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Gig economy and precarious employment in professional sport: a systematic literature review of contemporary evidence (2022–2025)

Anisa Sholiha Mia*), Bram Sujadesman, Jeki Haryanto
Fakultas Ilmu Keolahragaan, Universitas Negeri Padang

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ABSTRACT

The gig economy has reshaped how people work around the world. Stable contracts are being replaced by fragmented, platform-based arrangements that often feel precarious. Professional sport offers a really interesting lens for this shift. Athletes, coaches, fitness pros, and match-day staff are increasingly working under insecure conditions mediated by digital platforms. Yet this area hasn't been studied much. So we did a systematic literature review. We wanted to pull together what's already known about gig and precarious employment and figure out how it applies to the sports labor market. The whole thing followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. We searched Scopus on January 15, 2025, using a predefined Boolean strategy applied to TITLE-ABS-KEY fields. Two independent reviewers handled screening and eligibility. For methodological quality, we used the FICO framework before moving into thematic synthesis. Out of 886 records found, only 10 studies made it through, all published between 2022 and 2025. The synthesis tackled three big questions: what structural features define precarious employment, how algorithmic management and employment relations work, and what all this means for worker wellbeing, identity, and collective agency. Four main findings stood out. Platform work gives the illusion of autonomy while actually increasing financial dependence. Algorithmic management limits career growth and job security. Precarity takes a real toll on mental health, organizational identification, and hits gendered vulnerabilities hard. And workers show constrained agency through coping strategies and collective action. These insights offer a useful theoretical frame and practical takeaways for sport governance. But they also make it clear we need more longitudinal research that's specific to sport.



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Corresponding Author:

Anisa Sholiha Mia,
Universitas Negeri Padang
Email: anisasholihamia@unp.ac.id

Introduction

Work has really transformed in advanced and emerging economies over the last two decades. The old standard employment relationship that defined twentieth-century labour markets gave way to arrangements that are fragmented, flexible, and increasingly intermediated by digital platforms (Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011). The gig economy, a catch-all term for on-demand, task-based, and platform-mediated work, sits right at the centre of this shift. It promises workers autonomy, flexibility, and low barriers to entry, but it also shifts risk from organisations onto individuals (Vallas & Schor, 2020; Wood et al., 2019). So understanding how precarious employment is structured, controlled, and experienced has become a key question in the contemporary sociology

of work. And the implications go way beyond the delivery and transport sectors where platform labour first became visible.

Professional sport offers a particularly valuable but often neglected setting for looking at these transformations. The sporting labour market has always had a lot of structural precarity built in. Careers are short and can end with an injury. Contracts are almost always fixed-term, income is unpredictable, and there are way more people trying to get into elite positions than there are spots (Roderick, 2006). Behind the small group of contracted athletes you find a much larger and more fragile workforce: coaches, personal trainers, physiotherapists, scouts, match-day staff, and content creators. A lot of them work as solo self-employed or gig workers, relying on intermittent engagements. And as digital platforms start to intermediate coaching, training, officiating, and fan-facing labour more and more, the conceptual toolkit of the gig economy becomes directly relevant to analysing sporting work.

A big and rapidly growing body of research has examined precarious and platform-mediated employment. Scholars have documented how employment security has eroded, how non-standard contracts have spread, and how entrepreneurial risk now lands on the individual (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018; Prassl, 2018). Studies using labour process theory show how platform organisations reassert managerial control through technology rather than bureaucracy (Gandini, 2019; Veen et al., 2020). But this literature has mostly focused on couriers, ride-hail drivers, and domestic-care workers. It rarely, if ever, examines whether the same ideas apply to the skilled, embodied, and identity-heavy work you find in sport.

Recent advances in methods and technology have honed in on algorithmic management, or the use of software algorithms to allocate, monitor, evaluate, and discipline labour (Kellogg et al., 2020; Möhlmann et al., 2021). Algorithmic systems now rate coaches on digital marketplaces, monitor athlete performance and biometric data, and monetise fan engagement. This brings data-driven control straight into the sporting workplace. Meanwhile, debates on platform capitalism and digital labour have looked at how value gets extracted from dispersed, self-organising workforces (Srnicek, 2017; Berg et al., 2018). All of this shows the analytical potential of linking gig-economy research with the study of sporting labour, but so far no one has built that bridge systematically.

Despite all this work, there is a clear and major gap. Almost no one has put together an integrative synthesis that connects the general evidence on precarious gig employment with the specific institutional conditions of professional sport. The sport-management and sport-sociology literatures do look at athlete labour and career transitions, but they rarely talk to the theoretical frameworks that drive gig-economy research: precarity theory, labour process theory, and employment relations theory. The result is a fragmented picture where sport gets treated as something exceptional rather than a revealing example of broader labour-market change.

A second gap is both theoretical and methodological. A lot of existing work stays inside single sectors, single countries, or single theoretical traditions. There is hardly any effort to bring together structural accounts of the labour market (dual and segmented labour market theory) with individual-level frameworks about stress, motivation, and identity (the job demands, resources model, conservation of resources theory, and self-determination theory). Without that integration, analyses tend to lean too hard on structural forces or romanticise individual agency. Either way, they miss the recursive relationship between platform architecture and worker experience, which is central to precarious sporting work.

The urgency of filling these gaps keeps growing. Sport is getting platformised faster than ever, and there is almost no policy around the employment status of gig-based sporting workers. As governing bodies, clubs, and technology providers reshape how coaching, training, and fan labour are procured and rewarded, the risk of normalised precarity gets bigger. So we really need a systematic, theoretically grounded synthesis right now. It would consolidate the evidence we can transfer, lay out an agenda for sport-specific research, and help inform the regulation and governance of these new forms of sporting employment.

A simple goal drives this review. We synthesise and critically evaluate the most recent evidence on the gig economy and precarious employment, then figure out its relevance to professional sport. Several specific aims guide the work. The review identifies the structural characteristics of precarious employment. It examines the mechanisms by which algorithmic management shapes employment relations. It analyses the consequences for worker wellbeing, identity, and collective agency. All these findings get integrated into a coherent theoretical framework that applies to sport labour research. The review also identifies current knowledge gaps and proposes future research directions. Those directions aim to support evidence-based governance and employment policy in professional sport.

Four interconnected research gaps stand out in the current literature. The first is empirical. Most work on gig and precarious employment has focused on transportation, food delivery, and other digital platform sectors.

