RGA Journal of Management and Business Strategy
ISSN: 3139-244X
Frequency: Bi-Monthly
Published By RGA Research Publications
Journal Homepage Link- https://rgaresearch.com/rga-jmbs/



Vol – 1 Issue – 5 September- October 2026 ***PP: - 01-12***

THE CHANGING MEANING OF WORK IN NIGERIA'S DIGITAL ECONOMY: YOUTH EMPLOYMENT, OCCUPATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION OF LABOUR

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Received: 21/10/2026 **Accepted: 27/10/2026** **Published:29/10/2026**

Abstract

The digitalisation of work is fundamentally altering how Nigerian youth conceptualise employment, careers and occupational success. This article interrogates the social transformation of labour in Nigeria's emergent digital economy, focusing on how remote work, freelancing, online entrepreneurship and platform employment are reshaping occupational identity among young workers aged 18–35. Anchored in Social Identity Theory and Boundaryless Career Theory, the study employs secondary data analysis of nationally representative surveys, policy documents and empirical literature published between 2020 and 2026. Findings suggest that digital labour platforms offer unprecedented flexibility and income opportunities, yet simultaneously reproduce precarity, algorithmic control and ambiguous employment classifications that challenge conventional notions of work dignity and social protection. Youth unemployment, officially estimated at 5.05–8.4 per cent depending on measurement methodology, masks deeper structural underemployment affecting over 90 per cent of the workforce in informal arrangements. The gig economy, valued at approximately $5.17 billion, contributes 2.8 per cent to national GDP while engaging millions in ride-hailing, delivery, microwork and digital freelancing. However, platform work often functions as a survival strategy rather than a pathway to decent work, with 65 per cent of platform workers reporting earnings essential for basic needs. The article argues that Nigeria's binary worker classification framework is ill-suited to digital labour realities and proposes a hybrid regulatory model recognising "dependent contractor" status. Policy recommendations include algorithmic transparency mandates, portable social protection schemes and digital skills integration across education levels. This study contributes to ongoing scholarly debates about the future of work in Africa by situating Nigerian youth experiences within broader discourses on digital labour, occupational identity reconstruction and the social meaning of work in technologically mediated economies.

Keywords: *digital economy, youth employment, occupational identity, gig work, platform labour, Nigeria, Social Identity Theory, Boundaryless Career Theory*

Introduction

The meaning of work has never been static. Across historical epochs, societies have constructed and reconstructed what constitutes legitimate labour, successful careers and worthy occupations according to prevailing economic structures, cultural values and technological capacities (Standing, 2011; Graeber, 2018). In contemporary Nigeria, a profound transformation is underway as digital technologies reconfigure the organisation, experience and social significance of work, particularly for the country's burgeoning youth population. With over 70 per cent of Nigerians under the age of 30 and approximately 4 million young people entering the labour force annually against fewer than 200,000 formal sector jobs created each year, the digital economy has emerged as both a pragmatic response to structural unemployment and a site of intense scholarly and policy contestation (NBS, 2024; Guardian, 2026).

This article examines how digitalisation—manifested through remote work arrangements, online freelancing, platform-mediated gig labour and digital entrepreneurship—is changing the ways Nigerian youth understand employment, construct occupational identities and define professional success. The inquiry is motivated by an apparent paradox: while official statistics suggest declining unemployment rates (from 33.3 per cent under the old methodology to 4.3 per cent using ILO-aligned measures), youth underemployment, job insecurity and the erosion of traditional career pathways remain acute concerns for policymakers, educators and young Nigerians themselves (NBS, 2024; BusinessDay, 2025). The gig economy, estimated at $5.17 billion in market size, now accounts for 2.8 per cent of national GDP, yet questions persist about whether platform work represents genuine economic empowerment or merely a new form of digital precarity (Vanguard, 2026; Research ICT Africa, 2026).

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The theoretical framing draws on two complementary perspectives. Social Identity Theory, originally articulated by Tajfel and Turner (1979) and subsequently extended to occupational contexts, posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in socially meaningful groups, including professional and work-based communities. In the digital economy, where algorithmic management replaces human supervision and platform branding shapes worker self-perception, the processes through which young Nigerians construct occupational identities warrant careful examination (Elbanna & Idowu, 2021b; Hybrid Work, Hybrid Identities, 2025). Boundaryless Career Theory, developed by Arthur and Rousseau (1996), offers a lens for understanding how careers increasingly transcend organisational boundaries, geographical locations and traditional employment relationships. For Nigerian youth navigating a labour market characterised by informality, digital mediation and portfolio-style work arrangements, the boundaryless career framework may better capture lived realities than conventional models premised on linear progression within stable organisations (Idowu & Elbanna, 2021a).

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to three intersecting scholarly conversations. First, it engages debates about the future of work in Africa, challenging techno-optimistic narratives that present digital platforms as universal solutions to unemployment while also resisting dystopian accounts that reduce all platform labour to exploitation (Awuni, 2026; Digital Labour Mirage, 2026). Second, it advances understanding of occupational identity formation in digitally mediated contexts, building on emerging research that examines how algorithmic management, customer ratings and platform branding influence worker self-conception (Hybrid Work, Hybrid Identities, 2025; Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025). Third, it situates Nigerian experiences within broader comparative discussions about regulatory responses to platform work, drawing lessons from jurisdictions that have experimented with hybrid worker classifications and algorithmic accountability measures (Uber BV v Aslam, 2021; European Commission, 2021).

