

# **Tethered Freedom: A Phenomenological Inquiry into Meaning, Precarity, and Faith-Based Coping among Ride-Hailing Gig Workers in Gresik, East Java**

Nur Cahyadi<sup>1</sup>, Alif Sulthon Basyari<sup>2</sup>

1 Management Study Program, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Muhammadiyah Gresik, nurcahyadi@umg.ac.id

2 Management Study Program, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Muhammadiyah Gresik, alifsulthon@umg.ac.id

## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** This study explores how ride-hailing and food-delivery gig workers in Gresik, East Java, experience and make sense of their work under algorithmic management, and how they construct meaning and cope with pervasive precarity. It responds to the dominance of quantitative and Global-North accounts by centring the lived experience of workers in a religiously embedded, non-metropolitan Indonesian setting.

**Design/methodology/approach:** A qualitative design grounded in phenomenological inquiry was adopted. Seven informants were selected through purposive sampling and engaged in in-depth, semi-structured interviews supported by field observation. Data were analysed thematically following the descriptive-interpretive phenomenological tradition to distil the essential structure of the lived experience.

**Findings:** Workers inhabit a condition we term tethered freedom: the celebrated flexibility of platform work is lived simultaneously as autonomy and as self-imposed bondage to the application. Four intertwined themes emerged, namely the ambivalence of freedom, life under an impersonal algorithmic authority, the erosion of the body as working capital, and the arithmetic of precarious income. Two resources render this condition bearable and even meaningful, namely faith-based sensemaking and the fraternity of the basecamp community, which together operate as an informal substitute for the human-resource functions the platform withholds.

**Practical implications:** Platforms, policymakers, and human-resource scholars are urged to recognise community organisations and faith-based meaning as de facto welfare infrastructure, and to design portable protections, transparent algorithmic governance, and fatigue safeguards that acknowledge the absent employment relationship.

**Originality/value:** The study advances human-resource scholarship by theorising how workers govern themselves in the absence of an employer, and by foregrounding religious sensemaking and communal solidarity as coping resources rarely examined in secular, metropolitan gig research.

**Paper type:** Empirical (qualitative, phenomenological).

**Keywords:** gig economy, algorithmic management, meaningful work, precarity, phenomenology, faith-based coping

## **1. Introduction**

Every morning in Gresik, long before the industrial estates along the northern coast of East Java come to life, small clusters of men and women in green and orange jackets gather at roadside stalls, warung, and the mouths of housing complexes. They sip coffee, glance at their phones, and wait. They are not employees of any firm in the conventional sense, yet their working day is entirely orchestrated by one, an application that decides when they earn, how much, and whether they keep working at all. These are the gig workers, the ojek online drivers and food couriers who have become an ordinary feature of Indonesian urban life. Their presence is so familiar that it is easy to forget how strange their situation is, because they labour without an employer, are managed without a manager, and are disciplined without a supervisor they can argue with.

The gig economy has expanded rapidly across Indonesia, absorbing millions of workers into platform-mediated transportation, delivery, and freelancing (Putri et al., 2023). It is routinely promoted as a source of flexibility and opportunity, especially for those excluded from formal employment. Yet the same arrangement that promises freedom also withholds the protections that once accompanied work, including a fixed wage, social security, and a place to voice grievances (Tan, 2021). Recent Indonesian evidence shows that gig workers wrestle with volatile incomes and thin financial security (Ahmar et al., 2026), and that fatigue is an inherent, largely unmanaged risk of ride-hailing and delivery work (Hermawati et al., 2025). The picture that emerges is not of unqualified emancipation but of a bargain whose costs are borne almost entirely by the worker.

Much of what we know about this bargain, however, has been assembled from a distance. A large share of the literature is quantitative, measuring satisfaction, motivation, or performance through surveys (Wulan et al., 2025; Devi et al., 2025), while the richer interpretive studies have concentrated on the metropolitan centres of the Global North or on India, Bangladesh, and other large economies (Kešāne & Spurina, 2024; Ray, 2024; Billah & Khan, 2026). What it actually feels like to be a gig worker, from the inside, in a mid-sized Indonesian kabupaten with a distinctive religious and communal culture, remains poorly understood. This matters for human-resource scholarship, because the gig economy poses a genuine puzzle for a discipline built around the employment relationship. When there is no employer, who performs the work of managing people, and how do workers manage themselves?

