iJRASET
International Journal For Research in Applied Science and Engineering Technology

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH

IN APPLIED SCIENCE & ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY

Volume: 14 **Issue:** IV **Month of publication:** April 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.22214/ijraset.2026.80959

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International Journal for Research in Applied Science & Engineering Technology (IJRASET)
ISSN: 2321-9653; IC Value: 45.98; SJ Impact Factor: 7.538
Volume 14 Issue IV Apr 2026- Available at www.ijraset.com

Status, Stigma, and Survival: Exploring Social Factors Deterring Participation in India's Informal Employment Sector

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Abstract: ***Youth unemployment is an ongoing structural issue in India, especially among youth in transition in a labor market with scarce formal labor opportunities and an expanding array of informal labor opportunities. Gig labor or platform-based gig work, such as delivery or ridesharing or logistics services enabled by digital platforms, has become an increasingly important labor opportunity. Despite its ease of access and income-generating capacity, gig labor is often subject to the influence of social perceptions of occupational prestige or stigma. One psychological construct that may influence gig labor is status anxiety, "a concern or apprehension experienced by individuals about their social status or position and their fear of status mobility or loss."***

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between status anxiety and willingness to participate in gig labor among unemployed youth. A quantitative cross-sectional survey research design was used with a sample size of 50 unemployed youth aged 19-25 years old. Status anxiety was measured using the Status Anxiety Scale by Ani Keshabyan, while willingness to participate in gig labor was measured using an adapted version of the Theory of Planned Behavior's Behavioral Intention Scale based on the theory proposed by Icek Ajzen. Both instruments showed excellent internal reliability with Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of .977 for the Status Anxiety Scale and .971 for the Willingness to Participate in Platform-Based Gig Work Scale. The findings showed a significant negative correlation between status anxiety and the willingness to take part in platform-based gig work ($\beta = -0.752$, $p < .001$). Moreover, the model accounted for a considerable amount of variance between the variables ($R^2 = .581$; Adjusted $R^2 = .573$). These findings indicate that the higher the level of status anxiety, the lower the willingness to take part in gig economy employment.

This research contributes to the literature by emphasizing the impact of social hierarchy and occupational stigma on the employment choices of the youth. Moreover, the research underscores the need to take into consideration the perceptions of status to enhance the participation of the youth in the emerging employment opportunities.

Keywords: Status Anxiety, Gig Economy, Informal Employment, Platform-Based Work, Youth Unemployment, Occupational Stigma.

I. INTRODUCTION

India is presently dealing with a major youth employment crisis, which has tremendous implications for social mobility, economic security, and personal life paths. Despite the country's high economic growth rate and rapid technological development, the rate of employment creation has been slower to keep up with the aspirations and qualifications of the country's youth. Recent estimates from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy revealed that the unemployment rate for the population belonging to the age groups of 15-29 is significantly higher compared to other age groups. This is especially true for educated youth and students, where the transition from the higher education system to the workforce is marked by long periods of unemployment. (Abraham & Shrivastava, 2020; Mehrotra & Parida, 2019)

In tandem with the unemployment crisis, the rise of the gig economy has been remarkable. Digital labor platforms such as Swiggy, Zomato, Uber, and Blinkit provide new forms of income-generating opportunities for the country's workforce. Digital labor platforms connect workers with task-based employment through mobile apps. Recent reports published by the NITI Aayog revealed that the gig workforce is projected to rise to tens of millions of workers in the coming decade, thereby emphasizing the importance of the gig economy for the country's broader informal economy. For the country's unemployed youth and students, the gig economy presents a promising platform for work.

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However, the existence of such opportunities may not necessarily mean that people are eager to take part in these opportunities. In some social settings, gig economies like platform-based gig work, especially delivery or ride-hailing jobs, may be perceived as having low occupational status in the occupational hierarchy. In sociological literature, it has been established that labor force participation is not only determined by economic needs but is also subject to concerns related to dignity, prestige, and respectability (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont, 2012). As such, some youths may refuse to take part in gig economies despite their economic needs because they may be concerned that their social identity may be threatened if they are involved in occupations perceived as having low status in their social networks.

To understand the labor market behavior in contemporary India, it is important to understand the social and psychological factors that affect youths' willingness to take part in gig economies. This study is an analysis of the influence of status anxiety on the willingness of unemployed youths to take part in gig economies.

A. Status Anxiety

In this respect, the idea of status anxiety has come to be recognized as a key analytical tool by sociologists and social psychologists to help comprehend the manner in which individuals interact with the social hierarchy. Generally speaking, the idea of status anxiety can be defined as the concern that an individual harbors with respect to their social standing or the apprehension of losing prestige or respect within a given society (de Botton, 2004). In modern societies that emphasize the idea of meritocracy, whereby success often represents a function of an individual's ability or effort, the social hierarchy tends to be internalized by the individual, who consequently becomes extremely sensitive to their standing within the social hierarchy.

