work, highlighting issues like informal labor, digital workforces, and migration. The keywords used are: labor, platform work, digital labor, regulation, politics, migration. Red cluster emphasizes the psychological and organizational aspects, such as well-being, job engagement, stress, and performance of gig workers. The keywords used are: gig workers, motivation, job satisfaction, stress, well-being, burnout, commitment. Green cluster examines inequalities generated by gig work and the role of public policy and social protection measures. The keywords used are: inequality, social protection, decent work, discrimination, policy. Yellow cluster addresses the business and technological innovations that underpin the gig economy, particularly platform-based and data-driven models. The keywords used are: sharing economy, collaborative consumption, innovation, business models, big data, framework. Purple cluster covers worker mobilization, unionization, and collective actions to improve rights in platform work. Keywords: collective bargaining, unions, collective action, power.

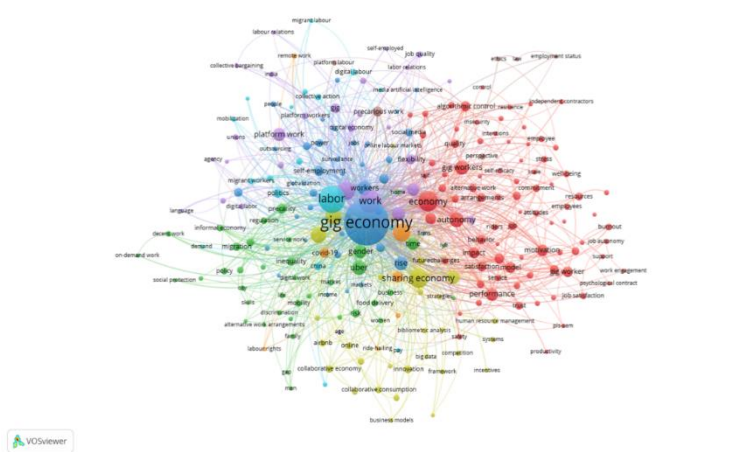


Figure 1: Bibliometric Network of Key Concepts in Gig Economy Research
Source: Our own analyses using VOSviewer

4.2 Global Expansion of the Gig Economy

The gig economy has seen exponential growth, driven by the proliferation of digital platforms and the normalization of freelance and project-based work. Between 2024 and 2030, the global gig economy is projected to grow from \$556.7 billion to over \$2.1 trillion (Business Research Insights, 2024). While countries like the United States account for a large share of this market—36% of the workforce engaged in gig work—regions like Canada and the EU also exhibit growing participation (TeamStage, 2023; Visa Analytics, 2024). Sectoral variations show concentration in delivery, transportation, and digital services.

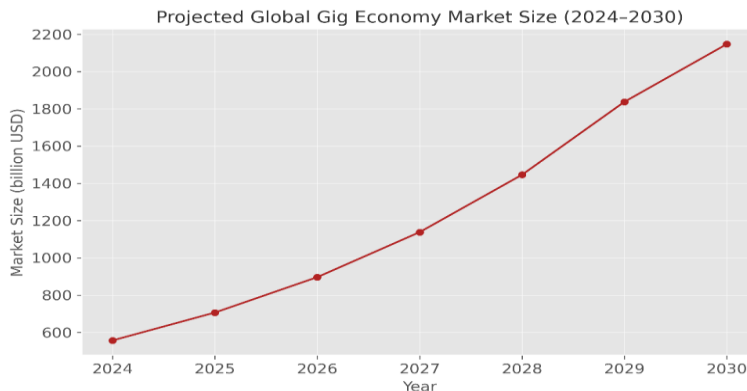


Figure 2: Projected Global Gig Economy Market Size (2024–2030)
Source: Business Research Insights – Gig Economy Market Report
[//www.businessresearchinsights.com/market-reports/gig-economy-market-102503](https://www.businessresearchinsights.com/market-reports/gig-economy-market-102503)

This chart illustrates the rapid growth of the global gig economy market from \$556.7 billion in 2024 to a projected \$2.1 trillion by 2030. The expansion is driven by digital platforms and flexible work models gaining traction worldwide.

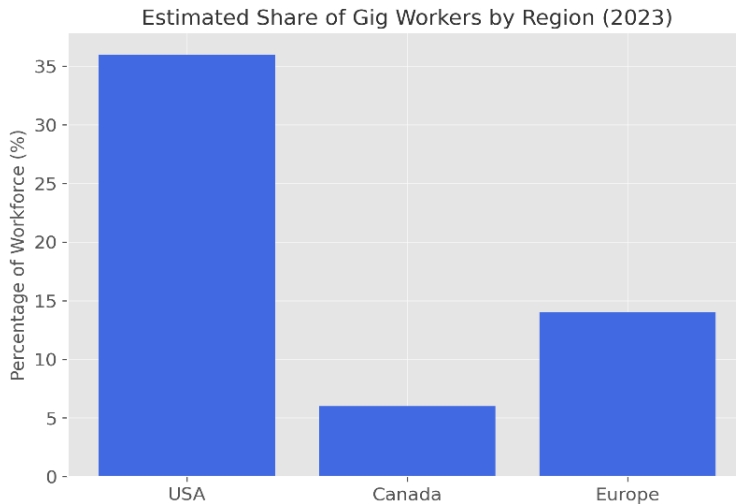


Figure 3: Estimated Share of Gig Workers by Region (2023)

Source: TeamStage – Gig Economy Statistics

<https://teamstage.io/gig-economy-statistics>

Visa Consulting & Analytics – Gig Workforce in Canada

<https://usa.visa.com/partner-with-us/visa-consulting-analytics/economic-insights/understanding-canadas-rapidly-expanding-gig-workforce.html>

The bar chart compares the proportion of gig workers in different regions. The United States leads with an estimated 36% of the workforce engaged in gig work, while Canada and Europe show emerging but growing participation.