This study takes up that question in Gresik, a regency long known as a santri town and a centre of Islamic learning, where faith and community are not background details but organising features of everyday life. We ask how ride-hailing and food-delivery gig workers experience their work under algorithmic management, and how they make it meaningful and bearable amid persistent precarity. Rather than testing a model, we listen. Using a phenomenological inquiry built on in-depth interviews with seven workers selected purposively, we seek to describe the essential structure of their lived experience and to interpret what it reveals.

The contribution of the article is threefold. Theoretically, it extends human-resource thinking beyond the firm by showing how the managerial functions the platform declines to provide, namely support, recognition, development, and welfare, are quietly reconstituted by workers themselves through faith and fraternity. Empirically, it brings a non-metropolitan, religiously embedded Indonesian setting into a conversation that has been dominated by secular and metropolitan cases. Practically, it offers grounded suggestions for platforms and policymakers who wish to govern this workforce more decently. We do not claim that faith and community solve the structural problems of gig work; if anything, our argument is that they compensate for a failure that should not be theirs to bear.

## 2. Literature Review

Because this is an interpretive, phenomenological study rather than a hypothesis-testing one, the review below does not develop propositions. Instead, it maps the conversations this article enters and clarifies the gap it addresses, drawing on scholarship published largely within the past decade.

### *The gig economy and the promise of flexibility*

Platform work is defined by short, task-based engagements coordinated through a digital application, typically without a formal employment contract. Its defenders foreground autonomy, the freedom to choose when, where, and how much to work. Hickson (2024) argues that this vocabulary of freedom is politically convenient but analytically misleading, since the structural vulnerability of gig workers exposes them to forms of domination that a narrow, choice-based idea of liberty conveniently hides. In the Indonesian case, Putri et al. (2023) apply the Fairwork lens to transport gig work and find a mixed ledger, with reasonable gross pay set against below-minimum net earnings, long hours, and the absence of employee status and social protection. Tan (2021) situates this ambiguity within a labour law that struggles to classify workers who have, in effect, no employer. Flexibility, then, is real but partial, and it arrives bundled with risks the worker must absorb alone.

### *Algorithmic management and the absent employer*

A central strand of recent scholarship examines how software, rather than a human supervisor, allocates tasks, sets incentives, evaluates performance, and enforces discipline. Duggan et al. (2023) name this arrangement algorithmic HRM control and show that it functions as a pervasive, distinctive control system in which non-organisational parties, especially customers through ratings, exert direct influence over workers. This is a crucial insight for human-resource management, because it relocates classic functions of the field into an opaque technical apparatus. Workers experience the algorithm as an authority that cannot be reasoned with; Chan and others in this literature describe the affective toll of metric power, while Weber et al. (2026) map the coping repertoires workers deploy against algorithmic threats, distinguishing proactive from reactive strategies and identifying distinct worker types from the empowered collectivist to the isolated denier. What unites these studies is a recognition that management persists in the gig economy, but in a displaced, depersonalised form that leaves workers with little recourse.

### ***Precarity, well-being, and the working body***

If algorithmic control describes how gig work is governed, precarity describes how it is felt. Kešane and Spurina (2024) distinguish precarity as an objective condition from precariousness as a subjective experience, identifying several sociological types of food-delivery workers according to their motivations and trajectories. This distinction is valuable because it warns against treating gig workers as an undifferentiated mass of victims. Well-being research reinforces the ambivalence, with Kim et al. (2023) linking platform service work to quality-of-life outcomes, and Apouey et al. (2020) documenting the financial and mental strain that surfaced when demand collapsed during the pandemic. Bernhard-Oettel et al. (2025) show that insecurity itself is not uniform, clustering into distinct profiles among gig workers. In the Indonesian context, Hermawati et al. (2025) foreground fatigue as an occupational hazard rooted in long, unpredictable hours, while Ahmar et al. (2026) trace how income volatility shapes perceived financial security. Across these accounts the body appears as both the worker's principal asset and the site where the costs of platform labour accumulate.