In this respect, research undertaken by various scholars to comprehend the idea of status anxiety has revealed that the phenomenon tends to be a function of social comparisons or perceived inequality. Based on the theory developed by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, societies with high levels of inequality are those that create a high level of concern with respect to the idea of status anxiety since the individual tends to be conscious of the relative prestige or success between them and the next person. In this respect, employment tends not to be a source of income for the individual but also a symbol of their identity.

In the context of labor markets, the phenomenon of status anxiety tends to take the form of avoiding occupations that are deemed to be undesirable or stigmatized. Various sociological theories of occupational prestige indicate that individuals often go about evaluating potential employment opportunities not merely in relation to monetary compensation or job security but also with respect to the probable perception of peers, family members, or society at large (Bourdieu, 1984; Ridgeway, 2014). Young adults often face a situation where their early career choices assume considerable significance with respect to the construction of personal identity or future life-course prospects. Therefore, employment opportunities that do not match with personal academic aspirations or middle-class status expectations often create a sense of embarrassment or concern for social reputation.

In the context of the emerging labor markets of the gig economy, the phenomenon of status anxiety assumes considerable significance. The gig economy often finds a dubious place in the occupational prestige hierarchy due to its association with informal labor markets. For unemployed youth or students who aspire to occupy prestigious occupations or positions, the phenomenon of status anxiety assumes considerable prominence with respect to the prospects of engaging with the gig economy.

B. Willingness to Participate In Platform-Based Gig Work

The rapid evolution of the digital platform revolution across the world has significantly altered the character of labor markets across the world. The phenomenon of the gig economy represents a system of labor that finds expression through the form of temporary or short-term employment opportunities mediated through digital platforms that connect workers with consumers in real time (Wood et al., 2019). In the context of the Indian labor market, the phenomenon of the gig economy or the evolution of the digital platform revolution has assumed considerable prominence over the last decade or so. Companies like Swiggy, Zomato, Uber, Blinkit, etc., have emerged as key players in the labor market with respect to the creation of flexible employment opportunities for millions of workers across the country.

From the perspective of unemployed youth and students, the opportunities for gig work provide a number of significant benefits. First of all, the barriers to entry for the gig economy tend to be relatively low compared to other forms of employment. Gig work is often only available to those who have access to basic documentation requirements, a smartphone, and access to a vehicle or bicycle. Secondly, the flexible nature of the work schedule is advantageous to those who need to pursue other interests or educational requirements. According to the projections of the NITI Aayog, the gig workforce in India is expected to increase significantly in the coming decade.

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This demonstrates the significant importance of the gig economy in the informal labor sphere. Despite the benefits of the gig economy for the unemployed in India, the willingness to participate in the platform-based gig economy is not entirely driven by the need for employment. According to the theories of decision-making behavior in humans, the willingness to participate in the labor sphere is driven by a number of factors. According to the Theory of Planned Behavior proposed by Icek Ajzen, the intention to engage in any behavior is influenced by the attitude toward the behavior in question. Moreover, the willingness to engage in any behavior is influenced by the perceived social pressures to engage in the behavior in question. Furthermore, the willingness to engage in any behavior is influenced by the attitude of the individual toward their ability to engage in the behavior in question. In the case of the Indian economy, the willingness to participate in the gig economy is often driven by cultural perceptions of the dignity of labor. Gig work is often considered to be of low social stature. For example, the willingness to engage in the delivery of products or the provision of ride-hailing services is often considered to be of low social stature. Despite the potential for significant income generation in the gig economy, the willingness of the youth in India to participate in the gig economy is often driven by the need to conform to the perceptions of their peers. By understanding the willingness to participate in the gig economy in India, the importance of the labor sphere in the informal economy can be better understood.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A literature review is an essential component that can ground the current study within the broader discourse while identifying areas that need to be explored further. In recent times, the gig economy and the psychological undercurrents that influence participation in the job market have been gaining more attention from scholars as the nature of work is changing at a very rapid pace. However, most studies that discuss these topics individually do not explore the potential interplay between them.

Studies on status anxiety have generally been more inclined towards exploring the implications of concerns over social hierarchy and status on individuals' lives (de Botton, 2004; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Concurrently, studies on the gig economy have been more inclined towards exploring the structural implications of gig work, which is more or less the opposite of precarious work and the challenges that come with it (Wood et al., 2019). While both lines of research offer valuable insights, there is a lack of studies that explore the potential interplay between psychological concerns over status and individuals' willingness to explore newer forms of work like gig work.

This section provides an overview of some of the most notable scholarly studies in the two areas of status anxiety as an idea and as an experience, and studies on participation in the gig economy and informal work arrangements. This discussion serves to highlight a gap that the current study hopes to address.

A. Studies on Status Anxiety

Status anxiety has also attracted more attention from scholars as they seek to understand the role of our position within the social hierarchy and the gaps between ourselves and others on our thoughts, behaviors, and emotions. However, the concept of status anxiety became more popular with the writings of Alain de Botton, who referred to it as the all-too-human concern about our position within society and the fear of losing status and respect. According to him (Alain de Botton, 2004), the modern meritocracy heightens the concern about status because it equates success with individual talent and efforts. Thus, individuals who perceive themselves to have lower status within the social hierarchy are likely to experience heightened levels of distress and sensitivity to what others think of them.