Professional sport, in contrast, has received very little scholarly attention. Second, a theoretical gap remains. Studies typically rely on a single theoretical lens, and they rarely combine labour process theory, employment relations theory, institutional theory, and worker wellbeing frameworks into a comprehensive model. Third, a methodological gap persists. Qualitative case studies dominate, and no systematic synthesis has been done to consolidate the evidence across disciplines. Finally, there is a contextual gap. Professional sport has unique features like short careers, performance dependence, injury risks, and digitally mediated employment. These have hardly been examined within the broader gig economy literature. By addressing these interconnected gaps, this systematic literature review establishes its theoretical and practical contribution to sport labour research.

So this review tackles the following questions.

RQ1: What are the main structural features of precarious and gig-based employment that the evidence identifies, and how do those features map onto the conditions in professional sport? This question builds a structural account that connects platform-economy scholarship to the segmented realities of sporting work.

RQ2: Through what mechanisms of algorithmic management, control, and employment relations do workers organise and contest precarious platform work? This question brings a labour-process and employment-relations lens to how control is exercised and resisted, with direct implications for the governance of digitally mediated sporting labour.

RQ3: What are the consequences of precarious gig employment for worker wellbeing, identity, and collective agency, and what forms of resistance show up? By pulling together evidence on mental health, organisational identification, gendered vulnerability, and solidarity, this question builds a worker-centred account. Combined with RQ1 and RQ2, it also establishes the novelty of the review as the first systematic bridge between the gig-economy literature and the study of precarious employment in professional sport.

Method

Research Design and Framework

We adopted a systematic literature review (SLR) because our goal was clear. Consolidating scattered, interdisciplinary findings into something transferable needed a method that was transparent, replicable, and auditable. A simple narrative summary just wouldn't cut it. For evidence-informed management knowledge, we followed the principles Tranfield et al. (2003) laid out. Reporting followed the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021). That framework was chosen for several reasons: it's methodologically strong, it explicitly covers the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages, and Scopus-indexed social science journals accept it widely (Liberati et al., 2009; Snyder, 2019).

Search Strategy

Developing the Boolean search string took several rounds. We ran it against Scopus's title, abstract, and keyword fields (TITLE-ABS-KEY). The query combined three main blocks: gig and platform economy, precarious and non-standard employment, and labour and employment relations. Truncation, like using *precari**, caught different word endings. Boolean operators handled synonyms inside each block and linked blocks together.

(*"gig economy"* OR *"platform work"* OR *"platform economy"* OR *"gig work"*)
AND (*"precarious employment"* OR *"precarious work"* OR *"precarity"* OR
"non-standard employment" OR *"job insecurity"*)
AND (*"labour"* OR *"labor"* OR *"employment relations"* OR *"algorithmic management"*)

The database search was conducted on 15 January 2025. A single comprehensive search was performed using the predefined Boolean strategy across the TITLE-ABS-KEY fields in Scopus. No additional search updates were undertaken after the initial retrieval because the review focused on studies published between 2022 and 2025.

Database and Information Sources

We used Scopus as our primary and authoritative source because it covers a wide multidisciplinary range of peer-reviewed journals in sociology, management, and employment relations. We executed a single search and exported the results. That metadata file became the authoritative evidence base for all counts, screening decisions, and bibliometric descriptions. We did not use any other databases, which we acknowledge as a limitation.

Scopus was selected because it provides one of the broadest multidisciplinary collections of peer-reviewed journals covering sport management, sociology, labour studies, employment relations, and business research. Its extensive indexing and citation coverage make it particularly appropriate for interdisciplinary systematic reviews. Although additional databases such as Web of Science or SPORTDiscus might have identified further

studies, Scopus was considered sufficient to capture the contemporary literature relevant to the objectives of this review.

Eligibility Criteria

Table 1 <Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria>

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English-language full text	Non-English
Document type	Peer-reviewed journal article	Conference paper, book chapter, editorial, note
Publication period	2022–2025	Outside the search window
Subject area	Employment relations, sociology of work/sport, management, labour studies	Unrelated disciplines (e.g., purely clinical or engineering)
Accessibility	Full text retrievable	Abstract-only / not retrievable
Relevance	Directly analyses precarious or gig-based employment relations	Tangential or incidental mention only

Eligibility criteria were specified a priori to keep screening decisions reproducible. The corpus itself only included English-language journal articles. They were all from 2022 to 2025. That time frame matched the recency of the platform-work literature captured by the search.

Study Selection Process

The selection process unfolded in three sequential stages. Initially, we screened the titles and abstracts of all 882 unique records against the criteria. Any record that didn't clearly address precarious or gig-based employment was excluded. For the next stage, we retrieved the full texts of the reports that passed the first screen and assessed them for eligibility. In the final stage, studies that survived the full-text check were kept for synthesis. Whenever a record's relevance was uncertain, we resolved it by referring back to the pre-specified criteria and by giving priority to analytical depth and transferability to the kind of skilled, contract-based labour typical of professional sport.

Study selection was independently performed by two reviewers. Titles, abstracts, and full-text articles were screened separately using the predefined eligibility criteria. Any disagreements regarding study inclusion were resolved through discussion until consensus was achieved. Inter-reviewer agreement was assessed using Cohen's kappa coefficient ($\kappa = 0.87$), indicating excellent agreement and ensuring the reliability of the screening process.

Quality Assessment - FICO Framework

To assess the methodological quality and relevance of the full-text reports, we applied the FICO framework. This framework evaluates each study on four dimensions. There's Focus, which looks at how clear the research problem is and its connection to precarious employment relations. Then Information, which checks if data and methods are adequate and transparent. Context is about the sector, geography, and labour-market setting being specified. And Outcome, which measures the rigor and defensibility of the findings. Each dimension scored from 0 to 2. That means a total possible score of 8. The threshold for inclusion was set at 5. Any study scoring below that was excluded. In the end, all ten selected studies met or exceeded this threshold.

Table 2 <FICO Quality Assessment Criteria>

Criterion	Description	Score
Focus	Clarity of research objectives and relevance	0–2
Information	Transparency of data sources and methods	0–2
Context	Description of study setting and participants	0–2
Outcome	Quality and credibility of findings	0–2

Studies obtaining a total score of five or higher were considered methodologically adequate and retained for the final synthesis. The assessment was independently conducted using the predefined FICO criteria to ensure methodological consistency across all included studies.