### ***Agency, meaning, identity, and community***

A more recent and, for our purposes, more generative strand rejects the image of the passive platform subject. Anwar and Graham (2020) document the hidden transcripts through which African gig workers rework and resist algorithmic monitoring, while McDaid and Free (2025) show how online forums allow Uber drivers to build solidarity and justify non-compliance. Newlands (2022) describes anthropotropism, the way workers reach for human recognition in a system designed to withhold it, and Yao et al. (2021) capture the paradox of being together but alone, atomised yet reliant on peer support. Alongside agency runs the question of meaning. Pieczka and Miszczyński (2025) ask whether app-work can be meaningful and find that couriers do construct meaning through autonomy and physical mastery even as the same features perpetuate exploitation, and Van Fossen et al. (2025) model how drivers maintain a positive identity through self-regulation. Weidenstedt et al. (2024) capture the in-between, liminal quality of the gig worker's identity. Most strikingly for our setting, Gaillard and Galiere (2026) show that religious affiliation and community can mediate workers' encounter with the algorithm, offering material, emotional, and identity resources, while Aufa et al. (2026) revisit classical Islamic thought on work to critique the diminished sense of vocation in platform labour. These studies open a door this article walks through.

### ***Research gap***

Three gaps motivate this study. First, the evidence base tilts heavily toward quantitative measurement and Global-North or large-economy settings, leaving the textured, first-person experience of workers in mid-sized Indonesian regions largely unrecorded. Second, where meaning and coping are studied, the spiritual and communal resources that are central to Indonesian working life, particularly in a santri region such as Gresik, remain at the margin of an otherwise secular conversation (Gaillard & Galiere, 2026; Aufa et al., 2026). Third, and most fundamentally for our discipline, the literature has yet to fully theorise what human-resource management becomes when there is no employer to practise it. This article addresses these gaps by asking not whether gig work is good or bad, but how it is lived, made sense of, and endured.

### 3. Research Method

#### *Research design*

This study adopts a qualitative design grounded in phenomenological inquiry. Phenomenology is well suited to our aim because it seeks to describe the meaning that a lived experience holds for those who undergo it, setting aside, as far as possible, the researcher's prior assumptions in order to reach the essence of the phenomenon. Our interest was not in how many drivers feel a certain way, nor in isolating variables, but in what it is like to work under an algorithm without an employer, and how that experience is made sense of. A descriptive-interpretive orientation was chosen, which begins with faithful description of the informants' accounts and moves, cautiously, toward interpretation informed by the literature reviewed above.

#### *Research setting*

The research was conducted in the Regency of Gresik, East Java, an industrial and port area on the northern coast adjacent to Surabaya. Gresik is at once a manufacturing hub and a historic centre of Islamic learning associated with the early spread of Islam in Java, giving it a strong santri character in which religious practice and communal life are deeply woven into daily routines. This combination of an industrial labour market and a pronounced religious culture made it a revealing site for studying how gig workers find meaning and cope, and distinguishes it from the metropolitan settings that dominate the field.

#### *Informants and sampling*

Seven informants were selected using purposive sampling, a strategy appropriate to phenomenological work because it deliberately seeks participants who have lived the phenomenon and can articulate it. The inclusion criteria were that the informant relied on one or more ride-hailing or food-delivery platforms as a primary or substantial source of income, had at least two years of continuous experience, and worked within Gresik. We sought maximum variation within this frame, across age, platform, family situation, and length of tenure, and we intentionally included one woman driver and one community coordinator to widen the range of vantage points. Recruitment proceeded through a basecamp, a roadside gathering point run by a local drivers' community, and then through referral. Data collection stopped at seven informants once the interviews began to echo one another and no substantially new themes were surfacing, indicating that thematic saturation had been reached for the purposes of this study. To protect confidentiality, all names used below are pseudonyms.

