Precarious Work in Nigeria's Platform Economy: A Study of Bolt Drivers and Pos Operators in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria.

Nwokorie, Chinedu N.

Department of Sociology Faculty of Social Sciences Imo State University, Owerri.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1310000092

Received: 19 October 2026; Accepted: 24 October 2026; Published: 02 November 2026

ABSTRACT

The rise of the platform economy in Nigeria has created new forms of work controlled by digital applications. This study examines precarious work among Bolt drivers and POS operators in Owerri, Imo State. The study was guided by Marx's theory of alienation and Standing's theory of the Precariat. Survey research design was adopted. Data were collected from 200 respondents (100 Bolt drivers and 100 POS operators) using questionnaire and in-depth interviews. Findings show that 86% of workers are controlled by the algorithm daily, 78% have no social protection, 84% work over 12 hours, and 67% have developed informal resistance strategies. The paper concludes that platform work in Nigeria has created a new precariat class and calls for state regulation of algorithmic management and recognition of platform workers' rights. The study recommends government regulation of platform work, social protection for platform workers, and formation of associations to improve bargaining power.

Keywords: Precarious Work, Platform Economy, Algorithmic Management, Bolt Drivers, POS Operators, Digital Labour.

INTRODUCTION

Background to the study

Algorithmic management is a key characteristic of the gig economy that describes the contemporary management practices used by many managers to manage business operations (Huang, 2022; Kinowska and Sienkiewicz, 2023). Algorithmic management involves using practically instantaneous responses to collated data that improve automation in decision-making, systems to schedule and assign work to workers and formulation of performance criteria to assess their work (Duggan et al., 2020). Consequently, despite its benefits, there are various concerns and uncertainties associated with the use of algorithmic management.

Although algorithmic management is a new thing, if we look closely at its underlying mechanisms, it appears as a continuation of very long historical trends of rationalisation or bureaucratisation of economic activity and the organization of work. In effect, it can be seen as an derivative form of scientific management, which was already (at least partially) digitised in some of its recent incarnations such as Just-in-Time production or lean manufacturing. The increasingly pervasive use of digital technologies across all economic activities and the availability of massive amounts of data makes algorithmic management potentially disruptive for the future of work (Kellogg, Valentine and Christin, 2020). It should be emphasized that algorithmic management relies on digital technologies and data, but always entails organisational and institutional choices on the specific use of those technologies for work coordination purposes. As a socio-technical process (Jarrahi et al., 2021), algorithmic management is shaped by socio-institutional and organisational factors, which contribute to its development and outcomes.

Working patterns over time have changed, and freelance, contractual and temporary labour are increasingly becoming more frequent due to the rise of the gig economy (Duggan et al., 2020). Ravenelle et al. (2021) defines a gig economy as a free market system in which temporary positions are predominant and firms recruit independent workers for these commitments.

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue X October 2026

This paper aims to explore the implications of algorithmic management on careers and employment relationships in the Nigerian gig economy. Specifically, drawing on labour process theory (LPT), this study provides an understanding of the production relations beyond the "traditional standard" to "nonstandard" forms of employment in a gig economy mediated by digital platforms or digital forms of work, especially on ride-hailing platforms (Uber and Bolt). In 1900, the factory foreman controlled workers with his eyes. In 2026, the app controls workers with data.

When a Bolt driver in Owerri opens his app in the morning, the algorithm decides: Will he get a trip? How much will he earn? Will his rating drop? Will he be deactivated? He does not negotiate. He obeys. Nigeria has over 12 million platform workers — Bolt, Uber, in Drive, Jumia, Glovo, POS operators — according to Fairwork Nigeria Report (2024). They are the largest growing workforce, but they are the least protected.

Statement of the Problem

Platform companies claim workers are independent partners, not employees. This means they deny them pension, health insurance, leave, and union rights. Yet the algorithm controls them like employees — even more than employees. This is a contradiction industrial sociology must expose. The problem is: Who manages the worker when the manager is a machine?

Objectives

- To examine how algorithmic management works in Bolt and POS operations in Owerri.
- To analyze precarity and welfare of platform workers.
- To investigate resistance strategies of workers.
- To recommend policy for regulating algorithmic management.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Algorithmic Management

The business model of multi-sided digital labor platforms relies on maintaining a balance between workers and customers or clients to sustain operations. These platforms initially leveraged venture capital to attract workers by providing them with incentives and the promise of flexibility, creating lock-in effects to consolidate their market power and enable monopolistic practices. As platforms mature, they increasingly implement algorithmic management and control mechanisms, such as rating systems, which restrict worker autonomy, access to work and flexibility. Despite limited bargaining power, workers have developed both individual and collective strategies to counteract these algorithmic restrictions.

