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 simultaneously produces new forms of dependency, income instability, and the erosion of social protection. Beyond its economic dimension, the gig economy also signifies a profound cultural shift in how work, identity, and value are constructed in the digital era. This study examines how the sustainability of gig workers' livelihoods is represented within Indonesia's digital media landscape, focusing on tensions between dominant narratives of digital competitiveness and counter-narratives of injustice, exhaustion, and collective resistance. Employing a qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) using Fairclough's three-dimensional framework—textual, discursive, and socio-political—this research analyzes online news, social media posts, and protest videos published between 2023 and 2025. The findings reveal that public narratives frequently glorify flexibility as a symbol of progress while obscuring the structural and cultural vulnerabilities faced by gig workers. Conversely, worker-generated counter-narratives articulate cultural solidarity and digital resistance against algorithmic exploitation. By situating the gig economy within Indonesia's socio-cultural context, this study argues that the sustainability of digital labor requires not only economic inclusion but also cultural recognition and decolonial understandings of work, identity, and justice. Therefore, policy reforms should integrate workers' lived experiences, media narratives, and cultural meanings to ensure a fair and sustainable digital transformation.

Keywords: gig economy, algorithmic management, social protection, cultural representation, decolonial work, indonesia

1. Introduction

The transformation of Indonesia's digital economy has profoundly reshaped how people work, interact, and interpret the meaning of labor. The rise of platforms such as Gojek, Grab,

Shopee Express, and various freelance applications has produced a new employment ecosystem known as the gig economy (Meilinda et al., 2023). This model is often celebrated for offering flexibility in determining time, place, and work rhythm according to personal preferences. However, Standing (2023) argues that behind the discourse of flexibility lies a fragile reality: income insecurity, absence of social protection, and growing dependence on algorithmic systems that control incentives, rankings, and job visibility. This contradiction is often referred to as the paradox of vulnerable flexibility.

In Indonesia, platform-based work has expanded rapidly and become a cornerstone of the urban economy. According to the Platform&AN report (2022), more than ten million workers depend on digital labor systems that operate outside formal employment regulations. The government, through national digital transformation policies, views this sector as an engine of innovation and job creation (Ministry of Agriculture, 2023). However, the legal status of gig workers remains ambiguous. They are officially categorized as "partners," not employees, which excludes them from social insurance, paid leave, and other labor protections (Stevania & Hoesin, 2024). This ambiguity creates a structural gap that enables new forms of technology-mediated labor exploitation (Domínguez et al., 2023).

Beyond economics, digital labor also functions as a cultural process that redefines how societies construct values, time, and identity (Levin & Mamlok, 2021). On social media, narratives of "freedom" and "digital entrepreneurship" coexist with testimonies of burnout, algorithmic control, and existential uncertainty. These competing representations form a discursive arena where the meaning of work, dignity, and social justice is contested (Daradkeh, 2023). In this sense, Indonesia's gig economy represents not only a site of economic production but also a cultural space of negotiation—where the rhetoric of modernization intersects with the reality of data colonialism, turning everyday life into a source of value extraction without adequate recognition (Yasih, 2023).

From a cultural and decolonial standpoint, the notion of flexibility is inseparable from underlying power relations that determine who gains access to job security and who becomes marginalized within global digital capitalism (Deridder et al., 2022). Lim (2020) notes the rise of digital solidarity among Indonesian gig workers as a form of cultural resistance to such inequality (Asmiatin, 2024). Within this tension, gig workers are not only striving for economic survival but also for cultural recognition and the sustainability of dignified life (Yasih, 2023).

Recent studies published in Jurnal Ketenagakerjaan emphasize similar dynamics. Alfarizi, Noer, and Noer (2025) found that hybrid work models and national labor policies significantly influence gig workers' productivity and engagement, yet gaps remain in social protection and inclusive regulation. Their findings suggest that achieving decent work (SDG 8) in the gig economy requires a balanced framework between technological innovation, labor rights, and cultural well-being. This study extends that conversation by examining how media representations—through news, social media, and digital protest materials—construct

competing meanings around flexibility, sustainability, and justice in Indonesia's digital labor landscape.