Recent research on status anxiety has linked it to broader structural factors, including income inequality. According to the work by Wilkinson and Pickett (2009), *The Spirit Level*, societies with higher levels of income inequality are more likely to have higher levels of status competition and status anxiety. They carried out a series of cross-country comparisons among developed countries and showed that individuals within societies with higher levels of income inequality are more concerned about maintaining and improving status within the social hierarchy. This concern with relative status affects many other areas of life and influences the ways individuals interact with each other.

In the realm of sociology, social theorists have been fascinated by how people's position within the social pecking order influences their decisions when it comes to their jobs or careers. One of the most important social theorists that can be considered when discussing social status and job or career choices is Pierre Bourdieu and his theories on social and symbolic capital. Bourdieu's theories contend that people's actions are directed towards acquiring forms of recognition that can sustain their position within the social arena.

In addition to social theories that can influence job or career choices based on social status, studies have indicated that social status can influence people's actual preferences when it comes to their careers or jobs.

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Ridgeway (2014) indicated that people's embedded status beliefs can influence their perceptions of appropriate jobs or roles that they can undertake. In addition to that, Anderson, Kraus, Galinsky, and Keltner (2012) indicated that people who perceive their social status as lower often experience more pressure to manage impressions and avoid behaviors that may perpetuate their feelings of inferiority.

Recent studies have attempted to investigate the impact of status anxiety on the decisions of young people as they go through critical life stages like the commencement of their first job. It has been established that the decisions people make during their early careers often correlate with who they wish to become and what they wish to achieve over the long term. It is therefore no surprise that people often make job offers based not only on the benefits that the job offers but also on how well the job aligns with what society considers to be successful and respectable (Brown, 2013). In addition to that, people may hold back from pursuing job opportunities that they deem to be less prestigious compared to what they had initially anticipated.

Despite the recent attention given to status anxiety, there is still a huge information gap when it comes to understanding how status anxiety impacts the participation of people in new forms of work like gig economy jobs. This information gap has been more pronounced in developing economies that experience rapid technological changes that impact traditional forms of work. It is therefore very important to understand how status anxiety impacts the decisions of young people when it comes to seeking jobs.

B. Studies on Gig Work Participation

This rapid growth of jobs delivered through digital platforms has given rise to a wide-ranging debate among scholars on what the gig economy offers and what it costs. In the fields of sociology, labor economics, and industrial relations, several studies have examined the impact of digital platforms on the world of work by connecting workers with customers to fulfill short-term gigs or tasks (De Stefano, 2016; Wood et al., 2019). In India, the growth of digital firms like Swiggy, Zomato, and Uber has fueled the growth of gig work, which has provided new opportunities to young people and migrants entering the Indian urban labor market.

Existing studies mainly focus on the essential characteristics of gig work, which is precarious, characterized by algorithmic management, and lacks traditional labor protections. For example, De Stefano (2016) argues that the gig economy dissolves the distinction between formal and informal work relations, which often places workers in a gray area that prevents them from enjoying social protections like minimum wage or job-related benefits. In another example, Wood et al. (2019) examined the experiences of online gig workers across several countries and argued that while the gig economy provides workers with flexibility and new earning opportunities, it is often accompanied by economic insecurity and unpredictable earnings**.**

In the Indian context, recent studies have examined the characteristics of gig workers and their reasons for choosing to work as gig workers. According to studies conducted by NITI Aayog, the reports show that a significant number of people seek to work as gig workers because they lack access to formal job opportunities. This shows that the gig economy is a survival mechanism as well as a stepping stone to more stable job opportunities.

However, the reasons behind people working as gig workers may not always be economic or survival-based. In fact, sociological studies have emphasized that how prestigious or prestigious a job is to an individual and how society views that job can impact an individual's willingness to seek that job or work as a gig worker.

In the Indian context, studies show that a significant number of young people may view working as a gig worker as being contradictory to their desire to finish school and move up the job ladder.

Studies on occupational stigma provide another perspective on the willingness of individuals to seek gig work as a means of earning a living. In fact, studies on occupational stigma show that jobs that are physically demanding or considered to be of low skill or high visibility can evoke social stigma.

Individuals working in jobs that evoke social stigma experience a form of symbolic devaluation that impacts how they view their social identity and how society views them as individuals. In the context of gig workers, individuals may shy away from working as gig workers because of the social stigma associated with the job**.**

Despite the increasing number of research studies on the concept of gig work and informal work, surprisingly little research has explored the psychological aspects that determine the willingness of individuals to participate in such work. The existing research studies on the topic have largely relied on structural and economic factors. However, the question of how social status anxiety plays a role in the willingness to participate in platform-based gig work remains unanswered. This question becomes even more important when the focus shifts to unemployed youth and students in the Indian context. This question becomes important to answer to build a complete picture of the social and psychological aspects that determine participation in such work.