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews relevant literature on digital labour, youth employment and occupational identity, highlighting gaps this study addresses. The theoretical framework elaborates Social Identity Theory and Boundaryless Career Theory as analytical lenses. Methodological considerations explain the secondary data approach and sources utilised. Findings are presented thematically, addressing youth employment statistics, the structure of Nigeria's digital economy, platform work experiences and identity implications. The discussion interprets these findings in light of theoretical propositions and comparative evidence. Policy recommendations propose regulatory reforms and institutional innovations. The conclusion reflects on limitations and directions for future research.

Literature Review

Conceptualising the Digital Economy and Platform Work

The digital economy encompasses economic activities that rely on digital technologies and internet-based platforms to facilitate transactions, interactions and value creation (Berkeley Publications, 2026; OECD, 2019). Within this broad category, platform work refers specifically to labour intermediated through digital platforms that connect service providers with clients via websites or mobile applications (ILO, 2021; Fairwork, 2020). Scholars distinguish between location-based gig work (ride-hailing, delivery services, domestic work) and web-based microwork (data entry, content moderation, digital freelancing), noting that these forms differ in skills requirements, income stability and regulatory implications (Research ICT Africa, 2026; Graham et al., 2017).

In the African context, platform work has grown rapidly, driven by high youth unemployment, widespread informality and increasing mobile internet penetration (Awuni, 2026; Nguimkeu, 2025). Nigeria exemplifies these dynamics: with 92 per cent of employed Nigerians working outside formal wage structures, digital platforms offer flexible earning opportunities that complement or substitute for traditional employment (Vanguard, 2026; NBS, 2024). Platforms operating in Nigeria include multinational corporations (Uber, Bolt, Jumia Food) and homegrown initiatives (NiYA Gigs, SafeBoda, Kwik Delivery), each embedding workers in algorithmic systems that allocate tasks, evaluate performance and determine remuneration (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; NiYA, 2025).

Youth Employment and Unemployment in Nigeria

Youth unemployment remains among Nigeria's most pressing developmental challenges, though measurement complexities obscure the true scale of the problem. Under the old methodology, Nigeria reported 33.3 per cent unemployment, with youth (ages 15–24) unemployment reaching 53.4 per cent (Plan International, 2025). Following adoption of ILO-aligned standards—where working just one hour per week qualifies as employed—the official rate dropped to 4.3 per cent overall and 6.5 per cent for youth in Q2 2024 (NBS, 2024; ThisDay, 2026). However, labour underutilisation, combining unemployment with time-related underemployment, stood at 13 per cent, three times the headline figure (Adediran Adeyemi, 2026).

The National Bureau of Statistics (2024) reports that 93 per cent of Nigeria's workforce is engaged in informal employment, characterised by low earnings, job insecurity and absence of social protection. Young people with secondary education face the highest unemployment rates (8.5 per cent), suggesting that educational attainment alone does not guarantee labour market success without corresponding skills alignment (NBS, 2024). The State of the Nigerian Youth Report 2025 estimates that over 80 million Nigerian youth remain unemployed or underemployed, highlighting the urgency of alternative employment pathways (Plan International, 2025).

Digital Labour and Occupational Identity

Emerging research examines how platform work influences occupational identity among African youth. Elbanna and Idowu (2021b) apply Social Identity Theory to Nigerian crowdworkers, finding that platform branding, algorithmic feedback and peer communities shape how workers understand their professional roles and social status. Similarly, a multi-country study on gig workers in Sub-Saharan Africa reveals that

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platforms actively regulate worker identities through rating systems, gamification and narrative framing that emphasise entrepreneurship over employment (Hybrid Work, Hybrid Identities, 2025).

Idowu and Elbanna (2021a) identify employment-enactment strategies among Nigerian digital workers, including portfolio diversification across platforms, skill signalling through certifications and community building in online forums. These practices reflect adaptive responses to labour market uncertainty, yet also raise questions about whether digital work fosters genuine occupational identity or merely fragmented, instrumental engagement (Digital Labour Mirage, 2026). The concept of "digital liminality" captures the ambiguous status of platform workers who occupy a threshold between traditional employment and self-employment, neither fully integrated into organisational structures nor enjoying the autonomy associated with genuine entrepreneurship (Elbanna & Idowu, 2021b).

Regulatory Challenges and Comparative Perspectives

Nigeria's Labour Act (Cap L1, LFN 2004) distinguishes only between employees and independent contractors, a binary framework increasingly recognised as inadequate for platform work realities (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; ILO, 2022). Platforms typically classify workers as "partners" or "independent contractors" to avoid statutory obligations such as minimum wage, paid leave and social security contributions, despite exercising significant control over work conditions through algorithmic management (Bolt Nigeria, 2023; Fairwork Project, 2023).

Comparative jurisdictions offer alternative approaches. The United Kingdom's Supreme Court ruled in Uber BV v Aslam (2021) that Uber drivers qualify as "workers" entitled to minimum wage and holiday pay, emphasising substance over contractual labels. The European Union's Platform Work Directive (2021) establishes a legal presumption of employment where platforms exert control over working conditions, shifting the burden of proof to platforms to demonstrate otherwise. India's Code on Social Security (2020) creates a distinct category for gig and platform workers, entitling them to welfare schemes funded by platform contributions, while California's Proposition 22 established a hybrid "independent worker" status with limited benefits (European Commission, 2021; Valerio De Stefano, 2020).

In Africa, South Africa's Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) ruled in 2021 that Uber drivers should be treated as employees during periods when logged into the app, a purposive interpretation later affirmed by the Labour Court (Ekundayo Oluwole, 2024). These developments suggest growing recognition that existing legal categories require adaptation to address the unique characteristics of platform work while preserving flexibility where genuinely desired by workers.