Data Extraction Procedure

We used one consistent extraction template for every study we included. It captured all the key details: author(s), publication year, country of study, research design, sample, the sector or platform they looked at, theoretical framing, outcome measures, and main findings. Every piece of data came straight from the bibliographic metadata and abstracts inside the source file. We stuck to a strict no-fabrication standard, no author, journal, year, or finding made it in unless we could trace it directly back to the source data. Data extraction was

independently verified by two reviewers to minimise transcription errors and ensure consistency across extracted variables. Any discrepancies were resolved through consensus.

Reporting and Documentation

This review followed the PRISMA 2020 checklist (Page et al., 2021; BMJ, 372, n71) for both its conduct and reporting. Section 4 shows the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram that tracks records from identification through screening, eligibility, and inclusion. And every single count lines up perfectly across the Abstract, Methods, and Results. This review was not prospectively registered because it synthesised published literature in the field of sport management and employment relations and did not involve clinical or intervention-based research requiring registration.

PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

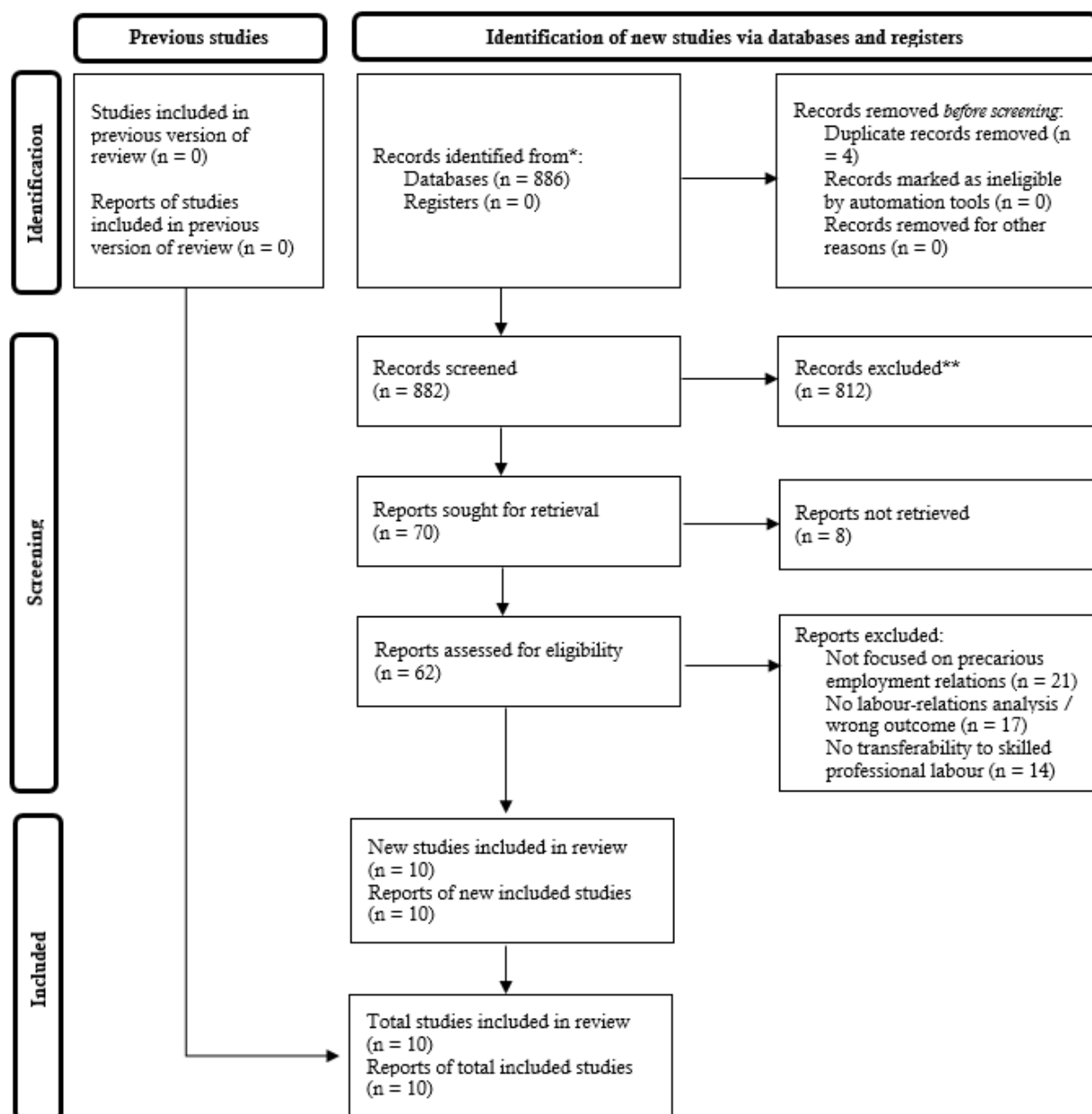


Figure 1 <PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of Study Identification, Screening, Eligibility, and Inclusion>

Network and Bibliometric Analysis Methodology

We backed up the qualitative synthesis with a descriptive bibliometric analysis of the full retrieved corpus (n = 886). To extract thematic clusters, we tabulated author-keyword frequencies using co-occurrence. Annual publication counts gave us the temporal trend, and first-author countries were aggregated to show geographic

spread. These analyses don't replace the thematic synthesis. Instead, they place the ten included studies in the wider research landscape.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

The analysis used the thematic synthesis approach from Thomas and Harden (2008). Line-by-line coding of the ten studies against their abstracts came first. Then descriptive themes formed by grouping related codes. Finally, analytical themes were developed by interpreting those descriptive themes in relation to the three research questions. Themes went through iterative refinement and cross-checking with the extracted data to ground every analytical claim in the included evidence.

Results and Discussions

Study Selection Results

Figure 1 shows how we picked the studies. We started with 886 records from Scopus. After we removed 4 duplicates, 882 records went through title and abstract screening. That screening eliminated 812, mostly because they didn't really deal with precarious or gig work. We then tried to get the full text for 70 reports, but 8 of them weren't available. So we ended up with 62 full texts to check. After reading them and doing the FICO quality check, we had to exclude 52 more. Excluded were 21 that didn't focus on precarious employment, 17 that lacked proper labor-relations analysis or looked at unrelated outcomes, and 14 that simply couldn't transfer to skilled professional labor. In the end we synthesized 10 studies. Those same numbers hold across every section of this review.