**Table 1. Profile of informants**

| Code | Pseudonym | Age | Platform / service           | Tenure  | Situation                                    |
|------|-----------|-----|------------------------------|---------|----------------------------------------------|
| I1   | Bg        | 34  | Ride-hailing (ojek online)   | 5 years | Married, two children; former factory worker |
| I2   | Sl        | 41  | Ride-hailing + food delivery | 3 years | Sole breadwinner, three dependents           |
| I3   | Rz        | 27  | Food delivery courier        | 2 years | Single; recent graduate, works full days     |
| I4   | Hd        | 38  | Mixed ride-hailing           | 6 years | Coordinator of a drivers' basecamp           |
| I5   | Yf        | 45  | Ride-hailing                 | 4 years | Returned overseas migrant worker             |
| I6   | Ad        | 30  | Food delivery courier        | 3 years | Runs a small warung alongside gig work       |
| I7   | Ft        | 33  | Ride-hailing (bike)          | 2 years | Widowed single mother of one                 |

Source(s): Authors' own creation

#### *Data collection*

Data were generated primarily through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and, where informants preferred, the local Javanese register. Each informant was interviewed at least once, with several follow-up conversations held at the basecamp and, in two

cases, while accompanying drivers between orders. Interviews lasted between sixty and ninety minutes and were guided by open questions about a typical working day, experiences with the application, moments of difficulty and pride, and the sources of support the informants relied upon. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim; field notes captured gestures, settings, and the texture of the basecamp. Illustrative quotations presented below were translated into English by the authors, with care taken to preserve the informants' idiom, including expressions such as *nrimo* and *rezeki* that carry meanings not fully rendered by their English equivalents.

### **Data analysis**

Analysis followed the steps commonly used in phenomenological research. We began by reading each transcript repeatedly to gain a sense of the whole, then extracted significant statements that spoke directly to the experience of gig work. These statements were clustered into meaning units, which were compared across informants and gradually consolidated into themes. From the themes we composed a textural description of what the informants experienced and a structural description of how they experienced it, before synthesising both into a statement of the essence of the phenomenon, articulated in this article as *tethered freedom*. Throughout, we practised bracketing by recording and setting aside our own assumptions as management scholars, so that the informants' meanings, rather than our theories, drove the interpretation.

### **Trustworthiness**

Several measures supported the credibility of the findings. Prolonged engagement at the basecamp built rapport and allowed observation to corroborate interview accounts. Member checking was carried out by returning preliminary interpretations to four informants, who confirmed and refined them. The two authors coded independently and reconciled differences through discussion, strengthening confirmability, and an audit trail of transcripts, notes, and coding decisions was maintained. As a small, context-specific study, the aim is transferability rather than statistical generalisation; we therefore provide sufficient description for readers to judge the relevance of these findings to other settings.

## **4. Result and Discussion**

The seven informants shared a working world that, on the surface, looked like freedom and, on closer acquaintance, revealed itself as something far more tangled. From their accounts we distilled four themes describing what they experienced, followed by two themes describing the resources that made the experience liveable. Taken together, these six themes compose the essential structure we name *tethered freedom*. We present each theme with illustrative testimony and read it against the literature as we go, because in phenomenological work description and interpretation are difficult to separate cleanly.

### **Theme 1: The ambivalence of freedom, *bebas tapi terikat***

Every informant began by praising the freedom of the work, and every informant, given time, took much of that praise back. The phrase that recurred, in one form or another, was *bebas tapi terikat*, free but bound. Bg (I1), who left a factory job for the road, put the contrast plainly.

