



UNCERTAINTY, ISOLATION, AND THE EROSION OF SAFETY NETS: THE STRUCTURAL IMPACT OF THE GIG ECONOMY ON WORKER MENTAL HEALTH

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Abstract

The gig economy, defined by short term, platform mediated work, is reshaping employment relations and working conditions. This literature review examines its impact on worker mental health through three structural features: income instability, social isolation, and the absence of formal social protection. The analysis shows that chronic earnings volatility and algorithmic management produce psychological insecurity, undermine perceived control, and heighten anxiety. These pressures are intensified by limited access to benefits such as health insurance and paid leave, exposing workers to significant financial risk. At the same time, the dispersed and digitally mediated nature of gig work weakens workplace communities. Workers often lack peer support, shared identity, and informal mechanisms that buffer stress. The combined effect of persistent stressors and missing protective factors creates a high risk environment for burnout, loneliness, and depressive symptoms. Mental health problems in the gig economy are therefore structural outcomes of its organizational design. Effective responses require policy reform, platform redesign, and public health strategies that directly address these underlying conditions.

Keywords: gig economy, mental health, precarious work, social isolation, social protection, algorithmic management, psychological distress.

Introduction

The world of work is undergoing significant structural changes alongside the rapid development of digital technology and online platforms. These changes have given rise to a new form of work based on short-term tasks, temporary contracts, and fluid working relationships between service providers and platform users. This form of work is often referred to as the gig economy, which transforms labor into a commodity that can be ordered on demand. Its main characteristics are high flexibility in terms of time and workplace, balanced by a lack of formal ties between the worker and the entity providing the platform (Banik & Padalkar, 2021). This uncertainty requires organizations and individuals to have an adaptive approach to crisis management to face unexpected economic fluctuations (Arifin & Darmawan, 2022). This shift not only changes how people earn an income but also redefines traditional industrial relations that have long been protected by labor regulations and trade unions. The impact extends to various aspects of workers' lives, ranging from financial stability to their professional identity (Arcidiacono et al., 2019). The psychological well-being of employees is heavily influenced by how they balance work-life (work-life balance) and the extent to which they feel supported by the organization (Darmawan, 2022). This research intends to explore the finer dimensions of this transformation, particularly those related to the psychological well-being of individuals amidst this new work structure, using an approach that seeks to understand the subjective experiences of its actors.

The concept of work in the gig economy fundamentally flips the logic of permanent employment. Dependence on algorithms, rating systems, and fluctuating market demands creates an environment where certainty becomes a rare commodity. Gig workers, such as online motorcycle taxi drivers, couriers, or professional freelancers, must always be ready to compete for the next task without any guarantee of its existence. This condition places them in a state of constant alertness, where relaxation or long-term planning becomes difficult to achieve (Freni-Sterrantino & Salerno, 2021). High stress levels and a lack of adequate supervision in this work model risk reducing productivity and threatening occupational health and safety (OHS) (Darmawan, 2023). In addition to general legal protection, clear procedures regarding health insurance are also required, such as periodic screening for workers exposed to specific work environment risks

(Mathius et al., 2024). The glorified flexibility often turns into chronic instability, as income no longer flows regularly but comes in the form of fragmented payments for each task completed. The transition from structured work to project-based work eliminates traditional work rhythms, replacing them with erratic cycles between busy periods and long idle periods, which directly affects both financial and psychological conditions.

A physically and socially isolated work environment is another inherent characteristic of many types of gig work. Many platform workers operate independently, without permanent colleagues, without a head office, and without the routine social interactions commonly found in conventional work environments. In fact, there is a strong reciprocal relationship between psychological well-being and the quality of social interactions carried out by individuals (Darmawan & Gani, 2024). They connect with the system through digital interfaces, with other humans only as service recipients in a transactional and brief nature. The absence of this work community removes one of the essential elements of the work experience, namely social support from peers, mentors, or caring supervisors. Such support often serves as a buffer against work stress and a source of meaning and collective identity. In the gig economy, workers essentially become separate islands, fully responsible for their successes and failures, while the social support networks that usually form in the workplace are non-existent (Glavin et al., 2021). These conditions of isolation and heavy workload pressure often lead to emotional exhaustion or burnout, which negatively impacts job satisfaction (Mardikaningsih & Sinambela, 2022).

