The Landscape of Gig Work in Malaysia: A Systematic Review of Practice and Challenges

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Abstract

This systematic literature review explores the nature of current practice and the challenges of gig workers in using digital platforms in Malaysia. Seven peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2024 were analysed based on Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020). The reviewers identify key practices such as expansion, low entry barriers, flexibility, reliance on algorithm systems, and significant challenges, including algorithm control, workload, stress, and income instability. Despite the growing presence of gig workers in Malaysia, limited studies have holistically examined how these digital platforms have influenced gig workers' daily practices and experiences. This review presents the gap by synthesizing fragmented findings and provides a wide view of digital labour and practice. This study contributes to the literature by offering a contextual understanding of how digital platforms influence gig workers' natures, working patterns, and experiences, thus supporting future research and insight to improve digital platforms' functionality and user experiences.
Keywords: Gig Economy, Digital Platform, Systematic Literature Review, Gig Workers

Introduction

The gig economy in Malaysia has experienced rapid growth in recent years, particularly with the rise of digital platforms such as Grab and Foodpanda, which offer flexible and short-term work concepts (MyDigital, 2024). By 2024, around 3 million Malaysians will be involved in gig work compared to 2023, 2.93million (Bernama, 2024). This situation presents the gig sector in Malaysia as rising in the national labor landscape. This sector attracted participants who offered flexibility, and supplementary income and skill development, although it also presented significant challenges such as income instability, pressure, and job insecurity (Shakil & MARA, 2024).

Despite the growing popularity of gig work, Malaysian gig workers face persistent problems such as income instability, algorithmic control, long working hours, and mental

fatigue, as well as operational and structural issues (Samad et al., 2023; Daud et al., 2024), especially among food delivery and ride-hailing workers. While research on the gig workers has increased, most of the studies remain fragmented, often focusing on isolated issues such as worker well-being (Salleh et al., 2023), or legal and social protection (Radzi et al., 2022). A consolidated literature review is essential to ensure a more profound understanding of the current practice and challenges of gig workers in Malaysia in digital platforms (Shakil & MARA, 2024).

Thus, this systematic literature review aims to synthesize the current studies by focusing on publication trends, research approaches, and key themes related to gig work. The review also focused on gig workers' daily experiences and challenges without addressing legal and policy issues. These findings support future researchers and provide practical insight for platform providers and others. The following research questions were developed to conduct this review:

RQ1: What are the publication trends on past literature on gig workers in Malaysia between 2020 and 2024?
RQ2: What research methodologies have been applied in existing literature on gig workers in Malaysia?
RQ3: What are the' main characteristics and focus areas of existing studies on Malaysian gig workers?
RQ4: What are the current practices adopted among gig workers in Malaysia as reported in recent literature?
RQ5: What are the challenges of digital platforms faced by gig workers in Malaysia?

Research Methodology
Identification: Data Search and Keywords
These systematic searches were conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, and ProQuest databases to capture the wide range of peer-reviewed studies. The databases selected in this review were chosen due to their strong indexing, impact, and reliable citation data in different field searches such as social sciences, labour studies, and digital information studies. Boolean operators were used to combine the core keywords such as gig economy, "digital platform," "Malaysia," "challenge," and "current practice. This review earned 298 articles in the selected database. The final search string used in each database is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1
Search Strings and Filters Applied

Database	Search String
Scopus	("gig economy" OR "platform work" OR "digital platform*" OR "online gig*" OR
Wos	"freelance platform*") AND ("current practice*" OR challenge* OR barrier* OR
ProQuest	issue* OR "work practice*") AND (Malaysia)

Screening
All data received from selected databases were exported, and duplicate data will be removed to avoid bias caused by repeated studies. The remaining records were screened based on title and abstract, which included the defined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure high-quality and relevant content. Only selected peer-reviewed journal articles and conference

papers were included in the studies, as they have been verified and are credible in their research findings. The searches were limited to English-language studies published between 2020 and 2024, to ensure the findings reflect recent developments in digital platforms and expansion in the Malaysian gig economy. Studies that did not mention and focused on digital platforms or gig workers in Malaysia were excluded to ensure the review aligns with the research objectives and topics. Additionally, studies that applied book chapters, reviews, and editorials were excluded due to a lack of rigorous peer review standards. Seven recorded studies passed and remained for complete text eligibility assessment.