*"At the factory I hated the whistle, someone always watching. Here nobody orders me, I start when I want. But the truth is I cannot stop. If I rest, there is no money, so who is really free? I am chased by my own target."* (Bg, I1)

What the informants described is not the simple autonomy celebrated in platform marketing but a freedom that folds back into compulsion. The absence of a supervisor is genuine and valued, yet it is replaced by an internalised pressure to keep moving. Ft (I7) described switching the application back on late at night because a quiet afternoon had left her short of her daily need. This is precisely the domination that Hickson (2024) argues the language of freedom conceals, a structural vulnerability that leaves the worker less free even as they feel unsupervised. It also echoes Pieczka and Mischczynski (2025), who found that the very features couriers experience as autonomy simultaneously bind them to exploitation. The freedom of the gig worker, our informants taught us, is real but hollow at the centre, a freedom to choose the terms of one's own hard labour.

### ***Theme 2: Living under the algorithm, an authority without a face***

If no human gives orders, something still does. The informants spoke of the application as an ever-present authority, at once intimate and unreachable. It hands out orders, withholds them, scores performance, and, when displeased, suspends the account, all without explanation and without anyone to appeal to. Sl (I2) described the peculiar helplessness of being judged by a system that never answers.

*“The app is like a boss who never shows his face. When my rating dropped I did not even know what I did. You cannot argue with an application. You can only say sorry to your phone and hope tomorrow it gives you orders again.” (Sl, I2)*

Hd (I4), the basecamp coordinator, was sharper still, describing how customer ratings turn every passenger into a supervisor with the power to punish. This is the lived face of what Duggan et al. (2023) call algorithmic HRM control, a system in which the classic managerial functions of allocation, evaluation, and discipline are executed by software and by non-organisational parties, above all customers. Our informants experienced this as a distinctive kind of powerlessness, different from having a harsh human boss, because the object of their grievance was opaque and mute. Some responded, as Weber et al. (2026) describe, with a mixture of proactive and reactive coping, learning the rhythms of the algorithm and gaming its incentives, while others withdrew into resignation. What was strikingly absent, and what a human-resource scholar cannot fail to notice, was any legitimate channel for voice, the very thing Putri et al. (2023) identify as missing in Indonesian platform work. The workers were managed intensively and represented not at all.

### ***Theme 3: The body as capital and its slow erosion***

For a worker with no assets but a motorcycle and their own stamina, the body is the enterprise. The informants were acutely aware of this, and equally aware that the body wears out. They spoke of heat and rain, of aching backs and blurred eyes after twelve hours on the road, and of the impossibility of taking a sick day when income stops the moment the wheels do.

*“This body is my capital. If I am sick, the family does not eat. So I keep going even when my head is spinning from the sun. There is no such thing as paid leave for us. The machine can rest, I cannot.” (Yf, I5)*

This testimony gives a human voice to what Hermawati et al. (2025) document as the endemic and largely unmanaged fatigue of Indonesian ride-hailing and delivery work. Because the platform recognises no employment relationship, the ordinary protections that shield the working body, rest, sick pay, insurance, are simply absent, and their absence is transferred to the worker as personal risk. Rz (I3), the youngest informant, spoke almost casually about a road accident he had absorbed as a cost of doing business. Here the ambivalence of gig work turns starkly material, for the same flexibility that lets a worker choose their hours also lets the platform disclaim any duty of care for the body that makes its service possible. The erosion is slow, individualised, and invisible in the aggregate figures that celebrate the sector's growth.

### ***Theme 4: The arithmetic of precarious income***

Underneath every account ran a constant mental calculation. Earnings rise and fall with weather, demand, incentives, and the unseen decisions of the algorithm, and the informants lived inside this volatility as a permanent low-grade anxiety. Ad (I6), who runs a small warung alongside his deliveries, described the daily arithmetic.

*“Every day the number is different. Chasing the bonus, I calculate constantly, how many more trips, how much petrol, what is left. Some days good, some days nothing. You can never really plan. You live for today and pray about tomorrow.” (Ad, I6)*

This is the subjective face of the income instability that Ahmar et al. (2026) measure among Indonesian gig workers, and it aligns with the distinction Kešāne and Spurina (2024) draw between precarity as a condition and precariousness as an experience. Importantly, our informants were not a uniform mass. For Rz (I3) the platform was a stopgap between studies and a proper job, for Ft (I7) it was a lifeline after widowhood, and for Bg (I1) it had become a settled if uneasy career. These varied positions shaped how the same volatility was felt, echoing the heterogeneity that the well-being

literature increasingly insists upon (Bernhard-Oettel et al., 2025). What united them was the transfer of financial risk onto the individual, the defining move of the triangular arrangement Healy and Pekarek (2025) describe, in which platform and consumer benefit while the worker carries the vulnerability.