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III. RATIONALE

Understanding the factors that influence the employment decisions of the youth has become increasingly important in the context of contemporary Indian society, given the rapid economic changes that have not been accompanied by a proportional increase in the availability of stable formal sector employment. High levels of youth unemployment have become a matter of considerable concern among policymakers and scholars, given the difficulties faced by large numbers of educated youth who are unable to acquire employment opportunities that are commensurate with their educational qualifications and aspirations. According to data provided by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, the rates of unemployment among the youth are substantially higher than the rates recorded among older sections of the Indian population, reflecting the inherent problems within the Indian labor market. However, the rise of the digital labor market has also provided new forms of employment within the informal sector, which are not only flexible and accessible but also widespread.

The rise of the gig economy, enabled through platforms like Swiggy, Zomato, and Uber, has become a matter of considerable discussion and debate as a potential tool to resolve the problem of unemployment by offering short-term employment opportunities to individuals who might otherwise remain outside the labor market. According to reports provided by the NITI Aayog, the overall numbers of gig workers within the Indian labor market are likely to rise substantially over the course of the next few years, reflecting the growing salience of the gig economy within the Indian labor market and the broader Indian economy. However, the availability of these opportunities does not automatically translate into the participation of the youth within the Indian labor market, given the perception of certain forms of gig work as occupations with lower social prestige.

Existing studies on the gig economy seem to focus narrowly on economic concerns like income volatility, job security, and regulatory challenges. There has been less attention to psychological and social factors that may influence people's decisions to engage with the gig economy. In cultures that place great social significance on occupational hierarchy, concerns over reputation, dignity, and social standing may play a significant role in people's decisions to work or not to work. The concept of status anxiety provides an insightful framework to understand these social processes because it entails people's fear of being at a lower social standing than they desire.

While interest in the topic of status anxiety and gig economy participation is increasing, the link between the two phenomena lacks sufficient empirical research, especially with respect to the Indian context. There is a lack of information about the role of status anxiety with respect to how unemployed youth and the student demographic view the world of work from the urban centers of Lucknow. This research attempts to bridge the information gap with respect to the link between status anxiety and gig economy participation from a broader perspective.

IV. RESEARCH GAP

Despite the growth of gig work in India, there's a void in research on factors influencing young people's psychological inclinations towards gig work. Most studies have focused on economic factors, such as "how much I earn," "the flexibility," "job protection," and "how algorithms work" (De Stefano, 2016; Wood et al., 2019; Heeks, 2017). While these studies provide good insights into gig work, they do not address social perception, prestige, and psychological factors influencing people's decisions

Finally, methodological limitations further constrain the current literature. Many prior studies employ secondary data, macroeconomic indicators, or qualitative interviews, which provide limited ability to quantify relationships between psychological variables and labor market behavior. There is a scarcity of quantitative, survey-based studies that measure status anxiety and willingness to engage in gig work among young, urban populations in India. in the labor market. What remains unclear is why some segments of people, especially urban males and students, avoid gig work even when they are attracted to high monetary rewards.

Most studies on gig work in India have not distinguished high- and low-prestige work in the gig economy. For example, in India, delivery work, ride-hailing, and task work are considered "low-prestige work" (Sundararajan, 2016; NITI Aayog, 2021). Although the stigma associated with occupations has been explored in Western settings (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Hughes, 1958), there is a lack of sufficient evidence on how these perceptions influence the employment goals of young people in the Indian context, where social hierarchy, educational achievement, and family expectations play a critical role in determining career paths.

Another significant gap is the link between status anxiety and how people behave in the labor market. As conceptualized by de Botton (2004) and empirically measured among young people by Keshabyan (2021), status anxiety is the concern about relative social position in the peer group, fear of damage to reputation, and sensitivity to hierarchical relations. While social psychology and sociology provide some insight into how status anxiety can influence occupational choices among young people (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009; Keshabyan, 2021), there is a lack of research that empirically examines this phenomenon in the context of gig work arrangements. In the Indian context, existing research on youth unemployment and gig work arrangements among young people

(Abdullah et al., 2024; Sundararajan, 2016) mainly focuses on economic needs and opportunity structures, with the psychological and social aspects being neglected. There is a significant gap in the literature on whether status anxiety deters gig workers from participating in the gig economy.

Without such data, it remains difficult to evaluate the magnitude of the effect of social-psychological factors relative to structural determinants.

In sum, the present study addresses these gaps by empirically examining the relationship between status anxiety and willingness to participate in platform-based gig work among male unemployed youth and students in Lucknow. By integrating psychological constructs with contextual labor market analysis, the study advances theoretical understanding and provides actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and platform operators seeking to enhance youth participation in India's gig economy.

V. METHODOLOGY

A. Objective

The primary goal of this research study is to identify the relationship between status anxiety and unemployed youth and students' intentions to pursue gig work opportunities through platforms. Specifically, the research aims to identify the relationship between the level of status anxiety and the intentions to pursue these opportunities. By understanding this relationship through the use of statistics, the research aims to identify if the level of status anxiety influences the intentions to pursue these opportunities through platforms.

The second goal of the research study aims to identify the level at which status anxiety can predict the intentions of individuals to pursue their work. By using a regression analysis, the research aims to identify the level at which status anxiety can predict the intentions of individuals to pursue their work.