Gaps in Existing Literature

While scholarship on digital labour in Africa has expanded considerably, several gaps persist. First, much research relies on qualitative case studies or platform-generated data, limiting generalisability and introducing selection biases (Jiang et al., 2024; Graham et al., 2017). Nationally representative quantitative studies remain rare, though Research ICT Africa's (2026) After Access survey begins to address this limitation. Second, occupational identity dimensions of platform work receive less attention than economic outcomes, despite evidence that subjective experiences of dignity, recognition and professional belonging significantly affect worker well-being (Hybrid Work, Hybrid Identities, 2025). Third, regulatory analyses often focus on legal doctrine without sufficient engagement with how young workers actually experience and navigate platform ecosystems (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025). This study seeks to address these gaps by synthesising secondary data from multiple sources to construct a comprehensive picture of how digitalisation is transforming the meaning of work for Nigerian youth.

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory and Occupational Identity

Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from perceived membership in socially meaningful groups. Applied to occupational contexts, the theory suggests that work provides not only material rewards but also symbolic resources for constructing identity, achieving social recognition and situating oneself within broader status hierarchies (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001). Occupational identities are formed through processes of categorisation (identifying with particular work roles), identification (internalising group norms and values) and comparison (differentiating one's occupation from others).

In the digital economy, these processes assume new complexities. Platform workers may identify simultaneously as entrepreneurs, gig workers, freelancers and members of profession-specific communities (developers, designers, writers), creating fragmented or hybrid occupational identities (Elbanna & Idowu, 2021b). Algorithmic management systems shape identity through rating mechanisms that publicly display worker performance, gamification elements that encourage competitive self-improvement and branding narratives that frame platform work as flexible entrepreneurship rather than precarious employment (Hybrid Work, Hybrid Identities, 2025).

For Nigerian youth, occupational identity formation occurs within a context where traditional markers of professional success—stable employment, organisational affiliation, career progression—may be unavailable or undesirable. Digital platforms offer alternative identity resources: portfolio diversity, client testimonials, online certifications and global market access. However, these resources may not confer equivalent social recognition, particularly when platform work is stigmatised as "not a real job" or when earnings remain insufficient for social mobility (Idowu & Elbanna, 2021a). Social Identity Theory thus helps illuminate the psychological and social dimensions of how young Nigerians make sense of their work in the digital economy.

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Boundaryless Career Theory

Boundaryless Career Theory, articulated by Arthur and Rousseau (1996), challenges conventional career models premised on linear progression within single organisations. Boundaryless careers are characterised by mobility across organisational boundaries, geographical locations, occupational fields and employment relationships. Key dimensions include:

1. Physical mobility: Movement across organisations, industries and locations
2. Psychological mobility: Capacity to envision and pursue diverse career possibilities
3. Network-based careers: Reliance on professional relationships rather than organisational ladders
4. Portfolio careers: Engagement in multiple income-generating activities simultaneously
5. Self-directed careers: Individual agency in shaping career trajectories independent of organisational structures

For Nigerian youth, the boundaryless career framework may better capture lived realities than traditional models. With formal sector jobs scarce and digital platforms enabling remote work for global clients, careers increasingly resemble portfolios of projects, gigs and entrepreneurial ventures rather than linear organisational trajectories (Idowu & Elbanna, 2021a). However, boundarylessness carries risks: income volatility, absence of employer-provided benefits, continuous pressure to upskill and the burden of self-marketing in competitive global labour markets (Digital Labour Mirage, 2026).

The theory also raises questions about agency and constraint. While boundaryless careers emphasise individual choice and adaptability, structural factors—digital infrastructure, educational access, social capital, economic conditions—significantly shape who can successfully navigate boundaryless career paths and who remains trapped in precarious survival strategies (Research ICT Africa, 2026). For Nigerian youth, boundaryless careers may reflect necessity rather than preference, complicating normative assumptions about career autonomy and professional fulfilment.

Integrating the Theoretical Lenses

Together, Social Identity Theory and Boundaryless Career Theory offer complementary insights. Social Identity Theory illuminates how young workers construct meaning, belonging and status through digital labour, while Boundaryless Career Theory explains structural shifts in career organisation and the skills required to navigate fragmented labour markets. Both theories acknowledge that work is simultaneously an economic activity and a social practice embedded in cultural meanings, power relations and institutional arrangements. Applying these frameworks to Nigeria's digital economy reveals tensions between opportunity and precarity, agency and constraint, identity reconstruction and social recognition that define youth experiences of work in technologically mediated contexts.

Methodology

This study employs secondary data analysis, synthesising evidence from nationally representative surveys, policy documents, empirical research articles and grey literature published between 2020 and 2026. The decision to use secondary data reflects both pragmatic considerations (resource constraints, access limitations) and epistemological commitments to building on existing knowledge rather than duplicating primary data collection efforts.

Data Sources

Primary quantitative data derives from:

-National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) Nigeria Labour Force Survey (Q1–Q2 2024): Provides official unemployment, underemployment and informal employment statistics using ILO-aligned methodology (NBS, 2024).

-Research ICT Africa After Access Survey (2022–2023): Nationally representative household and individual survey across seven African countries including Nigeria, capturing internet access, device ownership and platform work participation (Research ICT Africa, 2026).

-World Bank and ILO databases: Offer comparative unemployment rates, youth labour market indicators and time-series data for contextualisation (World Bank, 2025; ILO, 2024).

