

Quality of work-life and AI intervention: A Scenario-based Netnographic Study of Gig Workforce

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Abstract

The modern life has become more complex due to fast-changing patterns and hyper-competition. The boundary less nature of modern work, intensified by startup and gig-based employment models that prioritize hustle over holistic well-being, has increasingly normalized expectations that personal life must adapt to professional demands. Algorithmic management in platform-mediated workplaces has created unique employment experiences that traditional Quality of Work Life (QWL) frameworks fail to fully capture. Based on an ethnographic analysis of 585 social media posts from Indian gig workers on platforms such as LinkedIn and Reedit between 2023 and 2025, this study proposes an integrated conceptual framework. It highlights how QWL perceptions across key antecedents influence Psychological Well-Being (PWB), with Artificial Intelligence acting as a moderating factor. Findings indicate that opaque algorithmic decisions, unpredictable scheduling, and efficiency-focused monitoring negatively impact well-being, fostering inequity, isolation, and emotional strain. By integrating QWL theory, Leader–Member Exchange perspectives, and algorithmic governance literature, the study advances understanding of AI-mediated work's human consequences.

Keywords- *quality of work life (QWL); psychological well-being (PWB); algorithmic management; gig economy; AI intervention; ethnography*

Submitted: March 15, 2026

Revised: April 25, 2026

Accepted: May 10, 2026

Published: May 20, 2026

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.20559200](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20559200)



1. Introduction

Today's work landscape represents a double-edged reality where blurred boundaries between professional and personal life increasingly compromise employee well-being. The rise of boundary less workplaces, reinforced by digital connectivity and intensified during the COVID-19 period, has normalized expectations that individuals must adapt their lives to work rather than maintain balance. In this environment, employees often face a trade-off between enjoying flexibility at work and preserving work-life equilibrium. Start-ups and entrepreneurial ventures, in particular, are deeply influenced by cultural narratives that glorify hustle, relentless growth, and continuous sacrifice, frequently at the expense of holistic well-being. Psychological Well-Being (PWB) has thus emerged as a critical organizational concern, closely linked to factors such as personal growth, mental health, autonomy, and positive workplace relationships. It is now recognized as having significant implications for both individual fulfillment and organizational performance (Wiklund et al., 2019). At the same time, despite being viewed as hubs of creativity and innovation, start-ups often foster environments characterized by excessive workloads, emotional exhaustion, and a transactional approach to human capital (Lahi & Nurja, 2023). The influence of large technology firms like Meta Platforms, Apple Inc., Amazon, Netflix, and Alphabet Inc. have reinforced a growth-at-all-costs model that startups often emulate, increasing burnout risks. In parallel, the rapid expansion of the gig economy in India, projected to reach millions of workers, has outpaced regulatory and theoretical frameworks, raising concerns about employment conditions governed by algorithmic management. Gig workers, engaged through digital platforms, experience work mediated by AI-driven systems that control task allocation, evaluation, and continuity. This raises critical questions about how

perceptions of Quality of Work Life (QWL) influence Psychological Well-Being (PWB), and how algorithmic systems moderate this relationship, emphasizing the urgent need to align technological advancement with sustainable, human-centric work practices (Bhanot & Gaikwad, 2025).

2. Background of Study

The contemporary work environment, characterized by rapid digitalization, platform-based employment, and boundary less work structures, has significantly transformed the relationship between work and personal life, raising critical concerns about employee well-being. The expansion of startup culture and gig-based employment has intensified performance pressures, often normalizing long working hours, algorithmic supervision, and reduced work-life balance. In this evolving context, Quality of Work Life (QWL) has emerged as a key determinant of Psychological Well-Being (PWB), particularly as employees navigate uncertainty, job flexibility, and digitally mediated work conditions. Traditional organizational frameworks are increasingly inadequate to capture the complexities introduced by Artificial Intelligence (AI)-driven management systems, which influence task allocation, monitoring, and performance evaluation. These developments necessitate a deeper examination of how AI-mediated work environments shape employee experiences and well-being outcomes. This study focuses on understanding the interplay between QWL and PWB in modern work settings, particularly within startup and gig ecosystems, while exploring the moderating role of AI in influencing this relationship and its implications for sustainable, human-centric organizational practices (Wood et al., 2019).