Table 2
Screening Criteria with Justification

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion	Justification
Language	English	Non-English	Ensures accurate analysis and avoids translation bias.
Timeline	2020 – 2024	< 2020	Focuses on recent developments and studies in gig economy research.
Document Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles, paper	book chapters, reviews, editorial, etc.	Guarantees high-quality, credible, and scholarly findings.
Topic Focus	Gig economy or digital platforms in Malaysia	Studies outside the gig/platform domain	Aligns directly with research objectives on Malaysia's gig economy.

Eligibility
The remaining records were reviewed in the eligibility process to ensure they met all the inclusion standards. Articles included and selected were from studies that provided empirical evidence with critical discussion on current practice and challenges of gig workers in Malaysia. Studies were excluded if they were not directly related to the gig platform, lacked sufficient data, or did not provide full-text access. After the overall process, seven studies were deemed eligible for final analysis.

Quality Appraisal using CASP
To ensure the content transparency and credibility, this review applied the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) in the methodological process. The CASP assessment tool clarifies the research aim, appropriate methodology, recruitment strategy, data collection method, ethical considerations, analysis process, and overall value of the research findings.

Seven studies were evaluated; most clearly stated their research aims and employed the appropriate approaches. All studies demonstrated proper data collection and analysis processes, while ethical considerations were not fully addressed or mentioned in all studies. However, all studies generally provide valuable and relevant findings and data regarding current practice and challenges faced by gig workers on digital platforms in Malaysia.

Table 3

CASP Quality Appraisal Summary of Included Studies

No	Author (s) & Year	Approach	QI	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Overall Quality
1	Abd Samad et al. (2024)	Qualitative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	unclear	Yes	High
2.	Samad et al. (2023)	Qualitative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partial	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	High
3.	Lee et al. (2023)	Quantitative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	High
4	Daud et al. (2024).	Quantitative	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	High
5	Malaysia et al. (2022)	Qualitative	Yes	Yes	Partial	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Moderate
6	Abdullah et al. (2024)	Qualitative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	High
7	Uchiyama et al. (2024).	Qualitative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partial	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	High

CASP question:

Q1: Did the research have a clear statement in the research aims?

Q2: Is the methodology used appropriate?

Q3: Was the research design suitable for explaining the aims?

Q4: Was the recruitment strategy appropriate?

Q5: Was the data collection process adequately applied?

Q6: Has the relationship between the researcher and participants been considered?

Q7: Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?

Q8: Was the data collected sufficiently?