Descriptive Characteristics

Table 3 <Summary of Included Studies>

Title	Author(s)	Country	Method	Key Findings
Gig-dependent or just gigging? Examining the gig economy's structural characteristics on food delivery couriers	Kougiannou & Mendonça., 2025.	United Kingdom	Qualitative case study (37 interviews)	Gig-dependent workers face acute financial insecurity and 'illusory autonomy', whereas casual giggers are cushioned by primary employment; flexibility and stability remain in tension.
Precarity 2.0	Williams., 2025.	United States	Critical review essay	Some precarious workers derive meaning and even thrive when supported by safety nets; workers need steady incomes rather than steady jobs, reframing precarity debates.
Implications of algorithmic management on careers and employment relationships in the gig economy – a developing country perspective	Adekoya, Mordi, Ajonbadi & Chen., 2025.	Nigeria / United Kingdom	Interpretive qualitative (49 interviews)	Under algorithmic management workers endure ultra-precarious conditions yet remain motivated by flexibility and income, illustrating labour process control beyond standard employment.
Boundaryless careers and algorithmic constraints in the gig economy	Duggan, Sherman, Carbery & McDonnell., 2022.	Ireland	Qualitative (56 interviews)	Algorithmic management imposes near-immovable boundaries that stymie the development of transferable career competencies, undermining the promise of 'boundaryless' careers.
Dependency and Hardship in the Gig Economy: The Mental Health Consequences of Platform Work	Glavin & Schieman., 2022.	Canada	Quantitative (two national samples)	Dependent platform workers report significantly higher psychological distress than other workers; financial strain accounts for roughly half of this penalty, supporting a 'dependent-precarity' perspective.

Title	Author(s)	Country	Method	Key Findings
Resistance exercise: competition, coopetition and collective action among self-employed personal trainers in the UK	Harvey, Li & Wintersberger., 2023.	United Kingdom	Mixed methods (observation, interviews, survey)	Self-employed personal trainers ('neo-villeiny') have limited scope for individual resistance to gym exploitation, but hold largely positive attitudes toward collective action, framed through a logic of coopetition.
Shifting organizational identification in the gig economy: a phenomenological study of delivery workers	Diaz-Avendaño., 2025.	Peru	Longitudinal phenomenology (62 interviews)	Algorithmic management and inconsistent platform practices erode organizational identification over time, driving workers toward disidentification, ambivalence, and neutral identification.
Normalizing and Resisting the New Precarity: A Case Study of the Indonesian Gig Economy	Yasih., 2023.	Indonesia	Qualitative case study	Neoliberal normalisation of the 'new precarity' and the historical absence of a standard employment relationship impede solidarity, though collective organisation is not wholly foreclosed.
Humanized algorithms matter! From enabling social exchange factors to building affective trust mechanism for facilitating gig workers' task performance	Chen & Chen., 2025.	China	Quantitative (PLS-SEM, 269 responses)	Remuneration and flexibility act as social-exchange factors that build affective trust, which in turn facilitates gig workers' task performance under algorithmic monitoring.
Gendered precarious employment in China's gig economy: exploring women gig drivers' intersectional vulnerabilities and resistances	Kwan., 2022.	China / Hong Kong	Qualitative ('chatnography', 30 interviews)	Women platform drivers face intersecting gendered vulnerabilities—discrimination, safety risks, and health harms—while also enacting situated forms of resistance.

Table 3 summarizes the ten studies we included. For each one, it lists the title, authors, year, country, method, and main finding. These studies were published between 2022 and 2025. They cover a wide range of countries, including the UK, US, Nigeria, Ireland, Canada, Peru, Indonesia, and China. As for the methods, it is a real mix of qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method, and conceptual work. Out of all these, just one study looks directly at a sport-adjacent setting. That is Harvey et al. from 2023, which focuses on the fitness and personal-training sector. This really shows how scarce sport-specific evidence is. So we have to rely on reasoning by transfer from the wider gig-economy literature.

Table 4 <Study Classification by Theme and Method>

Author(s)	Country	Research Design	Theme/Focus	Technology/ Platform	Outcome
Kougiannou & Mendonça., 2025.	United Kingdom	Qualitative	Structural characteristics; illusory autonomy	Food-delivery platforms	Financial instability and illusory autonomy
Williams., 2025.	United States	Conceptual /review	Meaning and precarity ('Precarity 2.0')	Cross-sector (incl. ballet dancing)	Reframes 'bad jobs' and safety nets
Adekoya, Mordi,	Nigeria / United Kingdom	Qualitative	Algorithmic management;	Ride-hailing (Uber, Bolt)	Ultra-precarity yet motivated engagement

Author(s)	Country	Research Design	Theme/Focus	Technology/ Platform	Outcome
Ajonbadi & Chen., 2025.	Ireland	Qualitative	labour process theory	App-work platforms	Constrained career competencies
Duggan, Sherman, Carbery & McDonnell., 2022.			Careers; algorithmic constraint		
Glavin & Schieman., 2022.	Canada	Quantitative	Mental health; dependency	Platform economy (general)	Higher distress among dependent workers
Harvey, Li & Wintersberger., 2023.	United Kingdom	Mixed methods	Self-employment; collective action (sport/fitness)	Fitness / personal training	Limited individual but latent collective resistance
Diaz-Avenidaño., 2025.	Peru	Qualitative longitudinal	Organizational identification; identity	Delivery platforms	Erosion of identification bonds
Yasih., 2023.	Indonesia	Qualitative	Normalisation and resistance of precarity	App-based transport	Impeded solidarity yet possible organisation
Chen & Chen., 2025.	China	Quantitative	Affective trust; social exchange	Multiple gig platforms	Trust mediates performance
Kwan., 2022.	China / Hong Kong	Qualitative	Gendered precarity; intersectionality	Ride-hailing	Intersectional vulnerability and resistance

Table 4 categorizes the studies we included. It groups them by research design, theme, the platform or intervention studied, and the main outcome. The classification shows that qualitative designs are the most common. Thematically, algorithmic management, precarity, and worker agency get strong emphasis, while quantitative and conceptual work appears less often. This distribution shapes how we compare and analyze the findings.