B. Hypotheses

Based on theories and past research on the topic of status anxiety, prestige at work, and how people pick their jobs, the research argues that anxiety about social standing could affect the types of jobs that a person is willing to do. Specifically, for societies with a rigid occupational hierarchy, anxious individuals may avoid jobs with lower prestige levels, including gig work.

With this background, the research tests the following hypotheses:

HO (Null Hypothesis): There is no statistically significant relationship between status anxiety and willingness to participate in platform-based gig work among unemployed youth and students.

HI (Alternative Hypothesis): There is a statistically significant negative relationship between status anxiety and willingness to participate in platform-based gig work among unemployed youth and students.

C. Variables

Independent Variable:

Status Anxiety

Dependent variable:

Willingness to Participate in Platform-Based Gig Work

D. Tools

Two measures were used to measure the major variables of the current study.

1) Status Anxiety Scale developed by Keshabyan (2021): This measure was used to measure how anxious participants reported being about their social status. It has 20 items that were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. It measures different dimensions of participants' status anxiety, including their fear of falling in social status, their awareness of how their peers view them, and their concerns over their prestige at work. Some sample items include: "I am worried about how others view my social status" and "I get anxious when I compare my achievements to those of my peers." The reliability analysis indicated that the measure had excellent reliability among the participants of the current study (Cronbach's $\alpha = .977$). It has been previously validated among different youth populations with strong construct validity and predictive utility to social and work outcomes (Keshabyan, 2021).

2) Willingness to Participate in Platform-Based Gig Work Scale developed by Ajzen-based adaptation (2021): The dependent variable was measured with a modified version of the Theory of Planned Behavior Behavioral Intention Scale developed by Ajzen (1991). This measure was used to measure participants' intentions to engage in gig work. It has 12 items that were measured on a 5-

point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Very Unlikely to 5 = Very Likely. Some sample items include: "I intend to sign up on a gig work platform within the next month" and "I am willing to work as a delivery worker or ride-hailer if I need to." The measure had excellent reliability among the participants of the current study (Cronbach's α = .971). It was developed according to psychometric best practice standards that include expert review to ensure content validity and pilot testing with a subsample of the population of interest.

Data Analysis Software: All data analysis was done through the use of DataStatpro, which allows for the computation of descriptive analysis, correlation checks, and the building of linear regression models. Cronbach's alpha computation was done to assess the internal reliability of each scale, as well as regression analysis to determine the proposed association with status anxiety and willingness to engage with platform-based gig work.

E. Sample

The research employed a sampling strategy known as convenience sampling in Lucknow, India, targeting unemployed youth and students aged 19-25 years. Ultimately, a total of fifty participants were recruited into the study, including unemployed youth and students preparing to enter the labor market. Both males and females were targeted in this research, reflecting the gender distribution of urban youth in Lucknow.

A sample size of fifty participants in this research was deemed adequate in consideration of statistical power in correlational and regression analyses. Despite this relatively small sample size, it enabled a reliable estimate of relationships between variables, thanks to highly reliable measurement tools employed in this research (Status Anxiety Scale α = .977; Willingness to Participate Scale α = .971). Participants were asked to fill in an online or paper-based questionnaire.

Eligible participants were provided with detailed explanations of the purpose of the research, confidentiality, and voluntariness of their participation in this research. All participants were required to sign a consent form before participating in this research.

This approach enabled this research to focus on participants who were likely to be making decisions regarding gig work platforms in Lucknow, India, while also ensuring a representative sample of urban youth in Lucknow, India.

F. Inclusion Criteria

To keep the study focused and generate useful results, we decided to set some parameters to filter the eligible sample pool. First, they had to be male youths between 19 and 25 years old, matching the demographic we had decided to target with our study. Secondly, they had to be either unemployed or students who were planning to enter the labor market soon, as we wanted to investigate their employment intentions while they were considering their future opportunities in the labor market. Thirdly, they had to possess some level of general awareness about gig work mediated by online platforms like apps from companies such as Swiggy, Zomato, or Uber, so their willingness to participate would be an informed decision. Lastly, they had to provide their informed consent and volunteer to participate in the study.

All these parameters helped us target the sample pool with the highest probability of having to decide whether or not to engage with gig work mediated by online platforms.

G. Exclusion Criteria

Participants were excluded from the study if they did not meet the inclusion criteria or if their responses were incomplete. Specifically, individuals were excluded if they were female, under 19 or over 25 years of age, or already employed in full-time formal sector jobs, as their labor market context differed from the targeted sample. Additionally, participants who lacked awareness of platform-based gig work or who did not provide informed consent were excluded. Incomplete questionnaires or inconsistent responses were also removed from the dataset to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the analyses.

These exclusion criteria ensured that the sample accurately represented male unemployed youth and students in Lucknow, thereby maintaining the validity of the study's findings regarding status anxiety and willingness to participate in gig work.

VI. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopted a quantitative approach that was cross-sectional correlational in nature to investigate the relationship between status anxiety and the willingness to participate in platform-based gig work among unemployed male youth and students in Lucknow City, India. This approach was adopted to ensure that the research could be conducted at a particular point in time to generate a snapshot of the sample's attitudes, intentions, and psychological orientations to the concept of gig work. This approach does not imply causality.