Departing from this premise, the present study assumes that sustainability in digital work is not merely an economic issue but also a question of social representation and institutional recognition. Digital media narratives play a decisive role in shaping how the public perceives gig work—either as a symbol of progress or as a manifestation of emerging inequality (Swastiningsih et al., 2024). Therefore, this research aims to analyze the representation of gig workers' sustainability in Indonesian digital media, focusing on tensions between dominant narratives that glorify flexibility and counter-narratives that highlight vulnerability, injustice, and collective resistance.

Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as developed by Fairclough (1995) and adapted by Pešić (2022), this study explores relationships between texts (news, social media, protest videos), discursive practices (media production and circulation), and broader socio-political contexts (labor policy, digitalization discourse, and economic structures). Data were collected from national news portals, workers' community social media accounts, and online protest archives from 2023 to 2025 (Arman et al., 2025).

The novelty of this study lies in its integration of three analytical domains—employment, culture, and digital decoloniality. While previous research has largely focused on economic or legal aspects, this study foregrounds the cultural dimension of digital labor, examining how gig workers articulate identity and solidarity through online narratives. Thus, the study contributes to both digital labor scholarship and cultural discourse by illustrating how technology, media, and power converge in shaping contemporary working life in Indonesia.

2. Research method

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative approach employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as developed by Fairclough (1995) and elaborated by Pešić (2022). CDA was selected because it enables social phenomena to be interpreted not merely as observable events but as practices of meaning-making, in which language, media, and power interact to construct social reality. In this framework, discourse is treated as both a linguistic structure and a social practice, allowing the researcher to uncover how ideas of flexibility, vulnerability, and sustainability are shaped within Indonesia's digital labor landscape.

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. Research Context

The research context focuses on the digital sphere—the primary arena in which public meanings about platform labor are constructed. Data were collected from national online news, social media platforms (Instagram, YouTube, X/Twitter), and gig worker community channels. This context was selected because debates around gig workers' welfare and sustainability have intensified in the digital public space, especially between January 2023 and June 2025, coinciding with two milestones:

1. The publication of the Fairwork Indonesia 2023 Report, and
2. The drafting of the Digital Manpower Bill by Indonesia's Ministry of Manpower.

2.3. Data Collection Sources and Techniques

Data collection followed a qualitative–documentary design using purposive sampling. Only texts that explicitly discussed flexibility, vulnerability, or sustainability in gig workers' lives were included. Three main categories of sources were analyzed:

1. National Online News: Articles discussing gig workers, digital protests, or employment policies from reputable portals such as Kompas.com, Tirto.id, BBC Indonesia, and Katadata.co.id.
2. Social Media Content: Videos, testimonials, and narratives produced by online driver communities such as Ojol Nusantara and Komunitas Driver Online.
3. Policy Documents and Reports: Publications from the Ministry of Manpower of the Republic of Indonesia (2023), ILO (2023), OECD (2024), and Fairwork Indonesia (2023–2024).

2.4. Data Analysis Techniques

Following Fairclough's (1995) CDA model, the analysis consisted of three interrelated stages:
1. Textual Analysis:
   Identification of lexical choices, metaphors, and syntactic structures to uncover how "flexibility" is linguistically constructed. For example, expressions such as "partner," "freedom of time," or "self-employed" often mask hierarchical power relations (Morales & Stecher, 2023).
2. Discursive Practice Analysis:
   Examination of how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed within digital spaces. For instance, mainstream media frequently reproduce corporate narratives, while gig workers voice resistance primarily through social media platforms (Morales & Stecher, 2023).
3. Social Practice Analysis:

Contextualization of discursive findings within Indonesia's socio-political environment, including labor regulation, national digital transformation, and local cultural values such as gotong royong (mutual cooperation) and community solidarity (Morales & Stecher, 2023). This stage reveals how "flexible work" is entangled with development ideology and digital decoloniality.