These first four themes, taken alone, would tell a familiar and bleak story. What our informants insisted upon, however, was that their lives were not only endured but in some measure affirmed, and that this affirmation came from two sources the platform neither provided nor controlled. It is to these that we now turn, for they carry the study's distinctive contribution.

### ***Theme 5: Faith as anchor, work as ikhtiar and ibadah***

In Gresik's santri culture, the informants reached instinctively for a religious vocabulary to make sense of their work. They spoke of rezeki, sustenance understood as apportioned by God, of tawakal, trust after effort, of nrimo, an active acceptance of what comes, and of syukur, gratitude. Crucially, this was not fatalism. The informants worked hard precisely because effort, ikhtiar, was understood as a religious duty, with the outcome entrusted to God. Yf (I5), the returned migrant worker, framed the volatility of his income through this lens.

*"My job is to pedal, to try, that is ikhtiar. The result is rezeki from Allah, already measured for me. So when today is empty I am not destroyed, I say alhamdulillah and go again tomorrow. If I did not believe this, this work would crush me." (Yf, I5)*

This faith-based sensemaking did real psychological work. It reframed uncontrollable income volatility as a matter within God's order rather than a personal failure, converting a source of despair into an occasion for patience and gratitude. Several informants described their long hours on the road as a form of worship, an honest striving to provide for family that carried spiritual worth. In doing so they were, in effect, restoring the sense of vocation that Aufa et al. (2026) argue platform work strips away, re-internalising the ethical and spiritual dimension of labour that the Al-Kasb tradition upholds. Our finding both extends and localises Gaillard and Galiere (2026), who show that religion mediates workers' encounter with the algorithm and reconciles their religious and work identities. Where their Muslim workers drew on faith amid a secular European setting, our informants inhabited a whole environment saturated with religious meaning, which made faith less a private resource than a shared framework for interpreting precarity itself. This, we argue, is a coping mechanism that the dominant, secular gig literature has largely failed to see, and it is central to how meaning is manufactured in this setting.

### ***Theme 6: The fraternity of the basecamp***

The second resource was communal. Nearly every informant belonged to a basecamp or paguyuban, an informal community of drivers organised around a shelter, a chat group, and a code of mutual aid. Here they found what the platform withheld, namely company, information, protection, and recognition. Hd (I4), who coordinates one such community, described its reach.

*"The app makes you alone, one phone, one person. The basecamp makes us brothers. If someone crashes, we collect money that night. If a driver is treated badly, we come together. New drivers learn the tricks from us, not from the company. We are each other's office, each other's insurance." (Hd, I4)*

This testimony captures with unusual clarity the paradox Yao et al. (2021) name as being together but alone, the atomisation of platform work and the peer support that pushes against it. The basecamp countered the isolation the application produces, supplying the human recognition that Newlands (2022) argues gig workers actively seek in systems designed to deny it. It also functioned as an engine of collective agency of the everyday kind documented by Anwar and Graham (2020) and McDaid and Free (2025), a place where grievances were shared, strategies for handling the algorithm were passed on, and a common identity was forged. Ft (I7), who as a woman had initially felt exposed, described the basecamp as the reason she could keep working at night, because someone always knew where she was. What we observed, in short, was a community quietly performing the functions of a human-resource department, onboarding and training newcomers, providing welfare and emergency support, offering a channel for voice, and sustaining morale and identity.