For this research, the quantitative approach was appropriate to ensure that the sample could be described through descriptive statistics. This approach would also allow the researcher to assess the reliability of the measures through Cronbach's alpha. Furthermore, the quantitative approach would ensure that the research could be conducted to assess the relationships between the independent and dependent variables. This would be done to assess the relationships between the independent variable of status anxiety and the dependent variable of the willingness to participate in platform-based gig work. This approach would be appropriate to ensure that the research could be conducted to assess the relationships between the independent and dependent variables.

VII. PROCEDURE

The study collected data through a structured questionnaire to measure the two variables: the level of anxiety people have about their status and the willingness to participate in platform-based gig work. However, before the data collection process began, the questionnaire went through a revision to make sure it was simple, relevant, and appropriate to the study. We contacted potential respondents through colleges and universities, as well as student associations and community connections, in Lucknow to participate on a voluntary basis if they were eligible to participate in the study.

We provided the respondents with a brief explanation about the study and the purpose of the data collection process before they filled out the questionnaire. We also ensured confidentiality and informed consent from the respondents.

The questionnaire consisted of two scales: the status anxiety scale and the willingness to participate in platform-based gig work. However, the respondents were required to answer the questions on the questionnaire using a Likert scale.

After the data collection process, the data was cleaned and entered into the DataStatpro tool for analysis and other statistical tests to determine the reliability and correlations to see the relationship between status anxiety and willingness to participate in gig work.

VIII. RESULT AND INTERPRETATION

A. Result

With the intention to understand the relationship between status anxiety and the willingness to participate in platform-based gig work, a linear regression analysis was conducted. Descriptive statistics showed that the predictor variable and the outcome variable both showed sufficient variation. This confirmed that a regression analysis could be done. Reliability checks showed that the internal consistencies of the measures were both high. The Status Anxiety Scale showed a high Cronbach's alpha of .977, while the Willingness to Participate Scale showed a high Cronbach's alpha of .971. This confirmed that the measures were both highly reliable measures of the construct.

The results showed that status anxiety was a predictor of the willingness to participate in platform-based gig work, as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1
Linear Regression Predicting Willingness to Participate in Platform-Based Gig Work from Status Anxiety

Variable	Beta(β)	p-value
Status Anxiety	-0.752	<.001

This analysis indicates that a substantial portion of the factors influencing participation in gig work could be explained by status anxiety ($R^2 = .581$, Adjusted $R^2 = .573$). In essence, more than half of the potential desire to plunge into gig work could be attributed to their perception of their social status. As indicated by the negative beta weight, it is obvious that those with higher levels of status anxiety also have a lower willingness to participate in gig work.

This is also confirmed by a scatterplot indicating a clear downward trend, thus confirming the negative relationship between status anxiety and willingness to participate in gig work. It is obvious that those with the highest levels of status anxiety, as indicated by their performance on the Status Anxiety Scale, also demonstrated the lowest levels of willingness to participate in gig work. This is in line with the directional hypothesis (H1) and supports the assumption that social status plays a role in determining one's occupation.

This study demonstrates the psychological factors influencing the engagement of male youth in Lucknow in the labor market. It is obvious that economic factors are not the sole influencers in gig work participation; social factors also play a critical role in influencing participation in gig work. It is also obvious that status anxiety is a critical factor in influencing gig work participation; thus, it is essential to address this factor in order to encourage more youth to participate in gig work.

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IX. DISCUSSION

The research examined the level of worry that young men without jobs and students in Lucknow, India, experience regarding their social status. Furthermore, it examined the association between the level of worry regarding social status and the willingness of the participants to engage in gig work through online platforms. The results revealed a significant negative association between the level of worry regarding social status and the willingness to engage in gig work through online platforms ($\beta = -0.752$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .581$), supporting the idea that the level of worry regarding social status is important for the willingness to engage in gig work. This is important because it indicates the importance of the social-psychological factors, aside from the economic ones, for the willingness to engage in gig work. Moreover, the results are consistent with the theoretical idea of Bourdieu, according to which social capital is important for the decision to engage in a particular occupation. Indeed, according to Bourdieu, individuals are motivated to accumulate the maximum possible economic capital and social capital. Furthermore, different occupations provide different levels of social capital. Indeed, the gig work, such as delivery work, is considered to be a low-status occupation. Thus, the results suggest that the level of worry regarding social status is important for the willingness to engage in gig work, even if the economic compensation is high. Indeed, the results revealed a negative association between the level of worry regarding social status and the willingness to engage in gig work. Thus, the results suggest that the level of worry regarding social status is important for the willingness to engage in gig work. This is important because it is consistent with the idea of occupational stigma, according to which occupations that are culturally invisible may lead to internalized stigma. Indeed, the gig work is culturally invisible, at least for the participants, because it is performed behind the scenes.