2.5. Analytical Procedure Summary

To enhance analytical transparency, this study explicitly outlines the step-by-step process of CDA as follows:

1. Text Selection: 120 media texts, 80 social media posts, and 10 protest videos were identified based on keywords related to "flexibility," "vulnerability," and "gig work."
2. Coding Process: Each text was manually coded into preliminary semantic units (e.g., freedom, security, algorithm, solidarity).
3. Thematic Categorization: Codes were grouped into two thematic clusters: dominant narratives (progress, innovation, autonomy) and counter-narratives (inequality, exploitation, resistance).
4. Interpretation: The themes were traced across the three CDA levels—textual, discursive, and social—to identify recurring ideological patterns.
5. Validation: Triangulation was performed by comparing patterns across media types (news, social media, and policy documents).

This sequence ensures that the movement from text to context follows a systematic and replicable logic, strengthening the rigor of the CDA procedure.

2.6. Research Validity and Ethics

To ensure the credibility and dependability of findings, the study employed source triangulation-comparing data from multiple platforms and document types. Each interpretive decision was recorded in a research logbook to maintain analytical transparency. Only publicly available data were analyzed, and identities of individual users were anonymized to adhere to digital ethics (Van Hulst et al., 2025).

In line with decolonial research ethics, this study treats gig workers not as passive objects but as active cultural subjects who negotiate the meanings of their work. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the process to avoid reproducing power asymmetries between researcher and participants (May & Perry, 2022).

2.7. Conceptual Framework of Analysis

This study adapts Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model—text, discursive practice, and social practice-integrated with Stuart Hall's (1997) cultural representation theory and Couldry & Mejias's (2019) digital decoloniality perspective (June, 2023).

Within this framework, each text is conceptualized as:

1. A product of media discursive practices;
2. A component of broader digital socio-economic structures; and
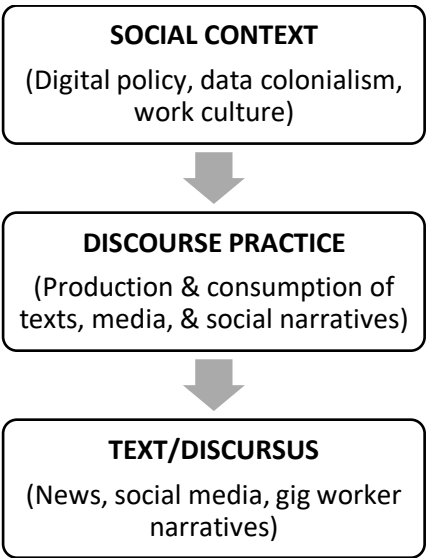3. A site of cultural resistance where gig workers negotiate identity and dignity.

SOCIAL CONTEXT

(Digital policy, data colonialism, work culture)

⬇

DISCOURSE PRACTICE

(Production & consumption of texts, media, & social narratives)

⬇

TEXT/DISCURSUS

(News, social media, gig worker narratives)

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

This diagram illustrates the conceptual integration of Fairclough's CDA with Hall's representation theory and Couldry & Mejias's digital decolonial perspective. The three dimensions-textual, discursive, and social-are presented as dialectically interconnected, showing how meanings of "flexibility" and "vulnerability" are constructed within Indonesia's gig economy.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that representations of digital work in Indonesian media are shaped by the discursive struggle between two competing narratives:

(1) the dominant narrative that glorifies flexibility, autonomy, and efficiency, and
(2) the counter-narrative that highlights vulnerability, injustice, and social struggle.

These competing discourses construct an ambivalent image of digital labor-one that simultaneously promises freedom while normalizing precarity (Ahlstrand, 2021). Through critical discourse analysis of online news, social media content, and workers' public statements, this study finds that the meaning of "flexibility" is not neutral but the product of ideological construction that reflects the digital power structure in Indonesia (Rautajoki, 2024).

3.1 The Dominant Narrative: Flexibility as Progress

At the textual level, mainstream media discourse consistently frames platform-based work as a symbol of progress, innovation, and inclusion in the digital economy. Phrases such as "future

jobs," "self-employment," and "freedom of time" frequently appear in national online media such as Kompas.com and Katadata.co.id between 2023–2024 (Rauscher, 2021).