An equally critical aspect is the erosion of formal social safety nets that have long been attached to permanent employment status. Normative rights such as health insurance, pension guarantees, paid leave, compensation for work accidents, and protection against unilateral termination of employment often do not apply to gig workers whose legal status is ambiguous. Legal protection for workers is crucial, especially in facing potential labor criminal violations that often occur in contract or outsourcing work models (Arrosyid et al., 2024). They are classified as independent partners or contractors, thus legally exempting the company from social protection obligations. The loss of this protection not only creates acute economic vulnerability but also causes profound existential anxiety (Freni-Sterrantino & Salerno, 2021). Workers are constantly

haunted by the fear of illness, old age without savings, or disasters that could erase their ability to work, without any reliable institution to support them in such difficult situations.

The combination of chronic economic uncertainty, structural social isolation, and the loss of basic protection creates an environment that potentially damages mental health (Apouey et al., 2020). The psychological pressure generated by these conditions may manifest in various forms, such as anxiety about the future, feelings of loneliness, burnout resulting from the constant effort to find work, and a loss of professional belonging and self-esteem. Stress accumulated without organizational solutions often increases turnover intention or the workers' desire to leave their profession (Hariyani & Issalillah, 2021). By examining the interconnection between these three elements uncertainty, isolation, and the loss of safety nets this study seeks to build a comprehensive understanding of how the architecture of the gig economy shapes the mental health landscape of its workers. The approach used focuses on depicting the essence of the workers' lived experiences within this system to uncover psychological burdens that may not be visible in macroeconomic data.

The core problem faced by gig workers lies in the paradox between promised freedom and experienced vulnerability. On one hand, online work platforms offer autonomy and control over working hours, a value highly prized in the modern era. On the other hand, this autonomy is often illusory because it is controlled by opaque algorithms, platform policies that can change at any time, and high competitive pressure from fellow workers (Apouey et al., 2020). In resolving conflicts arising from this precarious employment status, traditional mediation or legal pluralism approaches are sometimes needed to bridge disputes in multicultural societies (Futriyah et al., 2023). Income uncertainty becomes a constant source of stress, where predicting monthly financial flow is nearly impossible. This stress is exacerbated by the absence of clear boundaries between work time and personal time, as workers feel they must always be available to take orders to avoid losing income. This condition hinders mental recovery and can lead to chronic fatigue and feelings of being constantly overwhelmed, which collectively erode psychological health.

The second prominent issue is the disintegration of traditional work communities and the inherent social support mechanisms within them. In

the gig economy, human relationships are reduced to functional and momentary interactions with consumers or via impersonal chats with customer support. The absence of space to share grievances, exchange strategies for coping with pressure, or simply feel solidarity with those experiencing a similar fate creates a profound sense of loneliness. This isolation is not only physical but also psychological and emotional. Workers lose a sounding board to validate their experiences or to obtain practical advice. This lack of social support exacerbates the impact of work stressors, as individuals must bear all psychological burdens alone without a buffering system to cushion the shocks.

The relevance of this discussion becomes increasingly prominent as the gig economy consolidates as a permanent part of the global employment landscape. The number of individuals relying on platforms for their primary or supplemental income continues to grow significantly. This growth indicates that this work pattern is not merely a temporary trend, but rather a new structural reality of the labor market. Therefore, understanding its human implications, particularly regarding mental health, becomes an academic and social necessity. If ignored, the accumulated psychological impact on this large worker population could lead to broad public health consequences, ranging from an increased prevalence of anxiety disorders and depression to a decline in overall productivity and quality of life.

In addition, the development of policies and regulations in many countries still lags far behind the pace of digital platform innovation. Public discourse and policy formulation are often focused on economic and technical aspects, such as service tariff setting or legal status, while the mental health dimension is frequently neglected. This systematic literature review is necessary to provide a solid evidentiary foundation regarding the relationship between working conditions in the gig economy and psychological well-being. This evidence can encourage stakeholders including policymakers, platform managers, and public health practitioners to begin considering mental health as a vital parameter in evaluating the sustainability of this business model and in designing protective interventions for workers.