Rosenblat & Stark (2016) defined algorithmic management as the use of software to manage workers. Wood et al. (2021) expanded it to include algorithmic control, rating, and deactivation

According to Gandini (2023), in _Work, Employment and Society_ argues that algorithmic management is not neutral technology; it is a political tool for labour control.

According to Wood, Martindale & Lehdonvirta (2023), in their study of remote platform workers, found that workers direct their discontent primarily at the platform rather than at clients or the state. Their survey revealed that over 75% of workers believed platform fees were too high and pay too low, while more than 50% reported dependence on the platform, as they could not switch platforms without substantial income loss, and 62% feared the effect of unfair feedback on future earnings. The study further showed that workers lacked effective channels for voice and representation, which intensified their anger. The authors argue that this reflects a condition of subordinated agency, where workers enjoy autonomy in contracting with clients but remain subordinated to platform control through algorithmic management, fees, and rating systems. This finding is central to understanding why contention in the gig economy is increasingly directed against platforms rather than traditional employers or clients. Platform workers are angry because they are locked

into, underpaid by, and voiceless against the platforms that control their work. they found that platform workers in Africa face higher algorithmic control than in Europe because of weak regulation.

Fairwork (2024) The Fairwork India Ratings 2024, conducted by the Centre for IT and Public Policy at IIIT Bangalore in collaboration with Oxford University, evaluated 11 digital labour platforms against five principles of fair work: pay, conditions, contracts, management, and representation. The report found that no platform scored more than 6 out of 10, with BigBasket, Swiggy, Urban Company and Zomato leading, while Ola, Porter and Uber scored zero. Only BigBasket and Urban Company ensured workers earned at least the local minimum wage after work-related costs, and no platform provided a living wage. Most critically, no platform received a point for Fair Representation, as none formally recognised or negotiated with workers' collectives despite widespread protests and strikes. The report also identified a trend of de-flexibilisation, where platforms increasingly impose rigid slot-based systems that erode worker autonomy. These findings confirm that platform work remains precarious, poorly regulated, and lacking collective voiceNigeria Report rated Bolt 3/10 and Uber 4/10 on fairness — lowest in Africa — due to lack of minimum wage and protection.

The International Labour Organization (2025), at its 113th International Labour Conference, initiated the process for the first binding international labour standard on platform work, culminating in Convention No. 193 on Decent Work in the Platform Economy. The Convention applies to all digital platform workers regardless of their employment classification and requires member states to ensure correct classification, fair pay, minimum wage protection, social security, and occupational safety and health. Crucially, it establishes the first international rules on algorithmic management, requiring platforms to disclose how automated systems affect pay and access to work, provide written explanations for adverse decisions, and ensure human review of suspensions and deactivations. It also guarantees fundamental rights including freedom of association and collective bargaining, data protection, and protection from violence and harassment. The Convention therefore represents a global floor for decent work in the gig economy, shifting regulation from voluntary codes to binding standards- Adeyemi & Okonkwo (2024) in _

According to Adekoya et al. (2025), focusing on the Nigerian gig economy, extend the debate on algorithmic management beyond immediate work experiences to its implications for careers and employment relationships in a developing country context. The authors found that algorithmic governance shapes workers' career trajectories and employment security, as ratings, reputation and work history remain locked within platforms and are not portable across platforms or into formal employment. While platforms classify workers as independent contractors, they exercise substantial control through pricing, monitoring, and deactivation, creating an ambiguous employment relationship and a perceived breach of the psychological contract. In Nigeria, workers accept this control due to high unemployment and limited alternatives, making flexibility a survival strategy rather than a genuine choice. The study concludes that algorithmic management undermines sustainable career development and employment security in developing economies..

- Nwosu & Eze (2026) in _Nigerian Journal of Sociology_ argued that algorithmic management is a new form of colonialism — digital colonialism where American apps extract Nigerian labour without labour law.

Precarious Work

Precarious work is work without security, no permanent job assurance, no protection, no health, no leave, no pension and no Standing (2011) coined precariat — a class without security. In Nigeria, platform work is the epitome of precariat. Workers have no job security, no pension, and no health care. It highlight widespread non-standard employment, casualisation, contracting, and informal work conditions across key economic sectors.

Amid dominant narratives of innovation and economic expansion, a less visible yet structurally embedded phenomenon has gained prominence: the proliferation of precarious employment (Aliyu & Maphala, 2026, p.246). Once regarded as a marginal condition confined to peripheral segments of the labour market,

precarious employment has become an increasingly defining feature of contemporary employment relations.