This narrative naturalizes flexibility as an economic virtue — a marker of productivity and digital readiness aligned with Indonesia's modernization agenda. In Fairclough's (1995) framework, this process exemplifies the "naturalization of discourse", where social arrangements (e.g., precarious contracts) are portrayed as natural and inevitable, rather than policy choices that transfer social risk from the state to individuals (Bastos et al., 2022).

Yet beneath the rhetoric of efficiency lies a systemic erasure of gig workers' material conditions. The absence of social protection, unpredictable working hours, and algorithmic control over incentives demonstrate how flexibility produces new dependencies (Kossek et al., 2021). Survey data from the Fairwork Indonesia Report (2024) show that nearly 70% of online drivers experience chronic fatigue due to dynamic, data-driven performance targets (Santos et al., 2024).

These findings align with Alfarizi, Noer, & Noer (2025), who found that national labor policies and hybrid work models in Indonesia promote flexibility as a key indicator of productivity and innovation, while failing to address protection gaps. Thus, the dominant narrative of progress mirrors the policy discourse that privileges economic expansion over labor welfare.

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 (Qadri, 2022).

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 (Qadri, 2022).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
Meaning of Flexibility	Freedom, innovation, efficiency	Uncertainty, loss of control
Central Actor	Platforms and government institutions	Worker communities

Values Emphasized	Productivity, adaptation, progress	Solidarity, justice, dignity
Language Style	Technical, positive, normative	Emotional, reflective, critical
Communicative Goal	Promote digital economy narrative	Voice experiences and demands

Source: Author's analysis of online and social media discourse (2023–2025).

The findings confirm that "flexibility" in Indonesia's gig economy is socially constructed through discursive contestation. The state and corporations frame flexibility as autonomy and progress (Yasih, 2025), whereas gig workers expose it as a burden of survival without safety nets.

This duality exemplifies what Huws (2019) describes as "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

At the discursive practice level, this study reveals asymmetries in how media content is produced and consumed. News reports from mainstream outlets predominantly cite official or corporate sources (government ministries, platform spokespeople), while workers' perspectives are included only in conflict-related stories (Ristovska, 2022). This produces epistemic inequality: workers' lived experiences are reduced to supplementary data rather than narrative centers.

Conversely, on social media, workers themselves have become producers of alternative discourse. Through short videos, memes, and comment threads, they reinterpret and circulate counter-narratives that affirm identity and solidarity. In Fairclough's (1995) framework, this shift represents a move from "discourse consumption" to "discourse production" by digital subaltern groups (Sulianta, 2024).

This transformation also carries a decolonial dimension. Following Bonini & Treré (2024), digital media functions as an apparatus of data colonialism—extracting value from human activity while concealing structural asymmetries. Therefore, workers' acts of resistance—such as collective digital storytelling—can be read as attempts to reclaim epistemic sovereignty over their meanings and experiences.
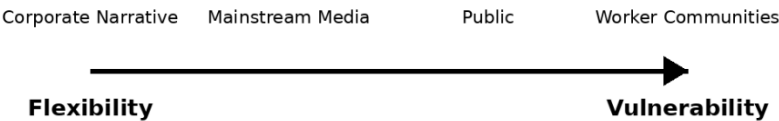

Figure 2. Discourse Spectrum of Flexibility in Indonesian Digital Media (2023–2025)

Caption: This diagram visualizes the continuum of discourse from the left (dominant narratives of corporations and state media) to the right (alternative narratives of worker communities). The further right the discourse, the more reflective and critical the language becomes regarding digital labor structures (Farrell et al., 2021).

3.4. Social and Cultural Implications

At the social practice level, the study underscores that Indonesia's gig economy is not solely an economic system but a cultural arena of meaning production. When algorithms dictate life rhythms, workers respond by reconstructing solidarity rooted in local cultural ethics such as gotong royong (mutual cooperation) and keadilan sosial (social justice).

This synthesis gives rise to an emergent "Indonesian digital work ethic", where technology becomes both a challenge and a site of negotiation for dignity and sustainability (Schlag, 2022). Furthermore, the findings reveal the decolonial dimension of gig workers' struggle. Through symbolic acts and online resistance, workers reject their positioning as objects of global digital capitalism and assert themselves as cultural subjects capable of defining work, value, and life (Udupa & Dattatreyan, 2023).