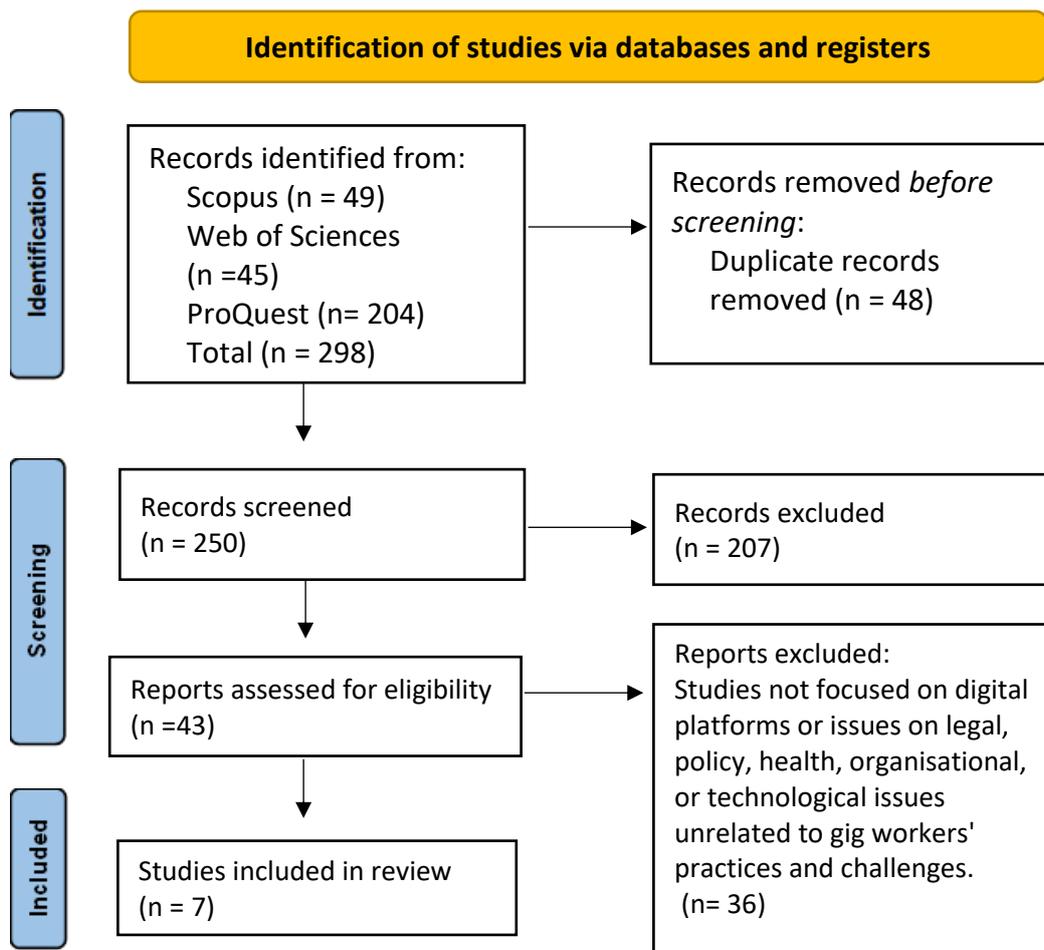Q9: Are the findings clear with supported data?

Figure 1. The Flowchart of PRISMA used in the SLR Study

Analysis

Publication Trends

Based on Figure 2, this systematic literature review examines the past literature in current practice and challenges faced by gig workers in Malaysia between 2020 and 2024. The findings highlight no relevant studies from 2020 to 2021. In contrast, one study was published in 2022, two in 2023, and four in 2024. These upward trends highlight the recent increase in scholars and interest in studies related to the gig economy. The lack of earlier studies provides a potential for future research, particularly in rapid technological evolution impacting the gig workers. This underscores the need for continuous inquiry in capturing the nature and well-being of gig workers in the gig sectors.
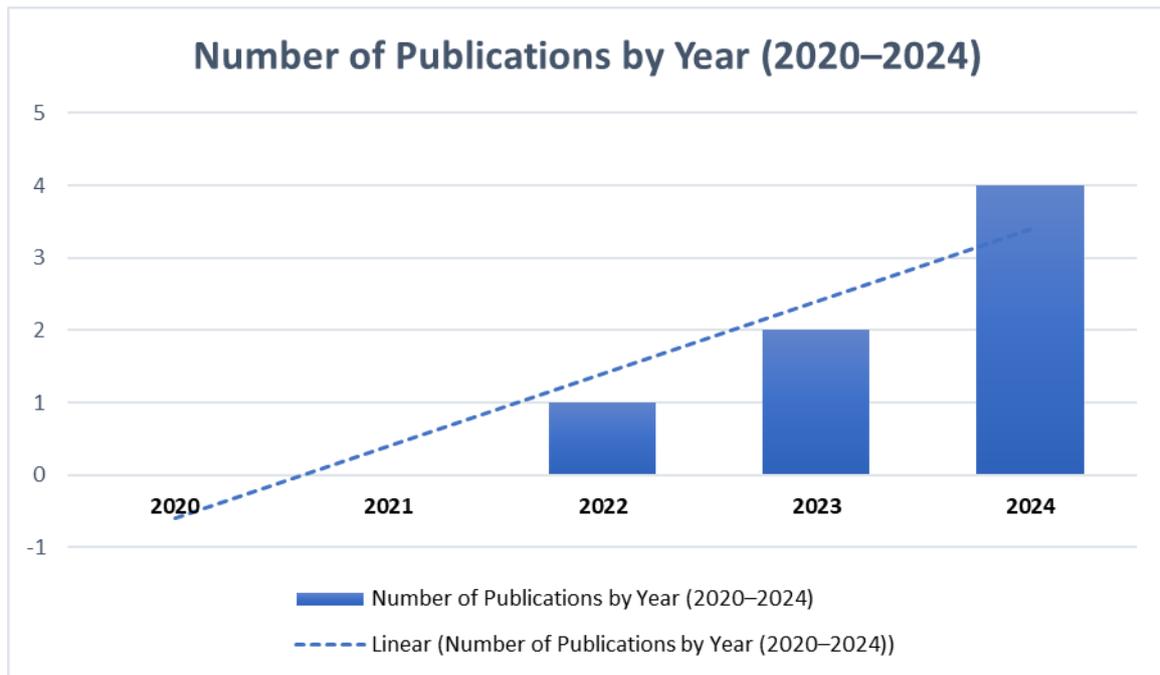
Figure 2. Number of Malaysian Studies by Year (2020–2024)