-Bolt-Ipsos Gig Economy Report (2026): Commissioned study estimating Nigeria's gig economy market size, sectoral distribution and worker demographics (Vanguard, 2026).

Qualitative and policy data includes:

-Peer-reviewed journal articles: Scholarly research on digital labour, platform work and occupational identity in Nigeria and Africa (e.g., Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; Elbanna & Idowu, 2021b; Awuni, 2026).

-Government policy documents: National Digital Economy Policy, NiYA Academy materials, Federal Ministry of Youth Development publications (NiYA, 2025; Berkeley Publications, 2026).

-Legal and regulatory texts: Labour Act (Cap L1, LFN 2004), National Minimum Wage Act (2024), Nigerian Data Protection Act, comparative legislation from UK, EU, India and South Africa (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025).

-Media reports and grey literature: News articles, think tank reports and NGO publications providing contextual detail and contemporary developments (Guardian, 2026; BusinessDay, 2025; ThisDay, 2026).

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Analytical Approach

Data analysis proceeded through thematic synthesis, organising evidence around key themes: youth employment statistics, digital economy structure, platform work experiences, occupational identity implications and regulatory challenges. Quantitative data was triangulated across sources to address measurement inconsistencies (e.g., differing unemployment rates under old vs. new methodologies). Qualitative insights were used to interpret statistical patterns and illuminate subjective experiences of digital work.

Theoretical frameworks guided interpretation: Social Identity Theory informed analysis of how platform features (ratings, branding, algorithms) shape worker self-conception, while Boundaryless Career Theory structured discussion of career mobility, skills requirements and structural constraints. Comparative evidence from other jurisdictions contextualised Nigerian findings and informed policy recommendations.

Limitations

Secondary data analysis has inherent limitations. Data sources vary in methodology, sampling frames and definitions, complicating direct comparisons. Some sources (e.g., platform-commissioned reports) may present optimistic portrayals of gig work, while academic literature may emphasise precarity. The study relies on published materials, potentially missing unpublished research or emerging developments. Despite these limitations, synthesising diverse sources offers a comprehensive overview that would be difficult to achieve through primary data collection alone, particularly given resource and time constraints.

Findings

Youth Employment Statistics: Beyond the Headlines

Nigeria's youth employment landscape presents a complex picture obscured by methodological shifts and political contestation. Under the old measurement framework, Nigeria reported 33.3 per cent unemployment, with youth (ages 15–24) unemployment reaching 53.4 per cent and those aged 25–34 at 37 per cent (Plan International, 2025; LinkedIn, 2025). Following adoption of ILO-aligned standards in 2023—where working at least one hour per week for pay or profit qualifies as employed—the official rate dropped dramatically to 4.3 per cent overall and 6.5 per cent for youth in Q2 2024 (NBS, 2024; ThisDay, 2026).

However, these headline figures mask deeper structural challenges. Labour underutilisation, combining unemployment with time-related underemployment (workers wanting more hours than available), stood at 13 per cent in Q2 2024, three times the unemployment rate (Adediran Adeyemi, 2026). Youth not in employment, education or training (NEET) reached 14.4 per cent, with females disproportionately affected at 15.9 per cent compared to males (Guardian, 2026). Time-related underemployment affected 10.6 per cent of the labour force, indicating that many employed Nigerians work fewer hours than desired (Guardian, 2026).

Educational attainment does not guarantee employment security. Secondary school graduates face the highest unemployment rates at 8.5 per cent, suggesting skills mismatches between education and labour market demands (NBS, 2024). Approximately 4 million young Nigerians enter the workforce annually, yet formal sector job creation barely reaches 200,000 positions, creating a structural deficit that digital economy initiatives aim to address (BusinessDay, 2025; Adediran Adeyemi, 2026).

Informal employment dominates, with 93 per cent of Nigeria's workforce engaged in activities outside formal wage structures (NBS, 2024). This context shapes how young Nigerians approach work: not as a choice between formal and informal employment, but as navigation across a spectrum of income-generating activities including subsistence agriculture, petty trading, artisanal work and, increasingly, digital platform labour (Vanguard, 2026).

Structure and Scale of Nigeria's Digital Economy

Nigeria's digital economy has expanded rapidly, driven by mobile internet penetration, fintech innovation and government policy initiatives. The digital economy contributes significantly to GDP through e-commerce, digital platforms, online marketing and global retail networks (Berkeley Publications, 2026). The gig economy specifically is valued at approximately $5.17 billion, contributing 2.8 per cent to national GDP (Vanguard, 2026).

Platform work participation has grown substantially. Research ICT Africa's (2026) After Access survey shows Nigeria's platform work prevalence increased from negligible levels in 2018 to measurable proportions by 2022, though still below Kenya's 10 per cent leadership. Growth drivers include high unemployment, rising freelancing in IT and creative services, penetration of ride-hailing (Uber, Bolt) and delivery platforms (Jumia, Glovo, Kwik Delivery), and fintech expansion facilitating digital payments (Research ICT Africa, 2026).

Sectoral distribution within the gig economy reveals ride-hailing as the largest segment at 24 per cent of participation, followed by delivery services, digital freelancing and microwork (Vanguard, 2026). Women remain underrepresented in certain segments, accounting for only 3 per cent of ride-hailing participants, though more visible in digital freelancing, content creation and online tutoring (Vanguard, 2026).

Government initiatives support digital economy growth. The NiYA (Nigeria Youths) Academy ecosystem, launched in December 2025, includes NiYA Gigs, a platform connecting young Nigerians with paid opportunities in graphic design, writing, development, marketing and artisanal work (NiYA, 2025). The initiative emphasises skills training, mentorship and market access, reflecting policy recognition that digital competencies are essential for employability in a technology-driven economy (eprints.gouni.edu.ng, 2026; Digital Education and Job Creation, 2026).