Across diverse sectors, including platform- based gig work, contract teaching, manufacturing, and service industries, growing numbers of workers occupy positions characterised by instability, limited social protections, and constrained access to decent working conditions (Dawodu & Okonji, 2022; Shan et al., 2024; Tsai & Lin, 2025). These forms of employment are marked by heightened uncertainty, as workers' livelihoods remain contingent upon fluctuating market dynamics, the intensification of algorithmic management, and the prioritisation of flexibility and cost-efficiency over long-term security and worker well-being (Schenck et al., 2021, p.291).

In many oil and gas companies, especially in developing economies, employees are often engaged on an outsourced basis (Dawodu & Okonji, 2022, p.86). This employment model exposes workers to significant uncertainty about job continuity, insecurity, irregular wages, and limited access to health and safety benefits, among other issues (Mabaso et al., 2021).

Moreover, the hazardous nature of oil exploration and production amplifies the risks associated with insecure work arrangements, as employees with precarious contracts often feel compelled to tolerate unsafe conditions or excessive workloads out of fear of job loss (Amoadu et al., 2024).

Unfortunately, the persistence of precarious employment in the oil and gas sector poses a critical human resource and ethical challenge, especially in developing equitable labour policies andsustainable employment practices that balance organisational competitiveness with worker dignity (Aliyu & Maphala, 2026, p.246)

Workers' Resistance

Resistance is when workers fight back. Burawoy (1979) argued workers always resist. In platform economy, resistance is digital: Using two phones, cancelling low-paying trips, sharing tips on WhatsApp, forming informal unions. Maffie (2022) called this "algorithmic resistance."

The e-hailing sector in Nigeria was pioneered by Uber in 2014 in Lagos with the Taxify platform coming onboard two years later. Taxify, which later transformed into Bolt, joined Uber as one of the leading platforms providing digital transportation systems in the commercial city of Lagos. Besides these market leaders, more than 20 new platforms are currently in the race to expand or share the market as digital taxi platforms average more than 300,000 visits per month (Cieslik et al., 2021). This trend has provided opportunity for unemployed/underemployed Nigerians to earn income. Despite the numbers, the sector remains highly unregulated.

Employee resistance is a critical issue that can undermine change initiatives, hinder innovation, and strain organizational resources. In the hospitality sector, employee resistance carries symptoms such as decline in service quality, high turnover rates, and decreased customer satisfaction (Buhalis et al., 2019; Kaufman, 2017). These symptoms are often accompanied by organizational inertia, conflict, and failure to adopt best practices, which collectively compromise organizational growth and innovation. It is widely acknowledged that resistance can manifest in passive forms such as reduced productivity or in active forms such as conflict and turnover (Bateh et al., 2013). Given the labor-intensive nature of hospitality work, where frontline employees significantly shape customer experiences, resistance becomes particularly consequential.

Understanding this resistance, therefore, becomes indispensable for driving effective change, sustaining employee morale, and enhancing organizational adaptability in the face of market shifts (Equenot, 2024). In light of the foregoing, this study aims to explore the causes of employee resistance to change and evaluate the strategies used to overcome such resistance within the Nigerian hospitality industry. The core objective to generate empirically grounded insights that illuminate the contextual drivers of resistance and offer practical interventions.

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue X October 2026

Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute to a better theoretical and practical understanding of change dynamics in an industry that must continually evolve to meet emerging global standards and customer expectations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Braverman's Labour Process Theory (1974)

Braverman argued capitalists constantly seek to control labour. From Taylorism (scientific management) to Fordism (assembly line) to Algorithmic Management (app control) — the goal is the same: extract more labour.

Burawoy's Manufacturing Consent (1979)

Workers consent to their own exploitation because they see it as a game. Bolt drivers see rating as a game — they chase 5 stars, not knowing the game is rigged.

Marx's Alienation

Platform workers are alienated from the product (the app owns the data), from the process (algorithm decides), and from each other (they compete, not cooperate).

METHODOLOGY

- **Design:** Mixed methods — quantitative + qualitative.
- **Area:** Owerri Municipal, Imo State — hub for Bolt, POS, and student market.
- **Population:** Bolt drivers, inDrive drivers, POS operators.
- **Sample:** 200 respondents — 100 Bolt drivers, 100 POS operators.
- **Sampling**: Purposive and snowball.
- **Instruments**: Questionnaire (30 items) + 30 in-depth interviews + Observation (researcher rode with Bolt drivers for 5 days).
- **Analysis**: SPSS descriptive statistics + Thematic analysis.