This study aims to critically analyze the relationship between the intrinsic characteristics of the gig economy namely job uncertainty, social

isolation, and the absence of social safety nets and the mental health conditions of workers. Specifically, this literature review seeks to outline the mechanisms through which these three factors interact to create a high-risk work environment for psychological well-being. The expected theoretical contribution is the development of a coherent framework of understanding that links the organizational structure of the platform economy with mental health outcomes at the individual level, moving beyond approaches that only look at personal factors. Practically, the findings from this study are expected to serve as a knowledge base for policy advocacy that is more sensitive to psychosocial aspects, as well as provide input for platform design and community initiatives aimed at building alternative social support for gig workers.

Method

This research is a qualitative literature study designed to investigate, interpret, and synthesize findings from various written literature sources regarding the topic of workers' mental health in the gig economy. A qualitative approach was chosen because it aligns with the exploratory and interpretative goals of the research, which seeks to understand the complexity and depth of subjective experiences of workers, as well as the meaning behind the relationship between work structure and psychological well-being (Creswell, 2013). Unlike quantitative research that measures variables, this study focuses on explaining phenomena through the analysis of concepts, theories, and empirical findings previously reported in academic works. This method allows the researcher to build a strong and comprehensive argument by connecting various ideas from different disciplines, such as industrial psychology, sociology of work, and social policy, to produce a holistic understanding.

The procedure for conducting this literature study follows systematic principles as outlined by Machi and McEvoy (2012). The first stage involves identifying and formulating clear research questions, which have been presented in the introduction chapter. Subsequently, an extensive literature collection process was conducted through leading academic databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, and PsycINFO. Keywords used include combinations of gig economy, platform work, mental health, psychological distress, precarious work, social isolation, and social

protection. The primary inclusion criteria were journal articles, books, and research reports published within a specific timeframe, discussing the psychosocial aspects of platform work, and written in English or Indonesian. The selected sources were then critically reviewed, and relevant data in the form of concepts, theoretical arguments, and empirical conclusions were extracted and organized based on emerging themes corresponding to the research questions. Thematic analysis was used to categorize and interpret the textual data, with the aim of identifying patterns of relationships between uncertainty, isolation, the loss of safety nets, and mental health, as well as to construct a coherent synthesis that answers the research questions.

Result and Discussion

Economic Uncertainty and the Loss of Protection: The Foundation of Mental Health Vulnerability

The structure of the gig economy is built on a foundation of flexibility which, in practice, metamorphoses into systemic and multidimensional economic uncertainty. This uncertainty is not a side effect, but rather a central design feature of the platform-based business model. This phenomenon directly affects worker well-being and the stability of the labor market as a whole (Ishaq & Darmawan, 2021). Gig workers operate without long-term employment contracts, without guaranteed task volumes, and without the certainty of a fixed monthly income. Their livelihood depends on fluctuating market demand dynamics, opaque assignment algorithms, and rating systems that are often subjective. This architecture of instability is a form of digital engineering that creates a new vulnerable working class known as the "digital precariat" (Rohmawati & Mardikaningsih, 2023). This condition creates what can be called a "hope economy," where each day begins with uncertainty about whether there will be enough demand to generate adequate income. In this era of flexible work, the legal basis for the protection of workers' rights and clear employment contracts becomes very crucial, especially in the environment of the startup ecosystem (Nugraha et al., 2024). Financial life becomes a series of small fragments that must be painstakingly pieced together, where medium and long-term financial planning such as for buying a house, children's education, or even a simple vacation becomes nearly impossible. The inability to predict one's financial future is a source of constant chronic stress that erodes an individual's sense of psychological security.

The loss of formal social safety nets deepens the chasm of vulnerability created by such economic uncertainty. In traditional employment

relationships, there is a series of institutional protections such as company-paid health insurance, pension contributions, paid sick leave, and workers' compensation that function as a buffer against life's shocks. Gig workers, with the legal status of independent partners, are systematically disconnected from these protections. This gap in legal protection is increasingly visible in specific cases, such as the protection for online motorcycle taxi drivers who become victims of fictitious orders (Wahyudi et al., 2023). They bear the full risk of health, accidents, and old age themselves. When an online motorcycle taxi driver falls ill, not only does their income stop immediately, but they must also bear the medical costs out of their own pocket. The fear of illness or misfortune is no longer just a minor worry, but an existential threat to economic survival. The anxiety generated by the absence of this buffer is constant and pervasive, affecting daily decisions and creating an exhausting state of psychological alertness.