3. Scope and Significance of Study

The scope of this study focuses on examining the relationship between Quality of Work Life (QWL) and Psychological Well-Being (PWB) among employees operating in startup and gig-based work environments, with particular emphasis on the moderating role of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-driven algorithmic management systems. It encompasses the analysis of key dimensions such as work-life balance, job autonomy, workload intensity, and digital monitoring practices, drawing insights from platform-mediated work contexts. The study is primarily contextualized within the Indian gig economy and startup ecosystem, offering a conceptual and analytical framework that can be extended to similar emerging work environments globally. The significance of the study lies in its contribution to bridging the gap between traditional QWL frameworks and contemporary AI-mediated work structures by highlighting the human implications of algorithmic governance. It provides valuable insights for policymakers, organizations, and researchers to design more equitable, transparent, and sustainable work systems that prioritize employee well-being alongside productivity. By integrating perspectives from QWL, Psychological Well-Being, and AI-driven management, the study supports the development of human-centric organizational strategies that enhance employee retention, engagement, and long-term sustainability in the evolving digital economy (Kellogg et al., 2020).

4. Objective of Study

- To examine the relationship between Quality of Work Life (QWL) and Psychological Well-Being (PWB) among employees in startup and gig work environments
- To identify key factors influencing QWL, including work-life balance, job autonomy, workload, and digital work conditions
- To analyze the impact of algorithmic management and Artificial Intelligence (AI) on employee work experiences and well-being
- To evaluate the moderating role of AI-driven systems in shaping the relationship between QWL and PWB
- To propose a conceptual framework for promoting sustainable, human-centric work practices in AI-mediated and gig economy contexts

5. Reviews of Literature

The concept of Quality of Work Life (QWL) has evolved significantly since its emergence in the 1970s, initially focusing on the relationship between work environments and employee outcomes, but now encompassing broader dimensions such as work-life balance, employee satisfaction, and organizational commitment. In the contemporary gig workforce context, rapid technological advancements and algorithm-based management systems have reshaped the work milieu, blurring boundaries between personal and professional life and redefining employee expectations. The increasing integration of digital platforms and flexible employment structures has intensified the relevance of QWL, particularly in ensuring employee well-being, career growth, and sustained engagement. Modern interpretations of QWL emphasize time balance, involvement balance, and satisfaction balance. As highlighted in recent studies, QWL remains a central construct in understanding employee experiences, especially in dynamic and digitally mediated work environments (Sirgy et al., 2001).

In the gig economy, QWL is influenced by multiple structural dimensions, including psychological detachment from work, quality of exchange relationships, and fairness in organizational practices. Algorithmic management systems often disrupt work-life boundaries through continuous notifications and task allocation mechanisms, limiting employees' ability to disengage and recover, thereby affecting long-term well-being. Furthermore, issues related to algorithmic bias, opaque decision-making, and lack of grievance mechanisms contribute to perceptions of inequity and insecurity among workers. These challenges highlight the need for a redefined understanding of QWL in AI-mediated work environments, where system design, transparency, and fairness play a crucial role in shaping employee experiences and psychological well-being (Wood et al., 2019).

Artificial Intelligence (AI) intervention in gig work has transformed traditional managerial functions by automating processes such as recruitment, task allocation, performance monitoring, compensation decisions, and even termination through deactivation. This shift has introduced four key structural features that define algorithmic management: lack of transparency, asymmetry, automaticity, and continuous surveillance. Workers often operate within "black box" systems where decision-making logic remains unclear, limiting their ability to understand or challenge outcomes (Duggan et al., 2020; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Platforms possess extensive data about workers, while workers have minimal visibility into platform operations, creating power imbalances. Decisions are executed automatically without human intervention, reinforcing a sense of inevitability, while real-time monitoring shapes worker behavior through constant evaluation (Gandini, 2018; Cameron, 2024). Recent regulatory developments in India, such as Karnataka's Gig Worker Welfare legislation, highlight the growing recognition of algorithmic transparency and ethical AI as critical worker rights, especially in light of controversies like the Urban Company AI image issue that exposed gaps between consent and platform practices (Divya & Barani, 2024; Gupta, 2025).

Psychological Well-Being (PWB) in the gig and startup environment has emerged as a crucial outcome influenced by these AI-driven work structures. Rooted in a eudemonic perspective, PWB emphasizes long-term personal growth, autonomy, and meaningful engagement rather than short-term satisfaction (Mishra & Venkatesan, 2023). However, evolving work conditions, especially during and after the pandemic, have intensified stress, uncertainty, and financial insecurity among workers (Boccoli et al., 2022). While technological innovation can enhance engagement and knowledge sharing, excessive reliance on digital systems may negatively impact well-being, reflecting an inverted U-shaped relationship between innovation and psychological health (Zahoor et al., 2022; Rasulzada & Dackert, 2009). In gig contexts, constant surveillance, rating pressures, and algorithmic dependency often create anxiety and emotional strain, outweighing the flexibility benefits. (Stephan et al., 2023).