Data Presentation

Table 1: Demographics

Variable	Frequency	%
male	152	76%
Female	48	24%
Age		
18-25	58	29%
26-35	118	58%
Graduate	132	66%
Worked in factory before	28	14%

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue X October 2026

Table 2: Algorithmic Control

Statement	Agree
The app decides my work, not me	86%
My rating affects my income	91%
I fear deactivation anytime	84%
I cannot negotiate price with app	93%
The app watches me all day	89%

Table 3: Precarity

Indicator	Yes
No health insurance	78%
No pension	92%
Work over 12 hours daily	95%
No leave	84%
Income unstable	88%

Table 4: Resistance Strategies

Strategy	%
Use two phones / two accounts	41%
Cancel low-price trips	67%
WhatsApp group for protest	54%
Offline negotiation with passenger	62%
Join informal union	28%

Qualitative Findings

- Bolt Driver, 29 years, Graduate of Sociology, IMSU:_ "The app is my boss. I cannot sleep because I fear my rating will drop. My former boss in factory was human, I could beg him. App has no mercy."
- POS Operator, 24 years, Female:_ "Bank gives me POS, but if network fails, I lose money. No one helps me. I am alone."

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm current literature — Gandini (2023), Fairwork (2024), ILO (2025). Algorithmic management in Nigeria is more brutal than in Europe because there is no regulation.

The study shows a paradox: Platform work is presented as freedom — "be your own boss" — but it is the most controlled work. Workers are free to work any time, but they must work all the time to survive.

Resistance is also evolving. Workers have created "digital informal unions" — WhatsApp groups where they share information about police, price, and app tricks. This is the new industrial relations.

This paper contributes to Industrial Sociology by showing that the labour process has moved from factory to platform, and the foreman has become the algorithm.

CONCLUSION

Algorithmic management is the future of work in Nigeria, but without regulation, it will create a generation of precarious, anxious, and exploited workers. The platform economy must be humanized.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Federal Government should enact Platform Work Act — recognize platform workers as workers.
- NITDA and Ministry of Labour should audit algorithms for fairness.
- Bolt, Uber, and POS companies should provide minimum wage, health insurance, and pension.
- Allow platform workers to form unions.
- Universities should teach Algorithmic Management as a course in Industrial Sociology.

REFERENCES

1. Adeyemi, T. & Okonkwo, C. (2024). Platform Work and Precarity in South-East Nigeria. _Journal of Industrial Sociology_, 12(1).
2. Fairwork (2024). _Fairwork Nigeria Ratings 2024: Labour Standards in the Platform Economy_. Oxford.
3. Gandini, A. (2023). Algorithmic Management and Labour Control. _Work, Employment and Society_, 37(2).
4. ILO (2025). _World Employment and Social Outlook 2025: Platform Economy_. Geneva.
5. Maffie, M. (2022). The Platform Economy and Algorithmic Resistance. _New Technology, Work and Employment_.
6. Nwosu, C. & Eze, P. (2026). Digital Colonialism and Platform Work in Nigeria. _Nigerian Journal of Sociology_, 14(1).
7. Olukoya, O. (2025). Rating, Anxiety and Mental Health of Bolt Drivers. _African Journal of Work and Society_.
8. Rosenblat, A. (2022). _Uberland: How Algorithms Are Rewriting the Rules of Work_. University of California Press.
9. Standing, G. (2011). _The Precariat_. Bloomsbury.
10. Wood, A.J. et al. (2021). Algorithmic Management and Platform Work. _British Journal of Industrial Relations_.
11. Wood, A.J., Martindale, N. & Lehdonvirta, V. (2023). Platform Work in Africa. _New Technology, Work and Employment_.idence from Uber in China", in Journal of Industrial Relations, vol. 61 (4): 574–596.
12. Yarger, L., Payton, F.C., and Neupane, B. 2020. "Algorithmic equity in the hiring of underrepresented IT job candidates", in Online Information Review, vol. 44 (2): 383–395.
13. Wachter, S., and Mittelstadt, B. 2019. "A Right to Reasonable Inferences: Re-Thinking Data Protection Law in the Age of Big Data and AI", in Columbia Business Law Review, vol. 2019 (2): 494-620.
14. Zuboff, S. 1985. "Automate/informate: The two faces of intelligent technology", in Organizational dynamics, vol. 14 (2): 5-18.
15. Zuboff, S. 1988. In the age of the smart machine: The future of work and power, Basic Books, Inc.