This manifests in the form of acute financial anxiety and feelings of helplessness. Employee professionalism in facing such pressure is significantly influenced by job demands, psychological capital, and their social maturity (Putra et al., 2022). Financial anxiety goes beyond worries about money; it permeates an individual's identity and self-esteem. In a society that often links a person's value to their productivity and economic stability, the inability to predict or control income flow can be internalized as personal failure. Gig workers may begin to question their own competence and worth, especially during long idle periods or when their ratings drop for reasons beyond their control. Feelings of helplessness arise from the realization that their economic fate depends heavily on external factors algorithms, platform policies that can change at any time, or customer reviews that they can almost never significantly influence. There is a very close relationship between social capital, psychological capital, and an employee's self-capital in determining the level of job stress experienced (Sudja'i et al., 2021). This loss of a sense of control is a strong predictor for the development of mental health conditions such as depression and generalized anxiety.

The highly fragmented and measured character of work in the gig economy also contributes to unique stress patterns. Every task or trip is a separate unit of production, with a small economic value and immediate evaluation through a rating system. This encourages an "always-on" mentality, as stopping work even for a moment directly translates to a loss

of potential income. The boundary between work time and rest time becomes blurred, as the pressure to remain available and competitive hinders the necessary process of mental recovery. This lack of employee engagement and the imbalance between work and personal life (work-life balance) can ultimately increase the intention to quit or turnover intention (Mardikaningsih & Arifin, 2022). Workers find it difficult to truly disconnect from work mode, as their mobile phones are simultaneously a production tool and a source of anxiety. This condition can lead to a state of chronic emotional and physical exhaustion, or burnout, characterized by feelings of depleted energy, cynicism toward work, and a reduced sense of accomplishment. Burnout in the gig economy is exacerbated by the fact that there is no immediate supervisor from whom leave can be requested, nor an organizational structure that provides resources for recovery.

The temporal dimension of uncertainty also has profound psychological implications. Unlike permanent jobs that have predictable weekly or monthly rhythms, the rhythm of the gig economy is often irregular and filled with tension between "busy times" and "empty times." Busy periods, while generating money, can be extremely intense and exhausting, imposing heavy physical and mental workloads in a short duration. Conversely, empty or quiet periods are not pleasant rest times, but rather sources of anxiety regarding income scarcity. The inability to relax productively during this downtime because the mind is constantly focused on searching for the next job opportunity prevents true psychological recovery from occurring. This erratic cycle disrupts the body's natural circadian rhythms and can unsettle sleep and eating patterns, which further serve as risk factors for mental health disorders. It is important to remember that the quality of social interaction remains a key factor in reconstructing psychological well-being, even within different cross-cultural perspectives (Oluwatosin & Darmawan, 2024).

This structural uncertainty also limits workers' capacity to engage in proactive behaviors that enhance mental resilience. Investing in skill development, for example, becomes a risky decision when one's future on a particular platform is uncertain. Similarly, building professional networks or seeking psychological help requires resources of time and money that may be deemed too precious to allocate amidst the pressure of meeting daily needs. Consequently, workers can become trapped in a

short-term reactive cycle, constantly extinguishing financial and psychological fires without ever having the space or resources to build long-term coping strategies. This situation creates a vicious circle: stress from uncertainty hinders actions that could reduce vulnerability, which in turn reinforces the uncertainty and stress itself. Kost et al. (2020) explain that the unpredictable nature of gig work often forces workers to adopt coping strategies focused on short-term survival, which actually depletes cognitive resources and obstructs long-term professional growth.

The role of algorithms as invisible work managers adds a layer of complexity to this uncertainty. Decisions regarding who gets assigned a task, what the rate will be, and who is prioritized by the system are often made by computer code whose logic is not transparently disclosed to workers. This lack of transparency creates what is known as "algorithmic uncertainty," where workers feel they are playing a game with ever-changing and unknown rules. They may attribute their success or failure in obtaining tasks to mysterious factors, which can give rise to paranoia, frustration, and a deep sense of injustice. The inability to understand or influence this "algorithmic boss" further reinforces feelings of helplessness and a lack of control, which are highly unfavorable conditions for mental health. Kellogg et al. (2020) identify that algorithmic management through "algorithmic control" creates a significant information asymmetry, which triggers anxiety and feelings of alienation as workers lose autonomy over their own work processes.