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Infrastructure challenges persist. Unreliable electricity, high data costs, unequal home working conditions and cybersecurity concerns affect the quality and sustainability of digital work (Hybrid Work as Entrepreneurial Capability, 2026; Berkeley Publications, 2026). Digital skills gaps limit participation, with only 26 per cent of Nigerians connected to the internet despite 63 per cent owning devices capable of connectivity (Research ICT Africa, 2026). Gender disparities in education and device access further constrain women's participation in platform work (Research ICT Africa, 2026; UNESCO, 2025).

Platform Work Experiences: Flexibility, Income and Precarity

Motivations for platform work reveal complex intersections of necessity and preference. Research ICT Africa's (2026) survey finds flexibility as the most commonly cited reason, with 53 per cent of men and 37 per cent of women prioritising autonomy over work schedules. However, unemployment drives significant participation: 27 per cent of men and 33 per cent of women engage in platform work due to lack of alternative employment, suggesting that for many, digital labour is a survival strategy rather than a preferred career path (Research ICT Africa, 2026).

Income dependency is substantial. Approximately 65 per cent of platform workers across surveyed African countries report earnings essential for meeting basic needs, indicating that platform work functions as primary income rather than supplementary earnings for most participants (Research ICT Africa, 2026). In Nigeria, 64 per cent of gig economy participants report significant improvement in living standards after joining platform-based work, with an additional 31 per cent noting slight improvement (Vanguard, 2026). These figures suggest material benefits, though they do not address earnings adequacy relative to cost of living or long-term financial security.

Working conditions vary by platform and sector. Ride-hailing and delivery workers face physical risks (traffic accidents, customer aggression), income volatility (demand fluctuations, platform commission changes) and algorithmic control (automatic deactivation based on ratings) (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; Fairwork Project, 2023). Digital freelancers and microworkers experience different challenges: global competition driving down rates, payment delays, client non-compliance and the burden of continuous self-marketing (Idowu & Elbanna, 2021a; Digital Labour Mirage, 2026).

Algorithmic management shapes daily work experiences. Platforms use data-driven systems to allocate tasks, evaluate performance, determine pay and enforce discipline, often without transparency or appeal mechanisms (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; ILO, 2022). Workers report opaque rating systems where low scores trigger reduced task allocation or deactivation without clear explanation or opportunity for redress (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; Hybrid Work, Hybrid Identities, 2025). Digital surveillance tools monitor location, response times and customer interactions, raising privacy concerns and intensifying work pressure (Olonade et al., 2026; NZOM et al., 2025).

Despite challenges, platform work offers opportunities unavailable in traditional labour markets. Remote work enables access to global clients, bypassing geographical constraints and local economic limitations (Digital Nomadism, 2026; Andela Nigeria Review, 2026). Digital portfolios and online certifications provide alternative credentials for workers lacking formal qualifications, potentially democratising access to professional opportunities (Idowu & Elbanna, 2021a; Research ICT Africa, 2026). For some, platform work serves as a stepping stone to entrepreneurship, skill development or migration pathways, though these outcomes remain exceptional rather than typical (Digital Education and Job Creation, 2026; NiYA, 2025).

Occupational Identity and the Social Meaning of Work

Platform work influences how Nigerian youth understand their professional identities and social status. Elbanna and Idowu (2021b) find that Nigerian crowdworkers employ identity-building strategies including platform diversification, skill signalling through certifications and participation in online communities to construct coherent occupational narratives despite fragmented work arrangements. Platform branding and algorithmic feedback systems shape self-perception: high ratings confer symbolic recognition, while low scores threaten identity coherence and social standing (Hybrid Work, Hybrid Identities, 2025; Elbanna & Idowu, 2021b).

Social recognition remains contested. While some young Nigerians embrace platform work as legitimate entrepreneurship, others experience stigma from family, peers and potential romantic partners who view gig work as "not a real job" or temporary stopgap rather than sustainable career (Idowu & Elbanna, 2021a; Digital Labour Mirage, 2026). This tension reflects broader societal ambivalence about the meaning of work in Nigeria's digital economy: is platform labour genuine employment, precarious survival or entrepreneurial innovation?

Occupational identity formation occurs within boundaryless career contexts where traditional markers—organisational affiliation, job titles, career ladders—are absent or irrelevant. Young workers construct identity through portfolio diversity (multiple platforms, client types, project categories), online reputation (ratings, testimonials, social media presence) and continuous skill development (certifications, tutorials, peer learning) (Idowu & Elbanna, 2021a; Boundaryless Career Theory applications). These practices reflect adaptive responses to labour market uncertainty, yet also raise questions about whether digital work fosters genuine professional identity or merely instrumental, transactional engagement (Digital Labour Mirage, 2026).

Gender dimensions complicate identity formation. Women face additional barriers including cultural norms restricting mobility, safety concerns in location-based gig work and lower digital literacy limiting online participation (Research ICT Africa, 2026; UNESCO, 2025). Yet platform work also offers opportunities for women to earn income while managing domestic responsibilities, potentially challenging traditional gender roles even as it reproduces certain inequalities (Research ICT Africa, 2026; Hybrid Work, Hybrid Identities, 2025).