This supports the Fairwork Indonesia (2024) recommendation that achieving decent work in the Global South requires a justice-oriented digital transformation. Overall, flexibility in Indonesia's gig economy represents a socially and ideologically charged construct.

The dominant narrative celebrates flexibility as modernization, while workers' counter-narratives expose structural inequality and social exclusion (Pignagnoli, 2024). The interplay of these two discursive currents forms a complex cultural landscape, where digital labor becomes a symbol of both survival and cultural resistance in the algorithmic age.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that flexibility in Indonesia's gig economy is a socially constructed paradox—simultaneously representing autonomy and vulnerability. The discourse of flexibility promoted by the government and technology corporations operates through language that glorifies independence, innovation, and efficiency. Yet beneath this rhetoric, gig workers face persistent insecurity in income, working time, and legal status. The supposedly liberating flexibility thus functions as a mechanism of algorithmic control and digital discipline, reinforcing structural inequality in the platform economy.

The findings further reveal that Indonesian gig workers are not passive recipients of digital precarity. Through social media narratives and online communities, they assert agency, negotiate identity, and construct dignity within the algorithmic system. These digital spaces have evolved into arenas of collective awareness and symbolic resistance, illustrating what Fairclough (1995) describes as the transformation of discourse into social practice. Within a decolonial perspective, such acts represent efforts to reclaim epistemic and cultural sovereignty in the face of global digital hegemony.

Overall, this study affirms that sustainability in digital labor cannot be achieved merely through economic inclusion. It requires recognition of cultural values, ethical governance of

algorithms, and participatory policy frameworks that place workers' lived experiences at the center of Indonesia's digital transformation agenda.

These conclusions complement Alfarizi, Noer, & Noer (2025), who argue that achieving decent work (SDG 8) in Indonesia's gig economy necessitates balancing innovation with social protection and worker engagement.

4.2 Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings, several strategic recommendations are proposed:

1. Expand Labor Protection Framework

   The government should extend existing labor regulations to formally recognize gig workers without undermining the flexibility that defines digital work. This includes mandatory basic social security, protection against occupational and digital risks, and a supervisory mechanism for algorithmic data use by platforms. Such measures align with ILO (2023) principles on fairness, ethics, and accountability in the platform economy.

2. Implement Algorithmic Transparency and Fairness

   Technology companies must adopt the principle of algorithmic transparency, ensuring that workers can understand how incentives, ratings, and workloads are determined. Transparent systems help restore trust and fairness, reducing the asymmetry between platforms and workers.

3. Promote Digital–Critical Literacy

   The government and educational institutions should develop digital literacy programs for young and informal workers to understand their rights, risks, and opportunities in the platform economy. Literacy-based empowerment supports resilience and awareness in navigating algorithmic work systems.

4. Institutionalize Dialogue Platforms

   Collaboration between government, platform companies, worker associations, and civil society must be institutionalized through policy dialogues and participatory mechanisms. Such platforms would ensure continuous evaluation of digital labor policies and promote co-created solutions for sustainable work futures.

4.3 Academic and Research Implications

From an academic standpoint, this study contributes to the intersectional analysis of digital work by integrating the frameworks of Critical Discourse Analysis, cultural representation, and digital decoloniality.

Future research should extend this approach to examine:

- gendered experiences of digital precarity,
- algorithmic ethics and data justice, and
- dynamics of gig work beyond major urban centers.

Ethnographic fieldwork and participatory action research involving gig workers-especially women, people with disabilities, and rural laborers-would deepen understanding of the lived

complexities of the digital labor system. Strengthening collaboration between academia, activists, and policymakers will also ensure that knowledge production becomes an inclusive tool for social transformation.

4.4 Concluding Reflection

Ultimately, this study is not only about changing work systems, but also about redefining humanity in the digital era. Amid algorithmic efficiency and data-driven discipline, workers continue to find spaces to affirm their existence—through stories, solidarity, and everyday acts of resilience. Reclaiming the discourse of work as a human endeavor reminds us that labor is not merely an economic instrument, but a vital space for dignity, relationships, and collective meaning.

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