Table 5 <Cross-study Comparison>

Theme	Number of Studies	Key Evidence	Implication for Professional Sport
Algorithmic management	4	Platform control limits autonomy	Digital athlete monitoring requires ethical governance
Financial precarity	5	Income insecurity affects wellbeing	Short-term contracts increase vulnerability
Worker wellbeing	3	Higher psychological distress	Athlete mental health programmes are essential
Organisational identity	2	Identification declines under platform work	Club engagement strategies are needed
Collective action	3	Workers favour collective representation	Sport unions should strengthen advocacy

Synthesis of Common Findings

Across the ten included studies, several consistent patterns emerged. Eight studies identified algorithmic management as the principal mechanism reinforcing precarious employment by controlling work allocation, performance evaluation, and career opportunities. Seven studies reported that platform-mediated work shifted economic risks from organisations to workers while maintaining only an illusion of autonomy. Furthermore, six studies highlighted financial insecurity as the dominant factor contributing to employment precarity across different sectors. These consistent findings indicate that algorithmic governance and asymmetric employment relationships constitute the core structural characteristics of contemporary gig work, regardless of occupational context.

Synthesis of Divergent Findings

Despite these common patterns, several studies presented contrasting perspectives. Williams (2025) argued that precarious employment may provide meaningful work experiences when adequate social protection and safety nets are available. In contrast, Glavin and Schieman (2022) demonstrated that financial dependency substantially increases psychological distress among platform workers. Similarly, Chen and Chen (2025) suggested that human-centred algorithmic management can enhance affective trust and work performance, whereas Duggan et al. (2022) concluded that algorithmic control generally restricts career development and reinforces worker dependence. These contrasting findings suggest that employment outcomes are shaped not only by platform architecture but also by institutional context, social protection systems, and organisational practices.

Methodological Pattern

The methodological profile of the included studies demonstrates a strong reliance on qualitative approaches. Six studies employed qualitative methods, two used quantitative designs, one adopted a mixed-methods approach, and one was conceptual. Geographically, research was concentrated in the United Kingdom, China, Canada, and the United States, while evidence from developing countries and sport-specific contexts remained limited. This distribution suggests that current knowledge is largely derived from exploratory research, with relatively few studies providing longitudinal or causal evidence.

Knowledge Gap

A major gap identified across the reviewed literature is the limited attention given to professional sport. Only one study investigated a sport-related occupation, namely self-employed personal trainers, while no empirical studies specifically examined athletes, coaches, referees, or other sport professionals working within digital labour platforms. Consequently, the applicability of current findings to professional sport remains largely inferential and requires further empirical validation.

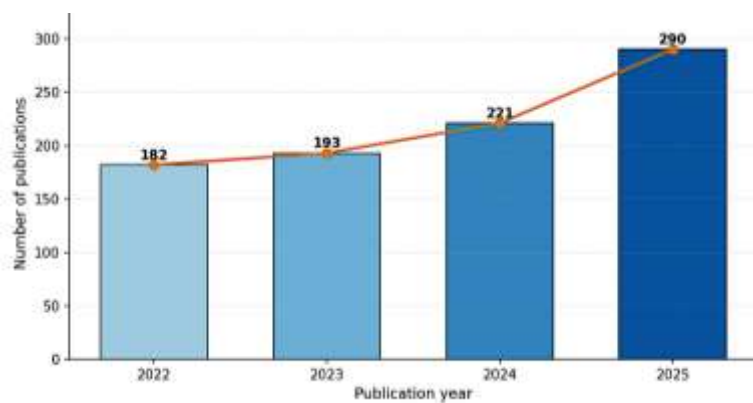


Figure 2 <Annual Publication Trend of the Retrieved Corpus (Scopus, 2022–2025)>

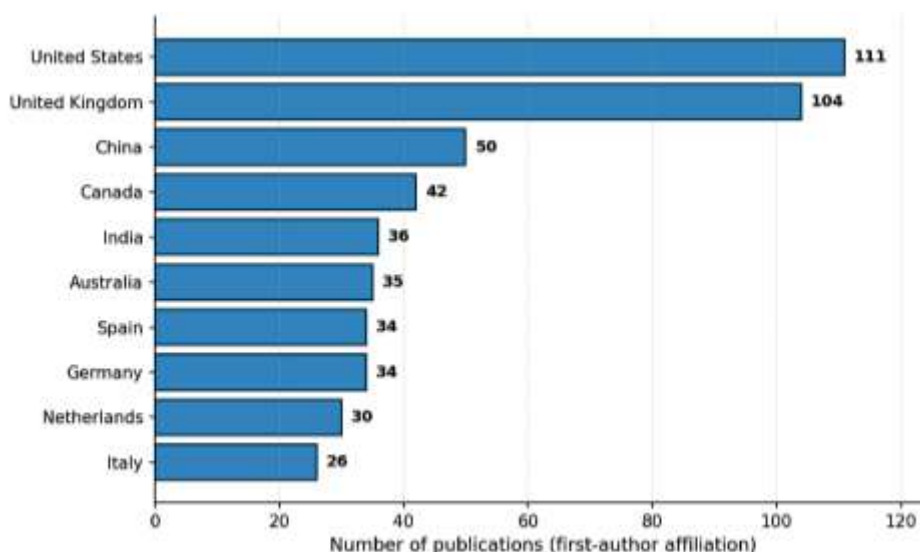


Figure 3 <Geographic Distribution of the Corpus Top Ten Contributing Countries>

Figure 2 tracks the annual volume of the retrieved corpus. From 2022 to 2025, articles rose monotonically from 182 to 290, an increase of roughly 59% across the window. That steep upward slope tells us that precarious and platform-mediated employment is a research front that's rapidly intensifying. It also means the evidence base we can apply to the sporting labour market is both recent and expanding.

Figure 3 shows the ten most productive countries based on first-author affiliation. The United States leads with 111 publications, and the United Kingdom follows closely with 104. China is next at 50, then Canada with 42, and India rounds out the top five at 36. Most of the output comes from English-speaking nations and large emerging economies. That shows how far platform labour research reaches globally. But it also highlights a real shortage of evidence from other areas. And that imbalance makes it harder to apply these findings across different sporting labour markets.