The concept of "digital liminality" captures the ambiguous status of platform workers occupying a threshold between employment and self-employment (Elbanna & Idowu, 2021b). Neither fully integrated into organisational structures nor enjoying genuine entrepreneurial autonomy,

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platform workers inhabit a grey zone where occupational identity remains fluid, contingent and continuously negotiated. This liminality may prove empowering for some (flexibility, multiple income streams, global access) yet destabilising for others (income volatility, absence of social protection, identity fragmentation).

Regulatory Gaps and Worker Classification Challenges

Nigeria's Labour Act (Cap L1, LFN 2004) distinguishes only between employees and independent contractors, a binary framework increasingly recognised as inadequate for platform work realities (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; ILO, 2022). Platforms typically classify workers as "partners" or "independent contractors" to avoid statutory obligations including minimum wage, paid leave, social security contributions and union rights, despite exercising significant control over work conditions through algorithmic management (Bolt Nigeria, 2023; Fairwork Project, 2023).

This classification creates legal grey zones where workers lack protections despite economic dependence on platforms. Gig workers often earn below the statutory minimum wage once expenses (fuel, data, platform commissions, maintenance) are accounted for, yet remain excluded from National Minimum Wage Act coverage due to contractor status (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; National Minimum Wage Act, 2024). Collective bargaining rights remain theoretical for most platform workers, as independent contractor classification strips them of unionisation rights under Nigerian law despite ILO Conventions 87 and 98 ratification (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; NUPA-BW, 2021–2023).

Arbitrary dismissal poses acute challenges. Workers can be "deactivated" without notice, explanation or appeal, typically based on algorithmic assessments or customer ratings beyond their control (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; ILO Convention No. 158, 1982). Sudden loss of platform access can have devastating financial consequences for economically dependent workers, yet no clear redress mechanisms exist under current law (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; Wu & Zhang, 2024).

Comparative jurisdictions offer alternative approaches. The UK Supreme Court's Uber BV v Aslam (2021) ruling emphasised substance over contractual labels, classifying Uber drivers as "workers" entitled to minimum wage and holiday pay. The EU Platform Work Directive (2021) establishes legal presumption of employment where platforms exert control, shifting burden of proof to platforms. India's Code on Social Security (2020) creates distinct gig worker category with welfare entitlements funded by platform contributions. South Africa's CCMA (2021) ruled Uber drivers qualify as employees during logged-in periods (European Commission, 2021; Valerio De Stefano, 2020; Ekundayo Oluwole, 2024).

Nigeria's National Union of Professional App-Based Workers (NUPA-BW), established 2021–2023, represents ride-hailing and delivery drivers seeking legal recognition and collective bargaining rights, yet faces platform resistance citing contractor classifications (NUPA-BW, 2021–2023; Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025). Legal reforms are urgently needed to address classification ambiguities, extend core protections to economically dependent workers and ensure algorithmic transparency and accountability (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; ILO, 2022).

Discussion

The findings illuminate profound transformations in how Nigerian youth experience, understand and construct meaning around work in the digital economy. Several themes warrant extended discussion in light of theoretical frameworks and comparative evidence.

Reconfiguring Occupational Identity in Digital Contexts

Social Identity Theory helps explain how platform features shape worker self-conception. Algorithmic rating systems function as public identity markers, conferring symbolic recognition on high performers while stigmatising those with lower scores (Hybrid Work, Hybrid Identities, 2025; Elbanna & Idowu, 2021b). Platform branding narratives emphasise entrepreneurship, flexibility and global opportunity, encouraging workers to internalise identities as independent business owners rather than precarious labourers (Digital Labour Mirage, 2026; NiYA, 2025).

Yet these identity resources remain fragile and contingent. Ratings can plummet due to factors beyond worker control (customer mood, algorithmic errors, traffic delays), threatening identity coherence and income security simultaneously (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; Wu & Zhang, 2024). Platform branding may inspire pride yet also obscure structural inequalities: celebrating individual "hustle" while deflecting attention from inadequate social protection, algorithmic exploitation and market concentration (Digital Labour Mirage, 2026; Awuni, 2026).

For Nigerian youth, occupational identity formation occurs within broader social contexts where work confers not only income but also social status, marriageability and family honour (Idowu & Elbanna, 2021a). Platform work's ambiguous status—neither fully legitimate employment nor clearly entrepreneurial success—creates identity tensions young workers must continuously negotiate. Some embrace boundaryless career identities, celebrating portfolio diversity and global access; others experience liminality as destabilising, longing for the security and recognition associated with traditional employment (Boundaryless Career Theory; Digital Labour Mirage, 2026).

Boundaryless Careers: Agency and Constraint

Boundaryless Career Theory illuminates structural shifts in career organisation, yet also reveals tensions between normative ideals and lived realities. The theory emphasises individual agency, adaptability and self-direction, qualities ostensibly enabled by digital platforms offering global market access, flexible scheduling and portfolio diversification (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Idowu & Elbanna, 2021a).

However, for many Nigerian youth, boundarylessness reflects necessity rather than preference. With formal sector jobs scarce and informal work predominant, platform labour often functions as survival strategy rather than chosen career path (Research ICT Africa, 2026; Vanguard, 2026). The burden of continuous self-marketing, skill development and income diversification may prove empowering for those with resources (education, devices, data, social capital) yet exhausting and unsustainable for others (Digital Labour Mirage, 2026; Research ICT Africa, 2026).

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Structural constraints significantly shape who can successfully navigate boundaryless careers. Internet access remains skewed toward urban, male, educated and higher-income populations, reproducing offline inequalities in digital spaces (Research ICT Africa, 2026; Nguimkeu, 2025). Once online, education and geography become less significant, suggesting platforms can bypass traditional gatekeeping mechanisms; yet initial access barriers exclude vast populations from digital opportunities altogether (Research ICT Africa, 2026).