For the Indian sample, these findings align with research on the interplay between education, work aspirations, and social status. Abdullah et al.'s (2024) research and Sundararajan's (2016) research both point to how young Indians connect work with both monetary rewards and social status. When work does not align with societal expectations or educational training, this can cause anxiety, especially for men who feel pressure to prove their capabilities. For the current study sample, those who experience status anxiety may perceive the work available through these platforms as not aligning with their desired social status. Thus, these individuals would be less likely to engage in this type of work despite the monetary benefits available.

The current findings also contribute to our understanding of status anxiety in meritocratic and unequal societies. Consistent with the work of de Botton (2004) and Wilkinson & Pickett (2009), individuals within a social hierarchy will always have a lingering fear of moving down the social hierarchy. This anxiety can be evidenced through avoidance, such as avoiding work that could provide a high monetary reward but does not align with societal expectations. For the young men within the Indian sample, within the urban setting where social status associated with a job aligns closely with family pressures, comparisons to others, and social status, these men may be internalizing these pressures and be more likely to seek formal work despite the unavailability of such work.

This is supported by the regression results that demonstrate a strong correlation between status anxiety and the probability of choosing to look for employment ($R^2 = .581$). This implies that social psychological factors may be at least as important as, or more important than, money concerns in determining whether or not an individual chooses to look for employment. Past research on the gig economy has focused on more structural and economic factors such as the money to be earned, flexibility, and labor policies (Wood et al., 2019; Heeks, 2017). This research argues that we should consider including psychosocial factors in our models as well. It supports the idea that an individual's decision regarding their occupation is not only an economic decision but also a way to navigate social hierarchies and protect their own and their family's prestige.

There is also an implication that gig jobs in the platform may be stigmatized among the group studied. According to occupational stigma theory, individuals tend to avoid occupations with negative social meaning, even if it means forgoing an opportunity to earn money (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). In the case of the study, the young men who experience status anxiety may associate gig jobs such as delivering packages or driving for ride-sharing with not being good enough at their jobs, failing at school, or having lower social value as a whole. This may imply that their reluctance to look for gig jobs is actually a means to protect their self-esteem and social status.

From a policy perspective, the research also offers a few practical lessons. To begin with, a series of interventions that reduce the stigma of platform work by promoting the idea of gig work as legitimate work enabled by technology and focused on skills could help reduce the impact of status anxiety on the labor market. Second, education institutions could be used to provide information to the public that positions gig work as a pathway to skill development, entrepreneurship, or formal employment, thereby helping to change the public perception of gig work from a negative to a positive phenomenon. Third, platform companies could also help to enhance the legitimacy of the work by promoting the brand and recognizing workers' contributions to the platform, which could help to reduce the negative effects of status anxiety on the labor market.

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The research also contributes to theoretical debates by connecting the dots between psychology, sociology, and labor economics through the Indian context. To be specific, the research demonstrates with empirical evidence that psychological theories, including the idea of status anxiety, do matter for understanding the labor market behaviors of the younger generation. This research contributes to the ongoing literature on occupational stigma, meritocracy, and hierarchy cultures by emphasizing the role of social and cultural factors for a comprehensive understanding of the gig economy.

Nonetheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study's male-only, Lucknow-based sample may limit generalizability to female youth or other urban and rural contexts. Additionally, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; longitudinal studies could further elucidate how status anxiety evolves over time and interacts with labor market experiences. Future research may also explore moderating factors, such as family expectations, peer influence, and socioeconomic background, to better understand variability in willingness to engage in gig work.

In summary, the present findings provide compelling evidence that status anxiety exerts a strong negative influence on willingness to participate in platform-based gig work among male unemployed youth and students in Lucknow. This relationship underscores the salience of social and psychological factors in labor market behavior, highlighting the need for interventions that address both stigma and perception alongside economic incentives. By integrating social-psychological insights with labor market analysis, the study offers a nuanced understanding of the barriers and opportunities facing young men in India's evolving gig economy.

X. FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

The implications of this study are obvious, especially in light of the evolving Indian labor market scenario. To begin with, a policy intervention in this area is a must, especially in addressing the stigma surrounding gig work in the Indian context. For example, when high status anxiety acts as a barrier to gig work participation, it becomes a matter of policy to ensure that gig work is portrayed as a legitimate activity, one that not only enhances skill sets but also carries social significance.

At a more organizational and institutional level, gig work platforms and educational institutions could play a more positive role in enhancing the social legitimacy of gig work in India. For example, universities and educational institutions could play a more positive role in enhancing the actual and social skills of gig workers, thus reducing the impact of status anxiety in this context.

Finally, this study also points to a potential area of research into the psychosocial factors influencing gig work participation in India. For example, future studies could explore how family factors, social pressures, and socio-economic factors influence the relationship between status anxiety and employment intentions in India.

In conclusion, it is obvious that removing psychological and structural barriers to gig work participation in India is a must, especially in light of a more evolving Indian labor market scenario. By removing these barriers, it becomes easier not only to ensure more participation in this area but also to help young people cope with the challenges of employment in a more positive manner.