4.3. Impact on Workers

The appeal of gig work lies in its promise of flexibility and autonomy. However, empirical data reveals significant economic vulnerability: 60% of freelancers rely on gig income to meet basic needs (AFCPE, 2024). Over 75% lack access to health insurance or retirement benefits (Upwork, 2024; AP News, 2024). Algorithmic management further complicates this landscape, introducing opaque systems of control that undermine worker agency and intensify competitive pressures.

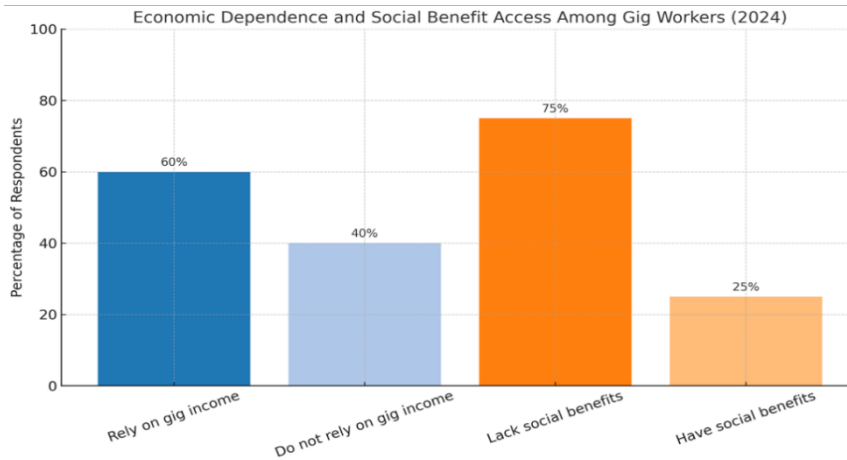


Figure 4: Economic dependence and social benefit access among gig workers

Source: Upwork – *Freelance Forward Report 2024 Gig Economy Statistics*
<https://www.upwork.com/resources/gig-economy-statistics> AP News – *European Union Platform Work Regulation (2024) EU debates gig worker protections*
<https://apnews.com/article/58ebf22a4853b9a21f558919fb9782df>

This bar chart illustrates the dual burden faced by gig workers: 60% rely on gig income to meet basic needs, while 75% lack access to health insurance or retirement benefits. These figures underscore the structural precarity and social protection gaps characterizing the platform-based labor model.

How Freelancers View Their Gig Income (2024)

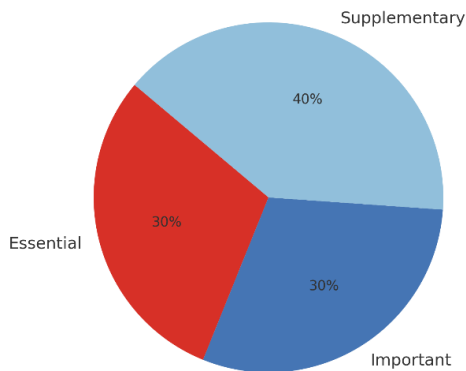


Figure 5: How Freelancers View Their Gig Income (2024)

Source: AFCPE – *Financial Wellness in the Gig Economy*
<https://www.afcpe.org/news-and-publications/blog/financial-wellness-in-the-gig-economy-empowering-flexibility-with-stability>

This chart shows how freelancers rely on gig income: 60% consider it essential or important for meeting basic needs. This highlights both the opportunity and financial vulnerability in the sector.

4.4. Employer Perspectives

From the employer's standpoint, the gig economy presents notable advantages, particularly in terms of reducing operational costs and enhancing workforce scalability. According to the OECD (2022), platform-based labor allows firms to bypass traditional employment expenses such as health insurance, paid leave, and long-term contractual obligations. Statista (2023) reports that 54% of surveyed U.S. businesses acknowledged significant cost savings when utilizing gig workers.

However, the operational efficiency of gig work is offset by considerable managerial challenges. Eurofound (2020) emphasizes that high turnover rates and performance variability among platform workers complicate workforce management. Platforms typically rely on rating and algorithmic tracking systems, which while efficient, introduce concerns around fairness, consistency, and compliance with emerging labor standards. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2021) notes that algorithmic management can also undermine worker privacy and increase disputes related to performance evaluation and job security.