The theory's emphasis on psychological mobility—the capacity to envision diverse career possibilities—raises questions about whether Nigerian youth genuinely perceive platform work as one option among many or as the only available path. For those facing unemployment, underemployment or exploitative informal work, platform labour may represent improvement yet also constrain long-term career imagination to survival-oriented strategies rather than aspirational trajectories (Digital Education and Job Creation, 2026; Plan International, 2025).

Regulatory Dilemmas: Protection versus Flexibility

Comparative evidence reveals diverse regulatory approaches, each balancing worker protection against platform flexibility differently. The UK's worker classification emphasises substance over form, extending core protections while preserving some flexibility. The EU's presumption of employment shifts burden to platforms, potentially reclassifying many gig workers as employees. India's hybrid category acknowledges distinctiveness of platform work while guaranteeing social security entitlements. California's Proposition 22 created "independent worker" status with limited benefits, a compromise criticised for insufficient protection (European Commission, 2021; Valerio De Stefano, 2020; Ekundayo Oluwole, 2024).

Nigeria faces similar dilemmas. Extending full employee status to all platform workers might increase protections yet reduce flexibility many workers value and potentially discourage platform investment (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; Hybrid Work as Entrepreneurial Capability, 2026). Maintaining current contractor classification perpetuates precarity, excludes workers from social protection and enables algorithmic exploitation without accountability (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; ILO, 2022).

A hybrid "dependent contractor" category, as proposed by Braimoh-Habeebu (2025) and supported by ILO (2022) and WIEGO research, offers a middle path. This status would recognise economic dependence on platforms while preserving flexibility where genuinely desired, attaching a tailored package of rights: minimum earnings guarantees, social security contributions, occupational injury coverage, collective bargaining rights and algorithmic transparency obligations (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; ILO, 2022).

Implementation challenges remain significant. Defining objective criteria for dependent contractor status (income share, exclusivity, substitution rights, algorithmic control) requires careful calibration to avoid over-inclusion or under-inclusion (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025). Enforcement capacity within labour inspectorates must be strengthened, potentially through dedicated Digital Labour Units with technical expertise in algorithmic auditing (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; NZOM et al., 2025). Platform resistance, political economy constraints and competing policy priorities may slow reform adoption, yet comparative experience suggests incremental progress is possible through stakeholder consultation, pilot programmes and phased implementation (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; European Commission, 2021).

Digital Inequalities and Inclusive Participation

Research ICT Africa's (2026) findings underscore that platform work is not a "silver bullet" for unemployment but rather a complement to traditional labour systems, offering opportunities for some while leaving others structurally constrained. Persistent inequalities in internet access, device ownership, digital literacy and electricity infrastructure reproduce offline exclusions in digital spaces (Research ICT Africa, 2026; Nguimkeu, 2025; Berkeley Publications, 2026).

Gender disparities remain pronounced. Women face barriers including cultural norms restricting mobility, safety concerns in location-based work, lower digital literacy and device access gaps (Research ICT Africa, 2026; UNESCO, 2025). Yet platform work also offers opportunities for women to earn income while managing domestic responsibilities, potentially challenging traditional gender roles even as it reproduces certain inequalities (Research ICT Africa, 2026; Hybrid Work, Hybrid Identities, 2025).

Policy interventions must address intersecting inequalities simultaneously: affordable connectivity, device access subsidies, digital skills training, electricity infrastructure and gender-sensitive support programmes (Research ICT Africa, 2026; Digital Education and Job Creation, 2026). Tiered data subsidies prioritising education and work-related platforms over entertainment, as recommended by Research ICT Africa (2026), could reduce financial barriers while supporting productive internet use.

Policy Recommendations

Based on findings and comparative evidence, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1. Legislative Reform: Recognising Hybrid Worker Status

Amend the Labour Act to introduce a third category of "dependent contractor" for platform workers meeting objective criteria: earning over 50 per cent of income from one platform, inability to set prices, algorithmic control over tasks and performance, limited substitution rights (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; ILO, 2022). Attach floor rights to this status: minimum earnings guarantees, social security contributions, occupational injury coverage, notice requirements for suspension/deactivation and simplified grievance procedures (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025).

Establish statutory presumption: where two or more platform indicators are present (algorithmic allocation, pay-setting, rating-based deactivation, no real substitution right), the relationship is presumed employment or dependent contracting, with platforms bearing burden to rebut (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; European Commission, 2021).

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2. Algorithmic Transparency and Accountability

Mandate platforms to publish plain-language algorithm statements explaining how key decisions (task allocation, performance evaluation, deactivation) are made, maintain audit logs and provide individual explanations on request (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; NZOM et al., 2025). Prohibit fully automated firing without human review, ensuring workers can contest algorithmic decisions before impartial bodies (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; ILO, 2022).

Require Algorithmic Impact Assessments (AIAs) evaluating risks of systemic bias, discrimination or harm to worker well-being, with results submitted to regulatory authorities (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; Olonade et al., 2026).

3. Social Protection Mechanisms

Require platforms to contribute to a gig-worker social fund (fixed percentage or band of turnover/payments) financing pensions, injury compensation and safety nets, learning from India's Social Security Code approach (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; Code on Social Security, 2020). Ensure portability: workers accumulate benefits across platforms and gigs, addressing boundaryless career realities (ILO, 2022; Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025).

Integrate platform workers into National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) and National Pension Commission (PenCom) frameworks, with simplified registration and contribution mechanisms accommodating irregular income patterns (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; NBS, 2024).

