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The Gig Economy in Nigeria's Digital Media and Creative Industries: Opportunities and Precarity

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Abstract

This article examines the expansion of gig work within Nigeria's digital media and creative industries and asks whether this expansion is better understood as a pathway to inclusion or as a new form of labour insecurity. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, predominantly utilising qualitative documentary analysis supplemented by preliminary survey data, synthesising peer-reviewed scholarship on platform labour and creative work with official Nigerian labour, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and payment-system data. The analysis shows that Nigeria's creative gig economy has grown at the intersection of three dynamics: rapid digital diffusion, the project-based organisation of creative production, and an already informal labour market in which self-employment and informal employment are dominant. On the opportunity side, gig work lowers entry barriers, enables portfolio careers, expands market access for designers, editors, marketers, and creators, and creates pathways into local and transnational client markets. On the precarious side, workers face irregular earnings, non-payment, algorithmic dependence, weak bargaining power, limited social protection, and the transfer of production costs such as connectivity, electricity, and devices to individuals. The article argues that the Nigerian case is best understood as a hybrid labour regime in which platformisation is layered onto pre-existing informality rather than replacing standard employment. This framing contributes to gig-economy scholarship by linking platform governance to African labour-market structure and to the specific logics of cultural and digital production. The paper concludes that the developmental promise of the sector depends on reforms around worker classification, portable benefits, payment security, digital infrastructure, and collective representation.

Keywords: Gig economy; Nigeria; creative industries; platform labour; precarious work.

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INTRODUCTION

The expansion of gig work has become one of the defining features of contemporary labour-market change. Across the world, digital platforms and networked communication tools now connect clients, intermediaries, audiences, and workers in ways that make it easier to break labour into short-term tasks, project contracts, and on-demand services (Graham et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2019a). In the creative industries, this transformation is especially visible. For instance, presently, graphic design, copywriting, video editing, social media management, animation, music promotion, podcast production, and influencer marketing circulate through platform-mediated and digitally coordinated markets, in which workers are expected to be flexible, visible, entrepreneurial, and continuously available (Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Peres et al., 2024).

In Nigeria, the rise of gig work is inseparable from the country's larger digital transition and from the long-standing informality of its labour market. Daodu and Babajide (2024) and Kemp (2025) reported that Nigeria had 165 million mobile connections, 109 million internet users, and 47.8 million social media user identities in late 2025. At the same time, official labour data showed that the majority of work in Nigeria is already outside standard wage employment: the National

Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2024a) reported that 85.6% of employed persons were self-employed and 93.0% were in informal employment in the second quarter of 2024. This context matters analytically. The Nigerian gig economy is not simply a transition from secure employment to platform work; rather, it is a new layer of market coordination built onto an economy where livelihood insecurity, self-employment, and weak social protection have long been widespread.

Nigeria's digital media and creative industries provide a particularly important site for examining this development. The services sector contributed 58.76% of aggregate GDP in the second quarter of 2024, growing by 3.79% year on year (NBS, 2024b). Within this broad services economy, cultural and digital production are increasingly visible in film, music, advertising, software, publishing, communications, and online content creation (Nwankwo, 2018; Ogbonna, 2023). UNESCO (2021) estimated that Africa's film and audiovisual industries currently employ about 5 million people and contribute US$5 billion to continental GDP, with Nigeria producing around 2,500 films annually. Yet, the economic organisation of this activity is not fully captured by formal sector labels. Much of the work is temporary, commissioned, subcontracted, informally negotiated, or monetised through platforms and audience metrics rather than long-term employment contracts (Lobato, 2010; Opesade, 2024).

Interestingly, public discourse often presents this transformation in celebratory terms. The gig economy is said to democratise access to work, empower youth, promote entrepreneurship, and connect Nigerian talent to global opportunity. These claims are not entirely false. Digital gig work can indeed widen access to clients, reduce barriers to market entry, and enable creative workers to combine multiple income streams. However, the same institutional arrangements that create these opportunities described above do not eliminate precarity, such as shifting risks from firms and platforms to individual workers, and income volatility. The challenges are well captured in the finding of Opesade (2024) that Nigerian digital freelancers experience the gig economy as beneficial but highly challenging. Elaborating the precarity further, Opesade (2024) posited that gig workers are paid per task, per project, or per campaign, and workflows are rarely continuous. Significantly, rankings, ratings, algorithmic visibility systems, and project-based contracting broaden access to markets, and simultaneously normalise income volatility, unpaid labour, and weak bargaining power (Anwar & Graham, 2021; Wood et al., 2019a, 2019b).