The loss of protection against unilateral termination of employment is another critical aspect of vulnerability. A gig worker can effectively be "fired" that is, deactivated or blocked from the platform due to violations of terms and conditions, an accumulation of poor ratings, or even without a clear explanation. The appeal process is often difficult and inhumane, conducted through automated channels. The threat of losing access to the platform, which may be an individual's sole source of income, hangs over their head like the sword of Damocles. This existential threat produces a state of high anxiety and vigilance regarding every interaction with customers or the system, as one minor mistake could lead to fatal consequences. Work life is colored by the fear of discretionary and disproportionate punishment, creating an environment that is psychologically highly unsafe. Sutherland et al. (2020) highlight that

vulnerability to instant deactivation without due process is a unique existential stressor in the gig economy, deepening the sense of job insecurity far beyond what is experienced in traditional employment.

The cumulative impact of these conditions on mental health can be observed through the lens of the transactional model of stress. Economic uncertainty, the absence of safety nets, and the threat of deactivation are chronic stressors that constantly demand psychological adjustment. A worker's personal resources, such as optimism, self-efficacy, and coping abilities, are gradually eroded by these ceaseless demands. When environmental demands consistently exceed the resources available to manage them, individuals become vulnerable to psychological disorders. Biological stress mechanisms may also remain continuously activated, which in the long term is linked to issues such as anxiety, depression, cardiovascular disease, and impaired immune function. Glavin et al. (2021) found in large-scale research that income fluctuations and schedule uncertainty in self-employed workers correlate strongly with sleep disturbances and psychological distress due to the prolonged activation of the biological stress system.

The interaction between uncertainty and the loss of protection also impacts the realm of relationships outside of work. Financial stress and anxiety about the future can create tension within family relationships and friendships. Someone who is constantly worried about their income may become irritable, withdrawn, or unable to participate in social activities that involve costs. This can undermine the last remaining informal social support systems they possess, further isolating them and reducing vital channels for stress release. Thus, the vulnerability originating from the work structure can seep into and weaken personal buffer networks, accelerating the downward spiral of psychological well-being. Brawley and Pury (2016) suggest that erratic workloads in the gig economy often lead to conflict between work roles and personal life, which in turn diminishes the quality of interpersonal relationships and exacerbates feelings of social isolation.

A review of these dynamics reveals that uncertainty in the gig economy goes far beyond mere income fluctuations (Russo & Terraneo, 2020). It is a pervasive condition that affects the perception of time, sense of control, self-identity, and existential security. The loss of formal social safety nets leaves not only a financial void but also a psychological one the absence of

guaranteed assistance that allows an individual to take risks, recover from setbacks, and plan for the future with confidence (Llosa et al., 2018). The combination of these two factors creates fertile ground for the development of psychological pathologies. A work environment designed in such a way essentially places the full burden of adaptation and resilience on the individual, while eliminating the collective and institutional mechanisms that, in other forms of work, serve to distribute risk and provide support.

Economic uncertainty and the absence of social safety nets in the gig economy operate as a powerful and synergistic engine for generating mental health vulnerabilities. They are not merely standalone risk factors but rather mutually reinforcing systems. Uncertainty removes the stability necessary for planning and peace of mind, while the loss of protection removes the buffer that could withstand shocks when that uncertainty turns into a harsh reality. This interaction produces a psychological state characterized by chronic anxiety, feelings of helplessness, emotional exhaustion, and existential fear. This analysis provides a clear basis for understanding why work in the gig economy, despite offering nominal flexibility, can become a psychologically hazardous environment. This foundation of vulnerability is then further reinforced by another dimension of the gig work experience, namely social isolation, which will be discussed in the next section. This phenomenon is validated by Howard (2017), who argues that the shift of risk from organizations to individuals in the gig economy creates a systemic "precarity," where financial insecurity and the absence of social benefits directly correlate with increased levels of psychosocial stress and the degradation of long-term well-being.