XI. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the relationship of status anxiety to the willingness to engage in the gig economy among male unemployed youth/students in Lucknow, India. The study revealed that there is a significant negative relationship between the willingness to engage in the gig economy and status anxiety. Specifically, the study found that as the level of status anxiety increases, the willingness to engage in the gig economy decreases. The study revealed that the relationship between the willingness to engage in the gig economy and status anxiety is significant at 0.001 level. The relationship is negative as the beta value is -0.752. The study revealed that even though the main driver of engaging in the gig economy is the incentive to earn money, the psychological factor is as significant as the incentive in influencing the willingness to engage in the gig economy.

By using Bourdieu's theories of social and symbolic capital, as well as the theory of occupational stigma, the study provides evidence of how rigid social hierarchies and fear of loss of face impact people's willingness to engage with the gig economy. What this means for policymakers, schools, and the gig economy is that reducing stigma, recognizing skills, and socially validating workers can increase participation. Strategies that seek to alleviate both the psychological and financial dimensions of work may prove more effective in getting young people to engage with the gig economy.

This study provides more nuanced understanding of the Indian labor market because it demonstrates that social and mental health dimensions can play just as great a role as financial and structural dimensions. Future studies can improve on what has been done here by including more diverse populations and longitudinal designs that examine potential moderators like family and peer pressure. In short, addressing status anxiety and social perceptions is key to creating a more equitable and sustainable gig economy within India.

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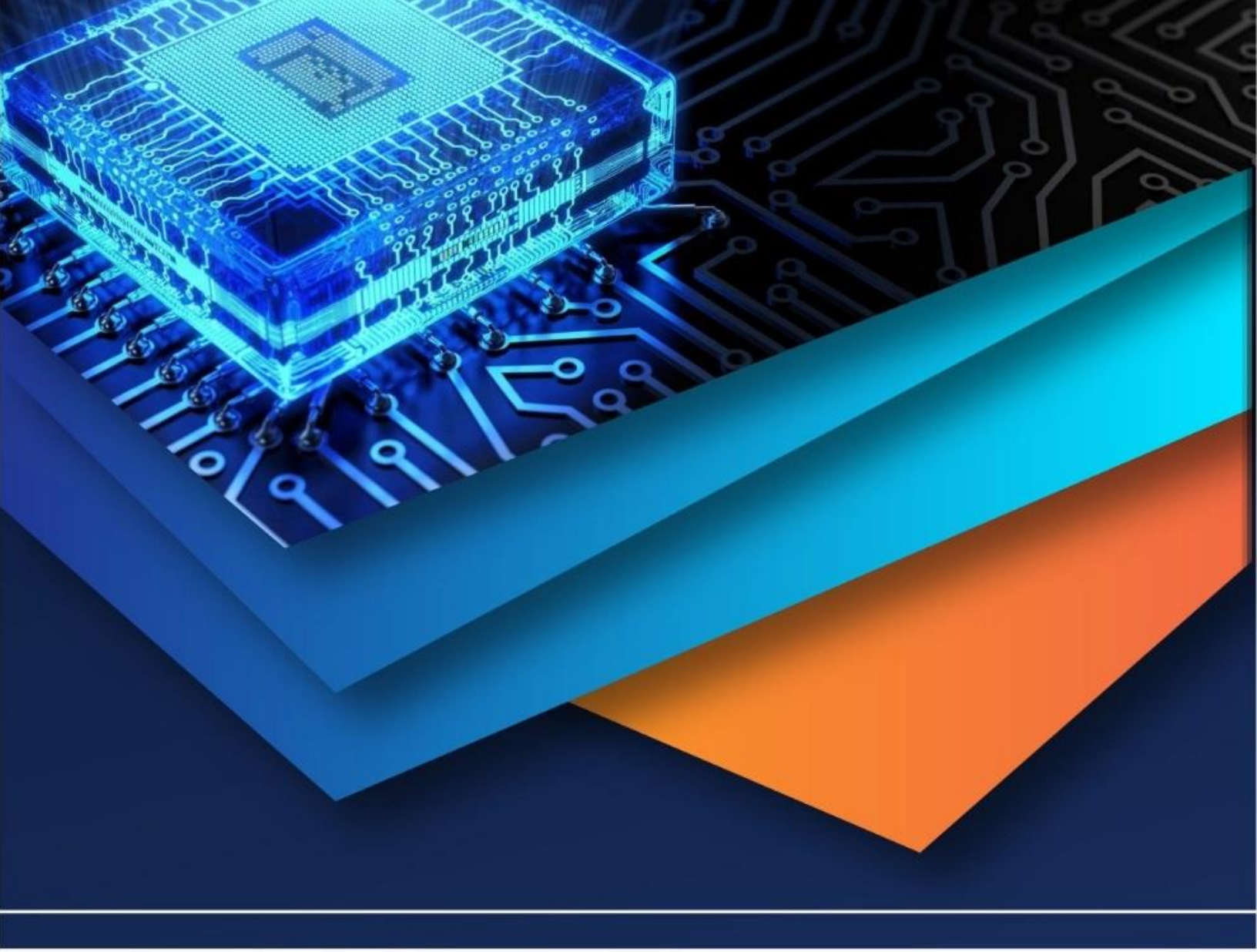

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