This article therefore asked two related questions. First, what opportunities does the gig economy create within Nigeria's digital media and creative industries? Second, how do those opportunities coexist with and reproduce labour precarity? The paper argued that Nigeria's creative gig economy is best understood as a hybrid labour regime shaped by the interaction of platformisation, entrenched informality, project-based cultural production, and infrastructural inequality. This argument contributes to scholarship in three ways. It contextualises gig work within African labour-market structure rather than treating Western standard employment as the default baseline. It connects literature on platform labour to literature on cultural and creative production. Finally, it shows that opportunity and precarity in Nigeria's creative gig economy are not opposing outcomes but co-produced effects of the same digital and institutional arrangements.

METHODOLOGY

The article adopts a mixed-methods approach, predominantly utilising qualitative documentary analysis supplemented by preliminary survey data. Documentary analysis is appropriate where the research problem requires the systematic interpretation of existing texts, reports, statistics, and policy materials in order to identify patterns, categories, and social meanings (Bowen, 2009).

To contextualise the documentary data and ground the research in the practical realities of Nigerian digital freelancers, a scoping survey was conducted. The study employed a volunteer sampling technique to select the survey respondents. Participants were recruited through open invitations distributed across professional digital platforms and creative networks, allowing individuals who met the inclusion criteria to willingly opt into the study. The final sample's demographic distribution accounted for 22 respondents in the employee category—who engage in gig work concurrently with formal employment—alongside full-time independent digital freelancers. This volunteer-based primary data provided crucial initial insights that guided the thematic coding of the secondary data.

The documentary corpus for this study comprises three categories of material. The first category consists of peer-reviewed academic literature on the gig economy, algorithmic management, digital labour, creative work, and African platform economies. The second includes official and quasi-official datasets and reports, especially publications from the National Bureau of Statistics, the Central Bank of Nigeria, UNESCO, and DataReportal. The third includes current scholarly and industry-facing work on the creator economy and platformised cultural production. Documents were selected on the basis of relevance to Nigeria or Sub-Saharan Africa, conceptual value for understanding digital creative labour, and recency, especially for labour-market, GDP, payment, and digital-adoption data.

The materials were read comparatively and coded thematically around six issues: labour-market context, digital infrastructure, opportunity structures, precarity mechanisms, platform governance, and policy implications. Bringing together macro-level evidence, volunteer survey insights, and existing research allows this study to produce a coherent explanatory account of how Nigeria's creative gig economy is organised and why its opportunities are inseparable from its vulnerabilities.

Nigeria's digital media and creative industries as a gig-work ecosystem

Nigeria's digital media and creative industries are not a single sector in any narrow statistical sense. They cut across film, music, online publishing, advertising, software, design, digital marketing, social media content, and a growing creator economy. This dispersion partly explains why the sector is frequently celebrated in public discourse but harder to quantify in official accounts. As Nwankwo (2018) argued, Nigeria's creative industries have substantial cultural visibility and economic potential, yet sector mapping and coherent policy support remain weak. Ogbonna (2023) similarly showed that even where specific subsectors, such as software, demonstrate clear potential, growth is constrained by infrastructural, skills, and financing challenges.

Over the past decade, the degree to which cultural production, promotion, and monetisation have become platform dependent has increased. Nieborg and Poell (2018) described platformisation as the penetration of platform infrastructures and market logics into cultural production. This idea is especially useful in the Nigerian context. Many creative workers do not depend exclusively on formal labour platforms such as Upwork or Fiverr; they also obtain gigs through Instagram pages, WhatsApp referrals, Telegram groups, YouTube channels, TikTok visibility, and direct messaging networks. Platformisation, in other words, should be understood broadly: not merely as participation in a freelance marketplace, but as the wider reorganisation of discovery, distribution, payment, reputation, and audience-building through digital platforms.

The enabling conditions for this ecosystem are visible in current digital and payment data. Nigeria's high levels of mobile and internet adoption create a large social and commercial environment for online promotion, content circulation, and remote service delivery (Kemp, 2025). Payment infrastructure has also deepened. The Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN, 2024) reported that internet transfers accounted for 51.91% of e-payment volume and 52.95% of e-payment value in the first half of 2024; during that period, internet transactions reached 11.64 billion in volume and N825.50 trillion in value. For creative gig work, this matters because digital labour markets require not only visibility but also payment rails that make remote contracting, milestone billing, audience monetisation, and cross-platform commerce possible.