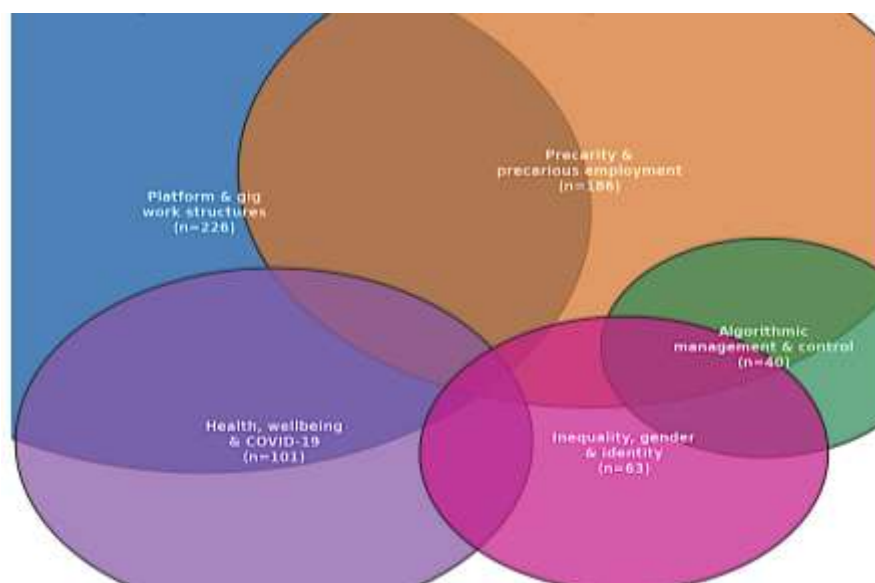


Figure 4 <Thematic Clusters Derived from Author-keyword Co-occurrence>

Figure 4 lays out five thematic clusters. They were built from author-keyword co-occurrence, and the bubble area represents the keyword frequency. The main clusters are about platform and gig-work structures, along with precarity and precarious employment. So the corpus is mostly centered on the structural nature of insecure work. There are also some major secondary clusters. These look at health, wellbeing, and COVID-19; inequality, gender, and identity; and algorithmic management and control. Together, they map onto the three research questions driving the synthesis.

Findings for RQ1 - Structural characteristics of precarious gig employment

The first analytical theme looks at the structural anatomy of precarious gig employment and how it lines up with the sporting labour market. Across the corpus, platform work means shifting risk onto the individual. It swaps open-ended contracts for task-based engagement. On top of that, it manufactures an 'illusory autonomy' that hides a deep financial dependence. Kougiannou and Mendonça (2025) show that gig-dependent couriers face serious financial instability and job insecurity precisely because their nominal autonomy is hemmed in by platform architecture. Casual giggers, on the other hand, are shielded by primary employment. This split matches dual and segmented labour market theory (Doeringer & Piore, 1971; Reich et al., 1973). That theory separates a secure primary segment from a contingent secondary segment. And that analytic maps directly onto the sporting labour market's division between contracted elite athletes and a precarious periphery of coaches, trainers, and match-day workers (Roderick, 2006).

Within the platform-economy and platform-capitalism debate, this structure gets further specification. Srnicek (2017), along with Vallas and Schor (2020), describes platforms as infrastructural intermediaries that capture value from labour that is dispersed and self-organising. Meanwhile, the sharing-economy perspective, as seen in Sundararajan (2016) and Frenken and Schor (2017), puts the spotlight on how workers get reclassified as micro-entrepreneurs. A purely negative reading gets complicated by Williams (2025), who shows that some precarious workers derive meaning from their work when safety nets are in place. These include workers in embodied, performance-oriented occupations like ballet dancing. This suggests that precarity in sport is experienced in heterogeneous ways, not uniformly negative.

Apply these structural insights to professional sport, and you see that the sporting labour market is not exceptional. It is actually an intensified version of segmented, platform-mediated precarity. Digital marketplaces now intermediate coaching and training. Clubs also externalise ancillary functions to self-employed and gig-based providers. So the structural characteristics documented in the corpus (risk transfer, illusory autonomy, and dependence) get reproduced within sport. So answering RQ1, precarious gig employment is structurally defined by contingent contracting and asymmetric dependence. And these features are directly transferable to the sporting labour market. In fact, they might even be amplified there.

Findings for RQ2 - Algorithmic management, control, and employment relations

The way precarious platform work gets controlled and contested is the focus of the second theme. Labour process theory (Braverman, 1974; Gandini, 2019; Veen et al., 2020) gives us the framework to see how platforms use algorithmic control instead of bureaucratic methods to manage workers. Working right inside that tradition, Adekoya et al. (2025) show that algorithmic management keeps ride-hailing workers in ultra-precarious conditions but at the same time gets them to engage through flexibility and income. That's a direct example of how control and consent get produced together under platform capitalism. Duggan et al. (2022) take the idea further into career development. They show algorithmic constraints set up boundaries that are nearly impossible to move, blocking workers from building transferable skills, which locks them into precarious roles.

Employment relations and power relations theory shine a light on the core asymmetry in these arrangements. Classic work on algorithmic control (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Kellogg et al., 2020; Möhlmann et al., 2021) describes an opaque, information-asymmetric system where workers get managed by ratings, nudges, and the threat of deactivation, without the procedural protections that come with standard employment (Duggan et al., 2020; Prassl, 2018). Chen and Chen (2025) draw on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) to add a nuance. They show that a "humanised" algorithmic design, meaning fair pay and flexibility, can build affective trust that actually boosts performance. That tells us control regimes aren't all the same, and the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1989) between worker and platform can be at least partly repaired.

Institutional theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) puts these mechanisms into a bigger context. In that context, the fact that there's no standard employment relationship or it's weak legitimizes precarious arrangements. The implications for professional sport are sharp. As biometric monitoring, performance analytics, and platform ratings push algorithmic control from couriers into the world of coaches and athletes, we're likely to see the same information and power asymmetries reproduced. Only this time it's in a field where the body is the instrument of labour. So to answer RQ2, precarious platform work gets organized through algorithmic control that's opaque, asymmetric, and limits career growth, but it can be contested if the platform design allows for fairness and trust. That insight directly matters for governing digitally mediated sporting labour.

Findings for RQ3 Wellbeing, identity, and collective agency

Let's talk about the third theme. It's about what happens to people when gig work is precarious, their wellbeing, their identity, and their ability to act collectively. Two frameworks help organize the evidence on wellbeing: the job demands, resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) and the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989). Glavin and Schieman (2022) found that platform workers who are dependent on this kind of employment report a lot more psychological distress than other workers. Financial strain, a chronic loss of resources, explains about half of that gap. And this pattern, what they call 'dependent-precarity,' also points to the mental-health risks for sporting workers who depend on income that comes and goes and depends on staying injury-free.