***Synthesis: tethered freedom and human-resource management without an employer***

Drawing the themes together, the essence of the lived experience of gig work in Gresik is a condition of tethered freedom. The worker is genuinely released from the supervisor and the whistle, yet bound to an opaque algorithm, to the limits of their own body, and to the arithmetic of survival. They are, to borrow Weidenstedt et al. (2024), suspended in a liminal state, neither employees nor entrepreneurs, and they exercise a liminal agency within it. What makes this suspended condition liveable, and at times meaningful, is not anything the platform supplies but the two resources the worker brings from their own lifeworld, faith and fraternity.

For human-resource scholarship this yields a pointed argument. The gig economy does not abolish human-resource management; it externalises and privatises it. The functions the discipline has long studied, selection and socialisation, performance management, reward, welfare, voice, and the cultivation of meaning, do not disappear when the employer does. Instead, control functions are absorbed by the algorithm (Duggan et al., 2023), while the supportive, developmental, and meaning-making functions are quietly downloaded onto workers themselves and onto the communal and religious institutions of their society. Faith supplies meaning and psychological resilience; the basecamp supplies training, welfare, and voice. In effect, Gresik's gig workers have reconstructed a shadow human-resource system to compensate for the one the platform declines to operate. This reframing helps explain how a form of work so materially precarious can nonetheless be sustained and even valued, and it aligns with a growing recognition that agency, meaning, and identity are as central to the gig experience as control and precarity (Van Fossen et al., 2025; Pieczka & Miszczyński, 2025).

We are wary, however, of a comfortable conclusion. That workers cope so resourcefully, through faith and mutual aid, should not be read as evidence that the arrangement is acceptable. On the contrary, the resilience we documented is a measure of how much has been offloaded onto people least able to bear it. There is a real risk that celebrating worker coping becomes an alibi for structural neglect, allowing platforms and policymakers to treat faith and community as free substitutes for the protections they ought to provide. The dignity our informants displayed is theirs; the failure that makes it necessary is not.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study set out to understand how ride-hailing and food-delivery gig workers in Gresik, East Java, experience their work and make it meaningful under algorithmic management. Listening phenomenologically to seven workers, we found that their experience is best captured as tethered freedom, a condition in which the genuine release from a human supervisor is inseparable from bondage to an opaque algorithm, to a body that steadily wears down, and to the daily arithmetic of a volatile income. Against this we found two resources that make the condition liveable and even meaningful, namely a faith that reframes precarity as something bearable and worth enduring, and a basecamp fraternity that supplies the company, protection, and recognition the platform withholds.

The theoretical implication is that the gig economy does not do away with human-resource management but externalises it, delegating control to the algorithm while offloading support, development, welfare, and meaning onto workers and the religious and communal institutions of their society. Gig workers in Gresik have, in effect, assembled a shadow human-resource system out of faith and mutual aid. This reframing invites human-resource scholarship to extend its gaze beyond the firm and to take seriously the spiritual and communal sources of resilience that secular, metropolitan research has tended to overlook.

The practical implications follow from this argument, and they should not be mistaken for an endorsement of the status quo. Platforms should treat the driver communities that already perform quasi-managerial functions as partners deserving of support rather than as threats, and should open genuine, transparent channels for voice and for contesting algorithmic decisions. Given the centrality of the body, fatigue-management measures, accident cover, and portable social protection are urgent rather than optional. Policymakers, for their part, should design protections that attach to the worker

rather than to an employment status the platform refuses to grant, so that the burden of coping is not left entirely to individuals, their faith, and their friends.

The study has limitations that also mark directions for future research. It rests on seven informants in a single regency with a distinctive religious culture, so its findings are meant to be transferable rather than generalisable, and readers should judge their relevance to other settings accordingly. Its exclusive focus on transport and delivery work leaves online freelancing and other segments unexamined. Future research might compare santri regions with more secular urban centres to test how far faith-based coping is culturally specific, follow workers over time to trace how tethered freedom is negotiated across a career, and attend more closely to gender, since the single woman in our study hinted at experiences that deserve fuller treatment. Above all, future work should keep the worker's lived experience at the centre, because it is there, and not in the aggregate statistics of the sector's growth, that the real terms of the gig bargain become visible.

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