The structure of creative labour itself also favours gigification. Cultural production is inherently project based: a campaign, a film edit, a logo package, a rollout plan, a music video, a season of podcast episodes, a brand account, or a series of posts. Firms and clients often need specialised skills intermittently rather than continuously. This creates demand for flexible commissioning and subcontracting. In Nigeria, such demand comes not only from formal corporations but also from start-ups, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), churches, political organisations, entertainment brands, and individual creators. The result is a broad market for short-term creative labour that sits somewhere between entrepreneurship, informal self-employment, and subcontracted digital work.

It is useful to distinguish two overlapping segments within this ecosystem. The first is client-facing freelance work, in which workers sell services such as design, editing, copywriting, digital marketing, account management, and production support to paying clients. The second is audience-facing creator labour, in which individuals build audiences on platforms and attempt to monetise attention through advertising, sponsorship, affiliate links, subscriptions, or brand partnerships (Peres et al., 2024; Rieder et al., 2023). The distinction matters because the revenue models differ, but the two forms increasingly overlap. A social media manager may also be a creator; a video editor may use content creation to attract clients; a musician may rely on freelance promotional labour while simultaneously monetising audience attention. In both cases, work is shaped by visibility systems, data metrics, and platform rules.

Opportunities in the creative gig economy

Labour-market entry and livelihood absorption

The first major opportunity created by the gig economy is labour-market entry. In an economy where standard formal employment remains limited, digital gig work offers an accessible route through which young people and skilled workers can monetise capabilities that might otherwise remain underused. Nigeria's labour-force data underline this point. With self-employment already dominant and informal employment pervasive, gig work functions less as an exceptional arrangement than as a digitally mediated form of livelihood absorption (NBS, 2024a). For many workers, especially younger entrants, the practical comparison is not between freelancing and secure salaried employment, but between freelancing and joblessness, underemployment, or low-return informal work.

This does not mean all barriers disappear. Access still depends on devices, skills, connectivity, language proficiency, and social networks. But compared with the capital requirements of many offline ventures, digital creative freelancing often has a lower threshold of entry. A laptop, smartphone, editing software, basic connectivity, and a portfolio can be enough to begin. Opesade's (2024) study of Nigerian digital freelancers reinforced this point: workers are drawn to gig work because it offers immediacy, flexibility, and an identifiable route to income generation, even if that route is unstable.

Portfolio careers, entrepreneurial agency, and transnational reach

A second opportunity lies in the expansion of portfolio careers. Instead of depending on one employer, workers can combine projects across multiple clients, sectors, and platforms. This diversification can create a degree of autonomy and reduce dependence on a single source of income. Graham et al. (2017) noted that digital labour platforms can allow workers to transcend the limits of local labour markets by reaching geographically distant clients. For Nigerian creatives, this may mean working for a Lagos fashion brand, an Abuja NGO, and an overseas start-up within the same month. In some cases, it also creates access to foreign-currency earnings and global professional exposure.

This opportunity is especially significant in creative fields where reputation and demonstrable output matter more than formal organisational rank. A well-curated portfolio, strong client testimonials, and visible work on social platforms can substitute, at least partially, for traditional career ladders. Gig work can therefore operate as a mode of entrepreneurial self-construction. Workers learn to package services, brand themselves, negotiate prices, and translate creative skill into commercial offerings. This entrepreneurial dimension helps explain the appeal of gig work to many Nigerian creatives. It aligns with wider social narratives of hustle, self-reliance, and youth enterprise, but it also has practical value in building adaptable careers in volatile labour markets.

Skills development and sectoral spillovers

A third opportunity lies in accelerated learning and cross-sector mobility. Gig workers acquire a mix of technical, relational, and commercial skills by handling diverse briefs across industries. Designers learn brand strategy; editors learn campaign thinking; content creators learn analytics, audience development, and platform-specific optimisation. These forms of practical learning can be quicker and more market responsive than those available in many formal employment settings.

The opportunity extends beyond individual careers. Nigeria's wider creative economy depends heavily on flexible specialist labour. Nollywood productions, music releases, digital advertising campaigns, software products, and creator brands all rely on workers who can be mobilised rapidly for discrete tasks. In this sense, gig work supplies organisational flexibility to the sector as a whole. Nwankwo (2018) and Ogbonna (2023) both suggested that Nigeria's creative industries possess considerable growth potential but require more effective ecosystems to translate talent into durable value. The gig economy partially addresses this need by making creative skills more searchable, more modular, and more commercially deployable.