Moreover, legal ambiguity regarding the employment classification of gig workers remains a central tension in the platform economy. The European Commission's Platform Work Directive (2024/2831) aims to address this issue by introducing a presumption of employment where platform control is evident. Nonetheless, the blurred boundaries between independence and subordination continue to pose regulatory challenges. Employers benefit from flexibility, but often at the cost of accountability—raising questions about the sustainability of the current model under evolving legal and institutional frameworks (European Commission, 2024).

4.5. Future Risks and Opportunities

Recent Legislative Reforms in the Gig Economy: Addressing Precarity Through Policy

In recent years, the rapid expansion of platform-based labor has revealed significant structural vulnerabilities affecting gig workers. These include legal ambiguity regarding employment status, the absence of social protection, and the pervasive use of algorithmic management systems. In response, several European countries and supranational institutions have introduced legal reforms aimed at rebalancing the rights and obligations within this emerging labor model (European Commission, 2024; ILO, 2021).

One of the most pressing challenges in the gig economy remains the precarious nature of work. Most platform workers are formally classified as self-employed, a status that often excludes them from basic labor protections, such as paid leave, health insurance, pension contributions, and protections against arbitrary dismissal. Moreover, algorithmic management systems—used to allocate tasks, monitor performance, and determine pay—operate with minimal transparency or human oversight (ILO, 2021; European Parliament, 2023). The inability to engage in

collective bargaining also compounds the vulnerabilities faced by this workforce (OECD, 2023).

In response to these concerns, legislative reforms have increasingly sought to ensure more equitable treatment of gig workers. A landmark example is the European Union's Platform Work Directive (Directive 2024/2831), adopted in October 2024 by the Council of the European Union. This directive introduces a rebuttable presumption of employment where platform control is demonstrated, enhances transparency of algorithmic management, limits data processing related to worker behavior, and mandates disclosure of work arrangements to authorities (Council of the EU, 2024).

Spain was one of the first countries to act at national level through the "Riders Law" (Ley Riders) enacted in 2021, which reclassified food delivery couriers as employees rather than self-employed. As a result, Glovo announced in 2024 that it would regularize approximately 15,000 workers following fines issued for non-compliance (AP News, 2024).

Portugal followed suit with its "Decent Work Agenda", which came into effect in 2023 and amended the Labour Code to presume the existence of an employment relationship in the context of platform work (Kluwer Law International, 2023). The reform seeks to address the precarious nature of gig work and grant workers access to core labor rights, including social protection and collective representation.

In Italy, labor authorities have initiated legal action against platforms for misclassifying workers. In April 2025, Delivery Hero, the parent company of Glovo, increased its provisions to €253 million in anticipation of liabilities related to unpaid social contributions and regulatory fines (Reuters, 2025).

Taken together, these legislative developments illustrate a broader shift in policy: from a market-oriented model prioritizing flexibility to a more balanced framework that emphasizes decent work, legal protection, and algorithmic accountability. However, the implementation of these reforms remains complex, particularly in ensuring effective enforcement across jurisdictions and platform models.

5. Conclusions and Implications

The gig economy has significantly reshaped the nature of employment in the digital era. While it creates new opportunities for income generation and labor flexibility, it also amplifies vulnerabilities related to legal status, social protection, and power asymmetries. A growing body of evidence suggests that this model, if left unregulated, risks institutionalizing precariousness. A key conclusion is that the gig economy is a transformative force in the labor market, but it brings substantial challenges regarding security, equity, and worker rights. The gig economy has undeniably reshaped the structure and dynamics of the global labor market. It introduces new forms of work that offer flexibility, autonomy, and the potential for income diversification. However, this transformation comes with significant challenges. The analysis conducted in this article confirms that gig work often entails high levels of economic insecurity, lack of access to social protection, and an asymmetrical power relationship between platforms and workers. The prevalence of algorithmic management and the misclassification of employment status

contribute to a state of structural precarity. While the gig economy may represent an adaptive response to the demands of a digitalized and globalized labor market, it simultaneously amplifies vulnerabilities for large segments of the workforce.

Given the dual nature of the gig economy—offering both opportunity and precarity—there is a growing consensus that policy interventions are necessary to ensure fair and equitable labor conditions. Legislative developments in the European Union (e.g., Directive 2024/2831 on Platform Work), as well as national reforms in Spain, Portugal, and Italy, underscore the need to formalize employment relationships when platform control is evident. Public policy should focus on expanding social protections to all workers, regardless of contractual status, ensuring transparency in algorithmic decision-making, and recognizing the right to collective bargaining. A hybrid legal framework, capable of adapting to the specificity of platform-mediated work, appears crucial to bridging the regulatory gap and mitigating the risks associated with digital labor markets.

There is a pressing need for adaptive legal frameworks that ensure fair treatment, access to social protections, and transparency in algorithmic management. Reclassifying workers based on actual working conditions, not contractual labels, is a necessary step toward labor justice.

Further research should explore (1) the long-term implications of AI and automation in gig labor; and (2) innovative models of social protection—such as portable benefits and universal labor standards—that align with the evolving nature of work.

The gig economy thus poses both a challenge and an opportunity. Navigating this duality requires rigorous scholarship and proactive policymaking that center the rights and well-being of workers in the digital era.

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