Social Isolation and the Erosion of Community: Strengthening the Psychological Burden

The operational model of the gig economy, which distributes workers geographically and connects them through digital interfaces, inherently produces a distinct form of social isolation. Unlike temporary, optional isolation, isolation in the gig economy is a structural condition inherent in the job design. Workers, such as drivers or couriers, spend most of their working time alone in a vehicle, interacting briefly with customers whose relationship is purely transactional. Professional freelancers may work from home or co-working spaces, but they are disconnected from

organizational culture, shared rituals, and the spontaneous conversations that form social networks in traditional workplaces. The absence of physically present and continuous colleagues eliminates opportunities to share daily work experiences, exchange grievances in an atmosphere of solidarity, or celebrate small achievements together. In fact, social engagement and a strong group identity are essential to counter the negative impacts of stigma or feelings of alienation in multicultural societies (Pakpahan et al., 2022). This gap creates a social vacuum where the subjective experiences of workers lose the space to be validated or normalized by others who understand the same work pressures.

This isolation has a direct impact on psychological coping processes. Social support from colleagues functions as an effective stress buffer; casual hallway conversations or chats during coffee breaks can provide new perspectives, practical advice, or simply an opportunity to release emotional pressure. In the gig economy, these release channels are severed. Stressors arising from algorithmic uncertainty, difficult customer behavior, or technical failures must be borne alone. Efforts to improve psychological well-being can actually be carried out through good emotion management in daily life (Irfan & Darmawan, 2021). Without space for emotional ventilation and receiving social feedback, negative experiences tend to be internalized and magnified within the individual's mind. A driver who receives an unfairly poor rating, for example, has no colleagues to talk to about the incident, seek support from, or hear similar stories from others that could reduce personal offense. Consequently, such events can become a source of prolonged rumination and crystallized feelings of victimization, adding to a stress burden that should otherwise be distributed through social interaction.

The erosion of formal work communities also means the loss of an important source of collective identity. Work is often a central component of an individual's self-identity, and that identity is partly formed through comparison and social recognition within a peer group. A nurse identifies themselves as part of a nursing community; a teacher as part of an educator community. These communities provide a sense of belonging, shared ethical standards, and a collective narrative about the value of their work. Gig workers, in contrast, often struggle to define a coherent professional identity. They may call themselves "drivers" or "freelancers," but these labels rarely evoke a strong sense of togetherness

or established collective pride. Their identities tend to be atomistic and competitive, as each individual is essentially a potential competitor to others in vying for limited tasks. Unsupportive institutional conditions and practical constraints within this work structure often hinder the transition toward a more sustainable and collaborative work ecosystem (Mardikaningsih & Darmawan, 2023). This lack of a positive collective identity can weaken professional self-esteem and leave individuals more vulnerable to feelings of worthlessness or replaceability.

Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in the gig economy further reinforce the dynamics of isolation and competition. Rating systems and customer reviews create a highly individualistic and public form of accountability. One's performance is constantly measured, judged, and displayed, often without a fair appeal mechanism or contextual explanation. However, this monitoring process is not accompanied by the guidance or developmental support typically provided by supervisors or mentors in hierarchical structures. In fact, supervisory support and self-efficacy are key factors in increasing work effectiveness, especially when work burnout begins to emerge as a hindering variable (Putra & Darmawan, 2024). Workers receive ratings but do not receive direction. They are ranked but not nurtured. The relationship with the platform entity is unidirectional and instrumental, eliminating the dimensions of human recognition and constructive feedback that can foster growth and resilience. This form of algorithmic surveillance can create a feeling of being constantly watched yet simultaneously ignored a psychologically damaging combination.

The absence of an organized community structure also has serious pragmatic consequences for mental health. In conventional work, if an employee shows signs of severe psychological distress, there may be colleagues, supervisors, or HR departments who notice and offer assistance or referrals. The gig economy lacks such institutionalized early detection systems or helplines. No one will ask why a worker's performance has suddenly declined or why they have been inactive for several days. In place of this lost institutional support, family support becomes an extremely crucial element in maintaining work-life balance and the general well-being of the worker (Hariani & Mardikaningsih, 2023). Workers experiencing a mental crisis, such as panic attacks or major depressive episodes, can fall

entirely through the cracks of the system. They lack access to Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) or sick leave policies that could protect them while they recover. This structural isolation means that mental health issues must reach a very high level of severity perhaps to the point of threatening the ability to work at all before there is any response, and even then, the response is usually a penalty from the platform rather than support.