The creator economy adds a further layer of opportunity. Peres et al. (2024) showed that digital platforms allow individuals to transform creative output into monetisable micro-enterprises, while Rieder et al. (2023) demonstrated that creators increasingly diversify revenue through cross-platform linking and multiple income streams. In Nigeria, where youth culture, music, humour, fashion, and commentary circulate strongly online, this opens spaces for creators to build brands and for support workers—editors, designers, managers, and strategists—to sell services around them. The result is not merely more content but a broader service ecology of digital creative labour.

Precarity and structural constraints

Income volatility, weak bargaining power, and unpaid labour

The opportunities described above do not eliminate precarity; they often reorganise it. The most immediate problem is income volatility. Gig workers are paid per task, per project, or per campaign, and workflows are rarely continuous. Periods of intense activity are followed by dry spells. Opesade (2024) found that Nigerian digital freelancers experience the gig economy as beneficial but highly challenging, a judgment that captures this tension well. The absence of stable salaries makes planning difficult, especially in an inflationary environment where the costs of data, electricity, software, and devices remain substantial.

Bargaining power is also typically weak. Graham et al. (2017) showed that workers on digital labour platforms face asymmetrical conditions in which clients and intermediaries are better positioned to set terms. In the Nigerian creative context, these asymmetries appear in rate suppression, delayed payment, uncompensated revisions, and "scope creep," where clients expand deliverables without proportional increases in pay. The glamour attached to creative work can further obscure the labour involved, leading some clients to treat design, content, or editing as inexpensive add-ons rather than skilled professional services.

Moreover, gig earnings often rest on significant quantities of unpaid work. Workers spend time prospecting, pitching, revising samples, posting content, maintaining portfolios, nurturing audiences, and managing communications. This labour is essential to income generation but not directly remunerated. Wood et al. (2019b) described such dynamics as part of a broader commodification process that exposes workers to market discipline without adequate institutional shielding. For Nigerian creatives, the problem is intensified by the absence of robust contractual enforcement and by the normalisation of informal business practices.

Algorithmic management and the politics of visibility

A second cluster of constraints stems from platform governance. Wood et al. (2019a) argued that the promise of autonomy in the gig economy coexists with algorithmic control. Ratings, rankings, performance scores, search visibility, and client-review systems structure access to work and can compel workers to accept unreasonable conditions in order to protect reputation metrics. Anwar and Graham (2021) similarly showed that African gig workers operate within systems that offer flexibility while simultaneously producing vulnerability, dependence, and constrained agency.

Although some Nigerian creative work is organised off formal labour platforms, visibility itself has become algorithmically mediated across the wider digital environment. Duffy and Meisner (2023) showed that creators on social media are subject to platform governance through opaque forms of algorithmic (in)visibility. This insight is relevant well beyond influencer labour. A designer depends on discoverability on Instagram or X; a writer depends on search, shares, or platform engagement; a videographer depends on visibility signals that help attract clients; a creator-manager depends on platforms that can change monetisation rules, moderation standards, or recommendation systems without negotiation. In all these cases, visibility is not merely promotional; it is part of the labour process.

This produces a specific form of insecurity. Workers must constantly optimise for discoverability without controlling the systems that determine it. They are pushed to remain active, responsive, and strategically visible, yet a change in algorithmic ranking, content moderation, or account status can sharply reduce income opportunities. Adekoya et al. (2023) showed, in the Nigerian platform context, that algorithmic management reshapes employment relations by embedding control within digital systems rather than face-to-face supervision. While their study focuses on ride-hailing, the broader insight travels to digital creative work: technology can intensify labour discipline while leaving workers formally classified as independent.

Social protection gaps, informality, and infrastructural precarity

The most serious structural problem may be the absence of social protection. Gig workers are generally excluded from employer-provided pensions, health insurance, paid leave, unemployment protection, and institutional grievance procedures. This is because they are usually treated as contractors rather than employees. In a context where formal welfare coverage is already limited, this exclusion is highly consequential. Ajonbadi et al. (2025) showed that questions of voice, representation, and decent work remain central in the Nigerian gig economy, especially because workers often lack formal channels through which to contest unfair treatment or improve conditions.

This is where the Nigerian case departs from simplified narratives of platform disruption. In contexts with stronger labour protections, platform work often appears as the erosion of a previously dominant standard employment model. In Nigeria, by contrast, platformised creative labour frequently extends pre-existing informal conditions into digital space. Lobato's (2010) analysis of Nollywood as an informal creative economy is instructive here: informality has long been central to Nigerian cultural production. What digital platforms do is not erase this history but reorganise it through new systems of searchability, data capture, payment, and reputation. The result is a hybrid condition in which old and new precarities accumulate.