Methodological Approaches
Based on the reviewed studies, five studies have employed qualitative approaches, while two have adopted quantitative methods. The dominance of qualitative research can emphasize more profound insight into understanding the dynamics of digital platforms in the gig workers industry. The limited number of quantitative studies and mixed methods can provide opportunities for future research to understand better gig workers' working patterns, well-being, and experiences.
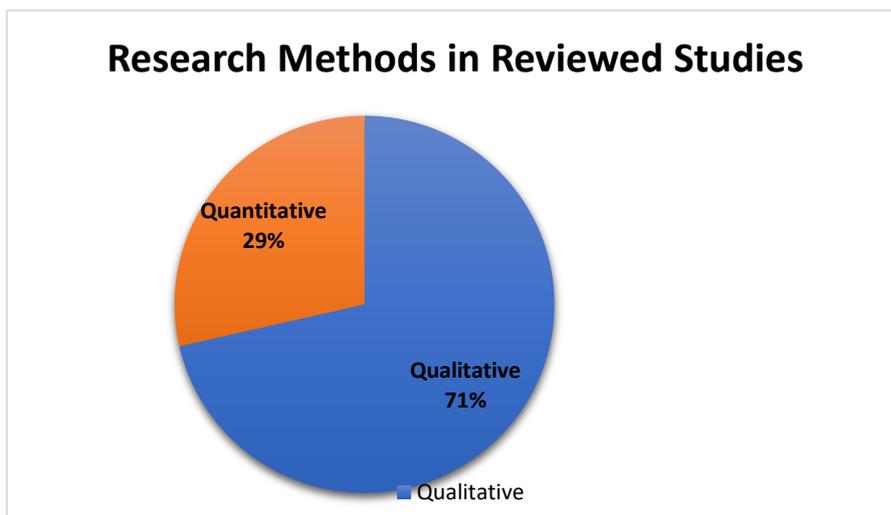

Figure 3. Research Methodologies of Malaysian Studies

Thematic Synthesis

Two dominant themes emerged from the seven Malaysian studies: current practices and challenges. These themes capture the nature and experiences of gig workers using gig platform labour. The themes and sub-themes are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4

Key Themes Identified in Malaysian Studies (2020–2024)