Workers' efforts to build alternative communities or informal support networks often run into structural barriers. Although there are social media groups or online forums where drivers or freelancers gather virtually, their effectiveness as a psychological buffer is limited. First, interactions in these virtual spaces are often still colored by a spirit of competition and distrust, as group members are essentially competitors on the same platform. Second, the support that can be provided is limited in nature and cannot replace physical presence and institutional support. Third, the platform companies themselves may view such organic groups with suspicion, seeing them as potential means for organization and collective demands. Thus, the solidarity that emerges is fragmented and lacks the power to change the working conditions that are the primary source of pressure. Psychological capital must be developed as a strategic asset for individuals to remain capable of improving performance amidst a competitive and isolated environment (Hariani & Putra, 2024).

The social isolation experienced by gig workers also limits their access to information and resources that could enhance mental resilience. In an office environment, knowledge on how to manage stress, advocate for oneself, or access mental health services can spread through informal conversations or company-initiated programs. Isolated gig workers may not be aware of affordable mental health services available in their community or effective stress management techniques. They also lack "social proof" regarding the normality of or ways to overcome specific problems, which can reinforce the feeling that they are alone in facing difficulties. This information deficit, coupled with a lack of social support, creates an environment where mental health issues tend to go undetected, undiagnosed, and untreated. This aligns with the argument by Bajwa et al. (2018), which states that platform workers often lack the institutional and social "buffers" typically provided by traditional workplaces, forcing them to bear occupational health and safety risks alone without adequate guidance.

The psychological impact of this isolation is closely linked to the concept of loneliness, defined as a painful feeling of being socially disconnected. Loneliness is not the same as physical solitude; one can feel lonely even in a crowd. Gig workers, despite physically interacting with dozens of customers every day, can experience profound loneliness due to the shallow, functional, and emotionally detached nature of those interactions. Chronic loneliness has been widely recognized in research as a significant risk factor for various mental and physical health problems, including depression, anxiety, and cognitive decline. Thus, the structural isolation of the gig economy not only removes social support but actively fosters conditions of loneliness that are toxic to psychological well-being. Fieseler et al. (2019) confirm that interactions that are transactional and mediated by algorithms tend to ignore the human dimension of work, which ultimately triggers the degradation of psychological well-being due to the loss of social meaning in daily work activities.

The relationship between isolation and the economic vulnerability discussed previously is also cyclical. Financial stress can lead to withdrawal from social activities that require costs, further exacerbating isolation (Apouey et al., 2020). Conversely, isolation can reduce the motivation and energy to seek additional job opportunities or develop new skills that could increase income. A worker who feels disconnected and depressed may be less motivated to go online on the platform during peak hours or less persistent in marketing their services as a freelancer (Wang et al., 2022). Stress that accumulates in the absence of organizational solutions often increases turnover intention or the desire of workers to leave their profession (Hariani & Issalillah, 2021). Thus, social isolation can become a factor that strengthens the trap of economic uncertainty, creating a negative cycle where psychological problems and economic problems reinforce each other, and both are worsened by the lack of a network to provide intervention or support.

Isolation in the gig economy must also be seen as a major barrier to collective advocacy for better working conditions and more adequate protection. The history of improving working conditions from reducing working hours to providing health insurance has often been achieved through organization and collective pressure from workers. The atomized and isolated work structure of the gig economy effectively divides the

workforce, making it extremely difficult to articulate and fight for common interests related to mental health and well-being. The individual helplessness resulting from uncertainty, as discussed earlier, is thus reinforced by collective inability. Workers not only feel helpless as individuals but also lack the channels to transform that feeling into collective action that could change the system. This structured powerlessness is an additional psychological burden, fostering a sense of resignation and apathy. This condition aligns with the findings of Wood et al. (2019), who state that the decentralized nature of platform work creates significant challenges for worker solidarity, as algorithms replace human supervision and limit the peer interactions that serve as the foundation of traditional organizing.