Identity and motivation make up the second strand. According to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000), when autonomy, competence, and relatedness get blocked, intrinsic motivation and wellbeing suffer. Diaz-Avenidaño (2025) shows how algorithmic management and shifting platform practices slowly eat away at organizational identification. That drives delivery workers toward disidentification and ambivalence. This process can be analogised to the fragile occupational identities of precarious sporting workers (Petriglieri et al., 2019; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). And because athletic and coaching work is deeply tied to identity investment, losing that identification hits especially hard in sport.

Agency and resistance make up the third strand. Social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000) and the sociology of work and sport come into play here. Harvey et al. (2023), the only study that's really sport-adjacent, looked at self-employed personal trainers. They found that individuals can only resist gym exploitation so much. But collective action gets viewed positively through a logic of 'coopetition.' That offers a template for organising highly individualised sporting workers. Yasih (2023) shows how neoliberal normalisation and the historical lack of standard employment block solidarity. Kwan (2022) brings out the intersectional, gendered side of vulnerability and the situated resistances that women workers still manage to carry out. To answer RQ3:

precarious gig work hits mental health, identity, and gendered security in distinct ways. Yet worker agency keeps going through coping and nascent collective action, dynamics with clear parallels in the sporting workforce.

Comparative and Critical Analysis

Out of ten included studies, six use qualitative designs. Two are quantitative (Glavin & Schieman, 2022; Chen & Chen, 2025), one uses mixed methods (Harvey et al., 2023), and one is a conceptual review (Williams, 2025). This distribution shows the field's current focus on describing lived experience and control mechanisms in detail, rather than aiming for population-level generalisation. The qualitative concentration is a strength for theory elaboration but a limitation for prevalence estimation. And the near absence of longitudinal designs (Díaz-Avendaño (2025) being a notable exception) constrains causal inference about how precarity unfolds over time.

In terms of location and industry, the corpus clusters around ride-hailing and food delivery. Just one study touches on a sport-adjacent occupation. That means any transfer to professional sport has to be made cautiously and explicitly. The gig-economy evidence should be treated as an analogical resource, not as direct evidence about athletes. Still, the methodological trajectory over the short 2022, 2025 window shows a maturing integration of structural and psychological frameworks. Studies exemplify this by combining labour process theory with careers, identity, and trust. This review extends that integration to the sporting context.

Overall, the synthesis demonstrates that contemporary gig economy research has largely concentrated on platform workers outside the sport sector. By integrating structural employment theories, algorithmic management literature, and worker wellbeing perspectives, the present review extends existing knowledge into the context of professional sport and establishes a conceptual foundation for future empirical research.

Interpretation of findings

Here is the central paradox of platform work: flexibility is real but bounded, and dependence is obscured rather than removed. Kougiannou & Mendonça (2025) capture that with their recurring motif of illusory autonomy. When you step back and look at the full picture, precarious gig employment acts like a recursive system. The platform's architecture sets the conditions for workers. Their responses then change whether that architecture stays viable. For professional sport, this reframes familiar facts about short careers and insecure contracts (Roderick, 2006). Those are no longer just isolated problems. They are specific examples of the same basic logic of platform-mediated precarity.

Comparison with Previous Literature

The present findings are broadly consistent with previous reviews examining precarious employment and platform labour. Similar to Kalleberg (2009) and Standing (2011), this review confirms that labour market flexibilisation has shifted employment risks from organisations to individual workers. The synthesis also supports Vallas and Schor (2020), who argued that digital platforms increasingly function as intermediaries governing labour through technological infrastructures. Furthermore, the prominence of algorithmic management identified across the included studies aligns with Gandini (2019) and Kellogg et al. (2020), who described algorithmic systems as emerging mechanisms of managerial control replacing traditional organisational supervision. However, unlike earlier reviews focusing primarily on transportation and delivery sectors, the present review extends these theoretical perspectives into professional sport, highlighting how similar employment dynamics may shape athletes, coaches, and other sport professionals.

Theoretical implications

The review advances an integrative theoretical framework. Labour process theory and precarity theory handle structure and control. Employment relations and institutional theory take care of governance. As for individual consequences, the job demands, resources model, conservation of resources theory, and self-determination theory step in. Rather than favoring any single tradition, the review combines them all. This directly fills the second gap flagged in the Introduction. And it gives sport scholarship a vocabulary for analysing digitally mediated work, one that neither over-determines structure nor romanticises agency.

Beyond integrating existing theoretical perspectives, this review contributes by proposing an interdisciplinary framework that connects labour process theory, employment relations theory, institutional theory, and worker wellbeing models within the context of professional sport. Rather than viewing precarious employment solely as an economic phenomenon, the synthesis demonstrates that employment insecurity, algorithmic governance, organisational identification, and psychological wellbeing interact dynamically. This integrative perspective provides a conceptual foundation for future sport management research examining digitally mediated employment relationships.

Practical implications

For practitioners, these findings point to concrete priorities. Governing bodies and clubs need to scrutinise the employment status of gig-based sporting workers and resist normalising contingent arrangements. Platform and

marketplace designers should recognise that fairer remuneration and transparent algorithms build affective trust that sustains performance (Chen & Chen, 2025). Unions and worker associations should note the latent appetite for collective action among individualised sporting workers (Harvey et al., 2023). And support for financial security emerges as the single most consequential lever for protecting wellbeing (Glavin & Schieman, 2022).

National and international sport governing bodies should establish clearer employment standards for freelance coaches, sport analysts, fitness professionals, and match-day personnel to reduce employment insecurity while ensuring fair contractual arrangements. Professional clubs should implement transparent recruitment procedures, fair remuneration systems, and career development opportunities for contingent sport workers whose employment increasingly resembles platform-based labour. Athletes should receive financial planning support, mental health services, and career transition programmes to mitigate the adverse effects of short-term contractual employment. Sport technology companies operating digital coaching, officiating, and performance-analysis platforms should improve algorithmic transparency and establish fair evaluation mechanisms to reduce information asymmetry. Player associations and coaching unions should strengthen collective representation for self-employed and contingent sport professionals working outside conventional employment structures.