Theme	Sub Themes	Citation
Current Practice	Flexibility in work operations	Abd Samad et al. (2024), Abdullah et al. (2024), Daud et al. (2024)., Lee et al. (2023), Malaysia et al. (2022), Samad et al. (2023), Uchiyama et al. (2024)
	Algorithmic control and performance management	Abdullah et al. (2024), Daud et al. (2024)., Lee et al. (2023), Malaysia et al. (2022), Uchiyama et al. (2024)
	Platform Expansion and Low Entry Barriers	Abd Samad et al. (2024), Daud et al. (2024)., Lee et al. (2023), Uchiyama et al. (2024)
Challenges	Algorithmic control and injustice treatment	Abdullah et al. (2024), Daud et al. (2024)., Lee et al. (2023), Uchiyama et al. (2024)
	Workload management and stress	Abd Samad et al. (2024), Daud et al. (2024)., Lee et al. (2023), Samad et al. (2023).
	Income instability	Abd Samad et al. (2024), Abdullah et al. (2024), Daud et al. (2024)., Lee et al. (2023), Samad et al. (2023), Uchiyama et al. (2024)

Findings and Discussion

This section delivers the findings based on seven selected studies on gig workers' current practice in Malaysia, categorised by two main themes: (1) current practice, and (2) challenges faced by gig workers in digital platforms. Comparative information will also be included to identify the unique comparison between patterns, nature, and overlapping trends.

Current Practice of Gig Workers in Malaysia

Flxibility in Working Operation

All seven studies have indicated flexibility as the main appeal in gig workers' current natures, which allows them to choose their schedules (Abd Samad et al., 2024; Abdullah et al., 2024; Daud et al.,2024; Lee et al., 2023; Malaysia et al., 2022; Samad et al., 2023; Uchiyama et al., 2024). Flexibility is also related to income-based incentives and platform demands, where employees can adjust according to their availability and flexible working hours. While this system includes the self-schedule, actual flexibility is also influenced by the algorithmic structure, resulting in varying degrees of condition.

Compared to the other countries, emerging studies in Western countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom highlight that the platform promotes flexibility in the gig industries as a selling point. However, findings also state that algorithmic control often reflects on autonomy and income shaped by digital management systems (Kellogg et al.,

2020; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Wood et al., 2019). This situation presents the consequences of gig work income instability and well-being and limits the boundaries of their working pattern.

Algorithmic Control and Performance Management
In this review, five Malaysian studies (Abdullah et al., 2024; Daud et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2023; Malaysia et al., 2022; Uchiyama et al., 2024) describe algorithmic control as a significant practice in the current practice of gig workers. The platform's algorithm controls the rating systems, automated performance monitoring, and incentive systems to control the gig workers' behavior.

In the global context, algorithmic control on digital platforms is also well-documented in different countries. For example, Rosenblat and Stark (2016) stated how an invisible algorithm system in gig job distribution and earnings controls Uber drivers. Malaysian past literature echoes these findings but often lacks critical engagement with key issues such as algorithmic control and data transparency, which are more debated in global literature (Tan & Gong, 2024). This suggests that even similar patterns of algorithmic influence exist, but the local findings focus on benefits and system operation rather than structural challenges.

Platform Expansion and Low Entry Barriers
Platform expansion in Malaysia has enabled a greater involvement in gig workers, particularly in food delivery and ride-hailing services (Abd Samad et al., 2024; Daud et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2023; Uchiyama et al., 2024). Gig workers often see the opportunity in the gig sector as easy and low entry level for low-skilled workers, particularly in the B40 income group and youth (Ab Rashid et al., 2023). Access to an easy job allows gig workers to earn an immediate income and flexible working arrangements.

Similarly, in developing countries such as India and Indonesia, the platform offered economic opportunities in informal labour (Tobing, 2024; Kumar, 2024); however, for the developed countries. The platform increasingly targets niche services such as remote freelancing or tech gig jobs, which presents a difference in market maturity (Millar, Stephenson, & Smith, 2019). This suggests Malaysia's gig economy dominates the gig labour sector, which has low skill mobility participation.