Infrastructural inequality compounds the problem. Participation in the creative gig economy requires reliable electricity, devices, data, software, and payment access, yet the costs and uncertainties associated with these inputs are borne mostly by workers themselves. Digital adoption in Nigeria is substantial (Kemp, 2025), but access remains uneven, and connectivity is not equivalent to frictionless work capacity. Even when demand exists, workers may lose productive time to power outages, connectivity failures, device breakdowns, or payment bottlenecks. The CBN's (2024) data demonstrated that digital payments are deeply embedded in everyday transactions, but scale at the payments layer does not automatically translate into equitable working conditions at the labour layer.

Discussion and policy implications

The central finding of this article is that the Nigerian creative gig economy cannot be explained by either celebratory entrepreneurship narratives or generic precarity arguments alone. It should instead be understood as a hybrid labour regime in which platformisation is layered onto entrenched informality. This interpretation helps reconcile the sector's contradictory features. Gig work expands access to clients, income opportunities, and creative entrepreneurship, but it does so through labour arrangements that individualise risk, intensify competition, and weaken institutional protection.

This framing contributes to the literature in at least three respects. First, it challenges the tendency to treat standard employment as the implicit baseline from which gig work deviates. In Nigeria, the baseline for many workers is already informal, self-employed, and insecure (NBS, 2024a). Second, it extends scholarship on digital labour by bringing cultural and creative production to the centre of analysis. Creative work is not a minor niche within the gig economy; it is one of the most visible arenas in which platform logics now shape labour. Third, it shows that client-facing freelancing and audience-facing creator labour, although organised differently, are linked by common dependencies on visibility, metrics, and weak social protection.

Policy responses therefore need to move beyond the binary of either celebrating innovation or attempting to force all gig work into existing employment categories without nuance. The immediate priority is the improvement of minimum conditions of decent work. This includes clearer rules around contracts, payment terms, intellectual property, and dispute resolution; more adaptable social-protection mechanisms for self-employed digital workers; and greater accountability for platforms and intermediaries whose design choices shape visibility and bargaining power. Ajonbadi et al. (2025) made a strong case that voice and representation are central to decent work in the Nigerian platform economy. Their insight applies directly to creative labour, where freelancers often remain atomised even when they share common problems.

There is also a case for ecosystem-level support. Nwankwo (2018) and Ogbonna (2023) both suggested that Nigeria's creative industries need stronger policy coordination if their economic promise is to be realised. For gig workers, this means more than generic entrepreneurship rhetoric. It requires affordable broadband, more reliable electricity, improved digital-payment interoperability, accessible legal literacy on contracts and intellectual property, and training that combines technical skills with pricing, client management, and business sustainability. Informal peer communities already perform some of these functions. Wood et al. (2018) showed that online worker communities can offer protection, information, and solidarity, while Ajonbadi et al. (2025) documented the importance of both formal and informal voice channels in Nigeria. Public policy should strengthen rather than ignore these associational infrastructures.

Conclusion

The gig economy has become a major organisational form within Nigeria's digital media and creative industries. Its growth is driven by digital diffusion, project-based production, and a labour market in which self-employment and informality are already dominant. This article has shown that the sector generates meaningful opportunities: it widens entry into paid work, supports portfolio careers, improves market reach, and enables new forms of creative entrepreneurship. At the same time, it reproduces serious forms of precarity through income volatility, weak bargaining power, algorithmic dependence, limited social protection, and worker-borne infrastructural costs.

The Nigerian case therefore demands a more context-sensitive understanding of the gig economy. The central issue is not whether gig work is simply good or bad. It is that the same structures that make creative work more accessible also make it more insecure. The article's main contribution has been to conceptualise this condition as a hybrid labour regime shaped by both platformisation and pre-existing informality.

Further research should now move beyond macro-synthesis to sector-specific empirical work. Interviews and longitudinal studies are needed on digital creators, freelance designers, editors, strategists, and production workers across regions and subsectors. Comparative work should examine differences between client-based freelancing and audience-based creator labour, as well as the gendered and regional inequalities that structure access to visibility, income, and protection. Only by connecting digital opportunity to labour conditions can scholarship and policy fully assess the developmental significance of Nigeria's creative gig economy.

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