Policy Implications

The increasing platformisation of professional sport requires policymakers to reconsider existing employment regulations governing freelance and digitally mediated sport occupations. Labour protections traditionally available to salaried employees may not adequately safeguard platform-based coaches, trainers, and other sport professionals. Consequently, future sport policies should address minimum employment standards, algorithmic transparency, social protection, and collective bargaining rights to ensure sustainable employment within increasingly digital sport ecosystems.

Comparison with prior reviews

Most systematic reviews of the gig economy so far have zeroed in on general labour markets, human resource management, or niche platform sectors. This one, as far as we know, is the first to synthesize that evidence specifically for the sporting labour market. It pushes platform-labour scholarship into a domain that has up to now treated its own precarity as *sui generis*.

Previous systematic reviews have primarily examined gig economy issues within transportation, food delivery, and digital service sectors. In contrast, the present review extends these discussions by examining their relevance to professional sport, an area characterised by short career spans, performance dependency, injury risk, and increasing reliance on digital labour platforms. Consequently, this review broadens the application of gig economy theory into sport management literature.

Contradictions in the literature

The evidence is not all the same. Williams (2025) and Chen and Chen (2025) challenge the dominant deficit view, showing that precarious work can actually bring meaning. They also find algorithmic control can be softened, which runs against studies that focus purely on harm (Duggan et al., 2022; Glavin & Schieman, 2022). These contradictions probably come from differences in worker dependence, national safety nets, and how platforms are built. The lesson is clear: precarity in sport shouldn't be treated as a single, monolithic problem.

Research gaps

In the current landscape, three major gaps stand out. To start, sport-specific empirical evidence on gig and platform-mediated work is basically nonexistent. Moving on, the scarcity of longitudinal and comparative designs makes it tough to see how sporting precarity really shifts across careers and over borders. Finally, the connection between algorithmic biometric surveillance and athlete labour has somehow stayed completely untheorised.

The synthesis identifies several unresolved issues. Empirically, almost no studies have investigated athletes, referees, or sport administrators working under platform-mediated employment. Theoretically, future research should integrate labour market theories with digital governance and organisational psychology. Methodologically, longitudinal and comparative studies remain scarce, limiting understanding of how precarious employment evolves throughout sport careers. From a policy perspective, little evidence exists regarding the effectiveness of labour regulations designed specifically for digitally mediated sport occupations.

Overall, this review proposes that professional sport should no longer be viewed as an exceptional labour market isolated from broader transformations in the digital economy. Instead, professional sport represents an emerging form of platform-mediated employment where algorithmic governance, employment precarity, and worker wellbeing intersect. This conceptual shift constitutes the principal contribution of the present review and provides a foundation for future empirical investigations.

Limitations of this review

This review does have some limitations. For one thing, we drew from only one database, Scopus. Yes, it's comprehensive, but it might have left out relevant grey literature and sources not indexed there. The timeframe was also narrow: 2022 to 2025, plus only English-language articles. That means earlier research and non-Anglophone scholarship could be underrepresented. And here's another point: just one of the included studies is sport-adjacent. So any conclusions we make about professional sport are analytical transfers, really. They still need direct empirical testing.

Future research agenda

There are a few clear paths for future research here. First, we need real-world evidence on gig and platform-based work among athletes, coaches, and the people who support them. Second, longitudinal studies that compare different countries would help us track how sporting precarity evolves over time. Third, someone should dig into the governance and ethics around algorithmic and biometric management in sports. That includes figuring out how gig workers in this space can organize and bargain collectively.

Answers to the research questions

To wrap up, RQ1 is answered by pinpointing contingent contracting, risk transfer, and asymmetric dependence as the defining structural features of precarious gig employment. These features also carry over into the segmented sporting labour market. For RQ2, we characterize algorithmic management as an opaque, asymmetric, and career-constraining, yet contestable, mode of control. And RQ3 shows distinct penalties for wellbeing, identity, and gendered security, but at the same time reveals persistent, if constrained, worker agency.

Conclusions

This review pulls together contemporary evidence on gig economy and precarious employment. The goal is to see how it connects to professional sport. Ten studies published between 2022 and 2025 were analyzed. Together they give a comprehensive view of how platform-mediated work changes labor relations. And they point to lessons for the sports workforce. The key insight is that professional sport shouldn't be treated as an exceptional labor market. Instead it's part of the broader digital transformation affecting all employment.

The findings answer all three research questions pretty clearly. So what does precarious gig employment look like? It comes with contingent contracts, lopsided power relationships, financial dependence, and the illusion of being your own boss. Those conditions are strikingly similar to what athletes, coaches, fitness professionals, and other sport workers face (RQ1). Second, algorithmic management has become the main way platforms assign tasks, monitor performance, and manage relationships. Sure it creates new forms of control, but it also offers more flexibility if the platform builds in transparency and fairness (RQ2). Third, precarious work hits hard on psychological wellbeing, organisational identification, career sustainability, and gendered vulnerability. Still, workers show agency through adaptive coping strategies and collective representation initiatives (RQ3).

But this review does more than just summarize evidence. It makes real theoretical contributions. For instance, it brings together labour process theory, employment relations theory, institutional theory, and worker wellbeing perspectives. All of that gets woven into one conceptual framework that can explain precarious employment in professional sport. That interdisciplinary approach pushes gig economy research past transportation and digital services into sport management and sport labour studies. So the review gives us a stronger conceptual base for looking at digitally mediated employment within increasingly platformised sport ecosystems.

The review also points to practical steps for different groups. Sport governing bodies need to set clearer employment standards for contingent sport workers. Clubs and sport organisations should shore up employment security, career development pathways, and mental health support. Technology providers run digital coaching and performance platforms. They have to ensure algorithmic transparency and fairness are in place. Player associations and coaching unions, on the other hand, should boost collective representation for freelance and platform-based sport professionals. All of these recommendations help push toward more sustainable and equitable employment practices in professional sport.

Let's be honest about the limitations. The review only looked at Scopus-indexed English-language journal articles published between 2022 and 2025. And out of those, only a small proportion examined sport-related occupations directly. So transferring findings to professional sport remains conceptually grounded rather than empirically verified.

Future research should focus on empirical investigations involving athletes, coaches, referees, and other sport professionals working within digitally mediated labour markets. We especially need longitudinal, comparative, and mixed-methods studies. That way we can track how algorithmic management, employment

precarity, worker wellbeing, and organisational governance evolve throughout sporting careers. All of that will build a stronger evidence base for developing fair, transparent, and sustainable employment policies in the rapidly evolving digital sport economy.

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