Challenges Faced by Malaysian Gig Workers
For challenges, findings found three dominant challenges: (a) Algorithmic Control & Unfair Treatment, (b) Workload Management & Stress, and (c) Income Instability.

Algorithmic Control and Injustice Treatment
Based on the selected studies, four studies reported feelings of unfairness and injustice due to algorithm decisions (Abdullah et al., 2024; Daud et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2023; Uchiyama et al., 2024), such as deactivation, poor ratings, and penalties for the refusal task. Workers reported no mechanism provided to appeal or seek recourse for the issues (Uchiyama et al,

Kellogg et al. (2020), highlight how opaque algorithms control and undermine procedural fairness. However, in Canada, union advocacy has pushed and solved the issues of "explained algorithms" in the gig industry (Ogunde, 2023). These findings reflect that issues

in algorithm control are unilateral and opaque, especially in regions lacking labour protections. Without a revolution in new labour protection, the gig workers will remain vulnerable and face the long, abusive system of exploitation under gig algorithmic management.

Workload Management and Stress
Workload management and stress highlighted four studies based on the selected findings (Abd Samad et al., 2024; Daud et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2023; Samad et al., 2023). Findings documented that gig workers face long working hours. Physical fatigue and mental stress are especially prevalent among food delivery workers. Workers also mentioned working more than 10 hours daily to achieve sufficient income.

This element aligns with global studies, where gig workers in Australia are exposed to various forms of stress due to precarious working conditions (Hafeez et al., 2023). Similarly, in Africa, gig workers experience deprivation, fatigue, and significant mental strain due to long working hours, 80 hours per week (Anwar & Graham, 2021). The consistent findings indicate that the poor workload and excessive working hours lead to mental distress among gig workers globally.

Income Instability
Malaysia studies have shown income instability (Abd Samad et al., 2024; Abdullah et al., 2024; Daud et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2023; Samad et al., 2023; Uchiyama et al., 2024). The findings reveal that workers reported facing inconsistent earnings, delayed payments, and pressure to meet the platform's benefits.

In global issues, income instability has been mentioned as a universal challenge in gig economies (De Stefano, 2016). In Indonesia, gig drivers experience income instability due to salary inequities (Maulana, 2022). In Malaysia, the lower income in the gig industry is caused by a lack of wage enforcement and social protection, unlike the United Kingdom, which has started to regulate the gig workers in contract terms (Deon, 2020).

Conclusion and Future Research
This systematic review investigates the current practices and challenges in digital platforms by gig workers in Malaysia between 2020 and 2024. These findings found the rising trend in these issues, particularly after the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw the sector in food delivery and ride-hailing services receiving the most attention. Most studies applied qualitative approaches and show the limited use of quantitative and mixed methods, highlighting a gap in further investigation. In terms of practices, gig workers commonly participate in gig platforms because of expansion and low entry barriers, flexibility, and reliance on algorithm systems for task allocation. However, significant challenges happened, including algorithm control and unfair treatment, which limit their autonomy, workload, and stress due to long working hours, platform pressure, and income instability due to unpredictable demand.

Despite the growing interest. This review identifies a few gaps in current practices and challenges in digital platforms by gig workers in Malaysia, especially in the working experience, that influence their autonomy, platform control, and wellbeing. First, future studies should further examine digital-related challenges faced by gig workers, particularly in

algorithmic control and automated task management. Despite the growing number of gig digital labourers, there remains a lack of focused studies on how these digital systems influence work, autonomy, and well-being in the Malaysian context.

Second, future research can compare the working experiences across different types of gig workers, such as food delivery services, e-hailing, and freelancers, to identify the differences in specific challenges and responses. In addition, studies can examine how demographics regarding age, education, and income level influence the gig opportunities and risks in gig wellbeing and working conditions.

Finally, future research can investigate by applying other methodological approaches, such as quantitative and mixed methods. Implementing different approaches may offer a new understanding and perspective and enhance a deeper understanding.

Declarations

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