4. Institutional Reforms: Digital Labour Governance

Create a Digital Labour Unit within the Ministry of Labour (or dedicated Office for Platform Work) to register platforms, review algorithmic impact statements, coordinate enforcement and advise government on trends (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; NZOM et al., 2025). Equip labour inspectors with technical training and tools to audit platforms (access logs, run impact audits), potentially partnering with Nigerian Data Protection Commission for algorithmic and data governance oversight (NZOM et al., 2025; Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025).

Establish independent dispute resolution mechanisms: Digital Labour Ombudsman handling complaints regarding unfair treatment, wrongful deactivation or wage disputes, with fast-track adjudication (30-day timelines) to reduce financial hardship (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; ILO, 2022).

5. Digital Skills and Infrastructure Investment

Integrate digital skills—including platform navigation, task literacy, online professionalism—into secondary school and vocational curricula, with targeted outreach to girls and low-income students (Research ICT Africa, 2026; Digital Education and Job Creation, 2026; eprints.gouni.edu.ng, 2026). Pair with subsidies or conditional grants for device ownership and data access, addressing affordability barriers (Research ICT Africa, 2026; Berkeley Publications, 2026).

Deploy regional digital work hubs and co-working spaces in underserved areas with reliable internet, electricity, mentoring and digital training, prioritising female participation through community outreach and gender-sensitive support programmes (Research ICT Africa, 2026; NiYA, 2025).

6. Data and Visibility

Establish an opt-in digital worker registry linked to national ID system to track platform work participation, earnings and conditions, generating reliable data for policy and social protection interventions (Research ICT Africa, 2026; Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025). Require platforms to periodically report (income paid, number of workers, algorithmic systems used), improving visibility and enabling evidence-based regulation (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; NBS, 2024).

7. Collective Representation and Social Dialogue

Legally recognise digital labour collectives and associations as trade unions or interest groups regardless of worker classification status, enabling collective voice in platform governance (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; NUPA-BW, 2021–2023). Impose statutory duty on platforms to engage in good-faith dialogue and negotiations with registered digital worker unions on pay rates, safety protocols and platform rules (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; ILO Conventions 87 & 98).

Include worker representatives in decisions related to algorithm design, operational rules and terms of engagement changes, promoting fairness-by-design principles in platform governance (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; NZOM et al., 2025).

Conclusion

This article has examined how digitalisation is transforming the meaning of work for Nigerian youth, focusing on employment, occupational identity and the social transformation of labour. Findings reveal a complex landscape where digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for income generation, skills development and global market access, yet simultaneously reproduce precarity, algorithmic control and ambiguous employment classifications that challenge conventional notions of work dignity and social protection.

Youth unemployment statistics, whether measured at 5.05 per cent (World Bank/ILO, 2024) or 53 per cent (Plan International, 2025), mask deeper structural challenges: 93 per cent informal employment, 13 per cent labour underutilisation and 4 million annual labour force entrants against 200,000 formal jobs created (NBS, 2024; BusinessDay, 2025). The gig economy, valued at $5.17 billion and contributing 2.8 per cent to GDP, engages millions in ride-hailing, delivery, freelancing and microwork, with 64 per cent reporting improved living standards yet 65 per cent depending on earnings for basic needs (Vanguard, 2026; Research ICT Africa, 2026).

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Social Identity Theory illuminates how platform features—ratings, branding, algorithms—shape worker self-conception, creating hybrid occupational identities that blend entrepreneurship, gig work and professional community membership (Elbanna & Idowu, 2021b; Hybrid Work, Hybrid Identities, 2025). Boundaryless Career Theory explains structural shifts toward portfolio careers transcending organisational boundaries, yet also reveals tensions between normative ideals of agency and lived realities of constraint (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Idowu & Elbanna, 2021a).

Nigeria's binary worker classification framework is ill-suited to digital labour realities. Comparative evidence from the UK, EU, India and South Africa suggests hybrid regulatory models recognising "dependent contractor" status can balance protection with flexibility, attaching tailored rights to economically dependent workers while preserving autonomy where genuinely desired (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; European Commission, 2021; Ekundayo Oluwole, 2024).

Policy recommendations include legislative reform introducing dependent contractor category, algorithmic transparency mandates, portable social protection schemes, dedicated Digital Labour Units, digital skills integration across education levels, digital worker registries for improved visibility and legal recognition of collective representation (Braimoh-Habeebu, 2025; Research ICT Africa, 2026; ILO, 2022).

Limitations of this study include reliance on secondary data with varying methodologies, potential biases in platform-commissioned reports and inability to capture unpublished research or emerging developments. Future research should employ mixed methods combining nationally representative surveys with in-depth qualitative interviews to illuminate subjective experiences of digital work, longitudinal studies tracking career trajectories of platform workers over time and comparative analyses examining how regulatory reforms affect worker outcomes across jurisdictions.

The future of work in Nigeria's digital economy remains contested and uncertain. Techno-optimistic narratives celebrating flexibility and opportunity must be balanced against critical perspectives highlighting precarity and exploitation. The challenge for policymakers, scholars and practitioners is to foster digital economies that expand genuine opportunities for decent work, meaningful occupational identities and social inclusion while addressing structural inequalities that reproduce exclusion in digital spaces. Nigerian youth are not passive recipients of technological change but active participants shaping the meaning of work through everyday practices, identity negotiations and collective organising. Understanding and supporting these agency-filled responses is essential for building inclusive, just and human-centred digital economies in Nigeria and across Africa.

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