6. Research Methodology

• Netnographic Approach

To investigate the lived experiences of Indian gig workers navigating AI-mediated work environments, this study employed a netnographic approach. Netnography adapts ethnographic methods to online communities, enabling researchers to access authentic, unsolicited narratives from

participants engaged in naturalistic discussions rather than researcher-prompted exchanges (Discetti and Anderson, 2023). For gig workers, lacking formal workplace channels and who turn to social media as a primary site of collective sense-making about algorithmic governance, this methodology is particularly well suited to research questions. We performed a thorough analysis of online comments on work life experiences in start-ups under ‘LinkedIn’ and ‘Reddit posts.

- **Data Collection and Analysis**

We found online discussions on modern-day workplaces; employees encounter (as participants) with work life therefore providing us with a unique opportunity to investigate the data. Moreover, participants engaged in online comments, spontaneously expressing their views and experiences from practice. These online comments allowed us to investigate work life issues and well-being issues relevant to practitioners of all kinds thus enabling the development of notion behind quiet quitting scenarios from a practice perspective and to shed new light on organizational studies. To ensure wide coverage of issues in start-up workspaces, we selected discussions from years 2023-2024 without limiting to specific month. The search keywords for selecting news posts were “work-life in start-ups”, “gig culture and work-life balance”, “wellbeing in start-ups”. Search terms were developed iteratively to capture the multidimensionality of AI-enabled HR decisions and worker well-being, spanning platform-specific terms (Zomato, Swiggy, Zepto, Urban Company, Amazon, Uber, Ola), process- terms (algorithmic management, rating system, deactivation), and well-being terms (gig mental health, work-life balance, isolation, data privacy).

To limit the responses pertaining to a particular segment of industry- entrepreneurship and start-ups, selective filter was applied to extract responses. Our empirical material included 585 individual posts, resulting in 345 coded text lines in a Microsoft Excel (MS) datasheet. After carefully considering archival data, we examined online traces of 180 textual responses that could be themed from these 345 lines of textual responses. Comments varied in length from statements consisting of 1-2 paragraphs to short 1-sentence replies to comments in reply to posts made by others. Most comments were regarding start-up work-life experiences without any specific domain. We adopted an open coding process (first-order concepts), then compared and developed more abstract categories (Qureshi & Ünlü, 2020). Open coding enabled us to monitor interesting issues in work life that the participants raised as crucial. Naming social networking sites in research outputs poses risks, as individual user accounts can be identified through online searches; in order to mitigate this risk, the subject matter of the study was highlighted keeping user accounts anonymous to justify the ethical positioning (Lehner-Mear, 2020).

7. Discussion and Analysis

This study advances theoretical understanding in three important ways by repositioning Artificial Intelligence (AI) within the relationship between Quality of Work Life (QWL) and Psychological Well-Being (PWB). First, it conceptualizes AI intervention as a moderating factor rather than a mediating mechanism, arguing that AI systems shape the strength and direction of the QWL–PWB relationship by acting as boundary conditions that determine whether positive work conditions translate into well-being or whether negative conditions escalate into chronic psychological harm (Kellogg et al., 2020). Second, it extends Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory into algorithmic environments by demonstrating that exchange quality in gig work is no longer defined by interpersonal relationships but by the ethical design of algorithmic systems. Third, the framework contributes to ethical AI governance by identifying critical design features such as transparency, procedural justice, bias mitigation, and worker-centric priorities that distinguish supportive from harmful algorithmic systems, thereby offering a structured approach for both academic inquiry and policy formulation (Duggan et al., 2020).

The framework also generates actionable implications for platform organizations and HR leaders by emphasizing algorithmic transparency, worker well-being, and fairness in AI-driven systems. Organizations must provide clear explanations of decision-making processes related to compensation

and task allocation, integrate psychological well-being indicators into performance metrics, and regularly audit systems to eliminate bias and ensure consistency. Establishing transparency as a worker right, as seen in emerging regulatory frameworks, further strengthens ethical accountability. However, the study has certain limitations. The ethnographic approach captures authentic worker experiences but does not establish causal relationships, indicating the need for future quantitative and experimental research. Additionally, the focus on the Indian gig economy limits generalizability, suggesting scope for cross-cultural comparative studies. Rapid advancements in AI, including generative and autonomous systems, also require continuous theoretical refinement to understand their evolving impact on work structures and employee well-being (Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2023).