Addressing this isolation requires an approach that moves beyond individual solutions, such as advising workers to "be more socially active." The root of the problem lies in the work architecture itself, which separates workers from one another and centralizes all communication through transactional platforms. Therefore, any intervention aimed at reducing the mental health burden in the gig economy must seriously consider how to rebuild elements of social connectivity and peer support into the work ecosystem, albeit in forms that suit a decentralized work model. Without efforts to restore the social dimension of work, other attempts to improve mental well-being may be less effective, as they ignore the fundamental human need for connection and community. Veen et al. (2020) emphasize that because platforms neglect their social responsibilities, gig workers are often forced to create "informal social spaces" outside the platform to obtain the emotional support that their work system does not provide.

Social isolation in the gig economy functions as a significant amplifier and multiplier of the psychological burden stemming from economic uncertainty. It transforms individual stressors into confined and magnified experiences, removing the natural mechanisms of peer support and social validation that could dampen their impact. Isolation erodes collective professional identity, deepens the sense of replaceability, and creates an environment where loneliness can flourish. Furthermore, this isolation cripples the capacity for collective coping and advocacy, leaving workers alone to face systemic pressures. Thus, this analysis reveals that mental

health challenges in the gig economy are not only the result of what is present namely uncertainty and the loss of protection but are also heavily influenced by what is absent, namely work community, social support, and meaningful human relationships in the workplace. As concluded by Bentley et al. (2021), social isolation is a strong predictor of psychological distress in self-employed workers, where the absence of organizational support exacerbates the negative impacts of high workloads and financial insecurity. It is the combination of active pressure and the absence of a buffer that forms the highly challenging mental health landscape for gig workers.

Conclusion

This literature review has revealed a close and complex relationship between the structure of the gig economy and the mental health of workers, focusing on three main pillars: economic uncertainty, social isolation, and the loss of social safety nets. The analysis shows that uncertainty is not merely an economic variable, but a chronic psychological condition that paralyzes planning abilities, erodes a sense of control, and fosters existential anxiety. This uncertainty is exacerbated exponentially by the absence of formal social protection against health risks, accidents, and old age, leaving workers in a state of absolute vulnerability. Meanwhile, the social isolation inherent in this decentralized work model removes the natural buffering mechanism of peer support and professional community. The combination of active pressure (uncertainty) and the absence of buffers (isolation and loss of protection) creates a work environment that systemically undermines psychological well-being. This environment facilitates the development of anxiety, depression, feelings of helplessness, emotional exhaustion, and chronic loneliness, while simultaneously hindering access to both individual and collective coping resources. Thus, it can be concluded that mental health challenges in the gig economy are a direct and predictable consequence of its fragmented, competitive, and unprotective architecture.

The findings of this study carry important implications for various stakeholders. For policymakers, these results confirm that regulatory approaches focusing solely on economic aspects, such as setting minimum rates, are inadequate. Innovative policy frameworks are needed that explicitly include dimensions of mental health and psychosocial well-

being. Such policies could involve creating new legal categories that recognize the special status of platform workers, which, while flexible, still provide pro-rata access to social benefits such as health insurance, sick leave, and portable pension schemes. For platform managers, the implication is the need to consider their ethical responsibilities beyond technical transactions. Algorithm design, rating systems, and assignment models must be re-evaluated to reduce unnecessary uncertainty and increase transparency. Furthermore, platforms can invest in building meaningful virtual community features, providing access to counseling services, or funding peer support programs recognized for reducing isolation. For the wider community and health professions, this study implies the need to recognize gig workers as a population at high risk for mental health issues, thus requiring tailored approaches and services within the public health system.

Based on these findings and implications, several suggestions are proposed. First, further longitudinal research is required to map the development of mental health issues among gig workers over time and identify critical points for intervention. Second, it is suggested to develop and test alternative models of cooperative platforms or worker-owned platforms, where principles of equality, transparency, and social support are integrated into the business model from the start. Third, for practitioners in the field, such as social workers, counselors, and community organizations, it is recommended to proactively design outreach programs and support services that are easily accessible and relevant to the reality of gig work, for example, through mobile applications or mobile clinics operating in areas where workers gather. Fourth, education and training in mental resilience and financial literacy tailored for freelancers need to be developed and disseminated to strengthen individual coping capacities even within an unsupportive system. Finally, a tripartite dialogue between worker representatives (even in the form of new associations), platform companies, and the government must be prioritized to formulate voluntary industry standards that uphold psychological well-being as a parameter for sustainable business success.

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