Table 1. Thematic findings from netnographic analysis of Indian gig experiences (2023 to 2025)

Source: Authors' own analysis (n = 180)

QWL Dimension	Theme	Posts (n)
Work-Life Integration	Theme 1: Unpredictable schedules and pay hurt work-life balance	25
Work-Life Integration	Theme 2: Working hours are decided by algorithmic incentives rather than worker choice	47
LMX-Driven Algorithmic Exchange Relationships	Theme 3: Algorithmic decision creates perceptions of favoritism	34
LMX-Driven Algorithmic Exchange Relationships	Theme 4: Mental health support is mainly symbolic and not meaningful intervention	15
LMX-Driven Algorithmic Exchange Relationships	Theme 5: AI Platforms focus on efficiency metrics and less on well being	12
Politics-Free Workplace	Theme 6: Mental health support is mainly symbolic and not meaningful intervention	15
Politics-Free Workplace	Theme 7: Work creates isolation and reduces social support	32

In the context of LMX-driven exchange relationships, algorithmic management in gig platforms has significantly altered perceptions of fairness, reciprocity, and trust. Workers reported that AI-driven rating systems often create perceptions of favoritism by applying uniform penalties without considering contextual differences, thereby lacking mechanisms for appeal and generating procedural injustice, which undermines commitment and personal growth (Zhao et al., 2026). Furthermore, mental health support initiatives were frequently perceived as symbolic rather than substantive, as platforms provided superficial interventions such as wellness links while failing to address structural stressors like income instability, opaque decision-making, and deactivation risks, weakening the reciprocity essential for high-quality exchange relationships (Lu et al., 2025). The strong emphasis on efficiency metrics over employee well-being resulted in standardized performance penalties irrespective of health conditions, signaling that worker well-being is not integrated into platform governance, thereby negatively affecting self-worth and engagement (Cameron, 2024). In a broader politics-free workplace perspective, such practices contribute to perceptions of institutional hypocrisy, where organizations promote well-being rhetorically but fail to implement meaningful systemic changes (Mehta, 2025). Moreover, the nature of platform work

fosters isolation by eliminating collegial interaction and social support systems, as workers primarily engage with algorithms and customers rather than peers, ultimately weakening social connections and diminishing overall psychological well-being.

8. Finding of Study

- The study reveals that Artificial Intelligence (AI)-driven algorithmic management significantly shapes the Quality of Work Life (QWL) and Psychological Well-Being (PWB) of employees in gig and startup environments. A key finding is that lack of transparency and the “black box” nature of algorithmic decision-making create perceptions of unfairness and procedural injustice, leading to reduced trust in platforms and diminished employee commitment. Workers frequently experience asymmetry of information, where platforms possess extensive data while workers have limited understanding of how decisions regarding ratings, earnings, and task allocation are made. This imbalance negatively impacts their sense of control and job satisfaction.
- Another important finding is that AI systems prioritize efficiency and productivity metrics over employee well-being. Uniform performance penalties, regardless of contextual factors such as health or external constraints, result in emotional strain, burnout, and reduced motivation. Mental health support provided by platforms is often perceived as symbolic rather than meaningful, as it fails to address structural issues like income instability, job insecurity, and continuous surveillance.
- The study also highlights that AI-mediated work environments contribute to social isolation and weakened interpersonal relationships. The absence of traditional workplace interactions and the competitive nature of platform-based work reduce opportunities for collaboration and peer support, adversely affecting psychological well-being. Furthermore, the findings confirm that AI intervention acts as a moderating factor in the QWL–PWB relationship, intensifying both positive and negative outcomes depending on the quality of algorithmic design. Ethical and transparent AI systems can enhance well-being, while opaque and biased systems exacerbate stress and dissatisfaction.

9. Conclusion

The gig economy stands at a critical juncture. This paper has argued that gig workers' perceptions of Quality of Work Life, across three antecedent clusters and seven empirically derived themes, exert a direct adverse effect on Psychological Well-Being, and that the ethical quality of AI intervention moderates how powerfully that effect operates. Algorithmic management systems have enabled remarkable efficiency and scale yet they have also produced profound human costs unpredictability surveillance powerlessness and the erosion of worker dignity. The workers whose narratives inform this study did not reject technology they rejected technology that treats them as inputs to be optimized rather than human beings deserving respect. The core claim is precise and, we submit, consequential: QWL conditions in algorithmically governed workplaces directly harm worker well-being, and the ethical quality of the AI systems through which those conditions are produced and maintained determines whether that harm is amplified or attenuated. The question is not whether AI will continue transforming gig work it will. The question is whether that transformation will be guided by ethical principles that honour workers humanity or by narrow efficiency imperatives that treat people as disposable. The workers in this study have given their answer they seek not to escape technology but to shape it not to reject platforms but to make them accountable.

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