

The Effect of Clarity of Expectations, Continuous Feedback, and Distributive Justice on Creativity with Psychological Well-Being as a Mediating Variable on IT Freelancers

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Keywords:

clarity of expectations; continuous feedback; distributive justice; well-being.

Abstract

The acceleration of digitalization has expanded the gig economy in Indonesia, where IT freelancers work amid structural uncertainties, such as scope creep, technical ambiguity, and underpricing, which may affect their cognitive capacity and creativity. This study aimed to analyze the effects of clarity of expectations, continuous feedback, and distributive justice on IT freelancers' creativity and to examine psychological well-being as a mediating mechanism. Using a cross-sectional explanatory quantitative design based on Social Exchange Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and the Job Demands–Resources model, primary data from 145 active IT freelancers were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0 software and 5,000 bootstrap subsamples. Clarity of expectations, continuous feedback, and distributive justice significantly improved psychological well-being, while continuous feedback and psychological well-being were the strongest direct predictors of creativity. Psychological well-being significantly mediated the relationships between all three exogenous variables and creativity, functioning as an internal mechanism that converts supportive project management practices into creative performance. Maintaining freelancers' psychological well-being is essential for fostering technological innovation and provides practical implications for clients, freelancers, and gig economy platforms.



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Publikasi Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

The acceleration of digitalization and the widespread adoption of information technology have driven a structural transformation in the employment landscape toward a gig economy ecosystem characterized by project-based work arrangements, short-term contracts, and independent flexibility. In Indonesia, this phenomenon is reflected in the increasing number of self-employed workers. Data from the Central Statistics Agency (Badan Pusat Statistik [BPS], 2023) indicate that the number of freelancers in Indonesia reached 46.47 million people, representing 31.69% of the national workforce (Xiaofang et al., 2026). Particularly in the information technology (IT) and telecommunications sectors, which employed 1.09 million

workers (BPS, 2022), approximately 35% or around 380,000–420,000 individuals were estimated to work independently as IT freelancers (Kazokku, 2023).

Despite providing flexibility and autonomy, the IT freelance ecosystem in Indonesia is characterized by structural challenges that may affect workers' cognitive capacity and creative performance. Unlike formal employees who operate within established job descriptions and organizational structures, IT freelancers work in digital transaction environments characterized by uncertainty. Common challenges include scope creep, referring to the expansion of project requirements by clients without corresponding compensation adjustments, ambiguity in technical specifications, and underpricing caused by intense price competition on digital platforms (Shevchuk et al., 2018)

In the IT industry, creativity represents an essential competency. The creativity of IT freelancers is not limited to visual aesthetics but also involves cognitive abilities to design efficient programming structures, develop innovative system architectures, and solve complex technical problems (debugging) (Amabile & Pratt, 2016). However, creative capacity may decline when workers experience psychological strain due to uncertain and demanding work environments (Evada Rustina et al., 2025).

To produce innovative outputs, IT freelancers require external support from clients in the form of clear expectations, structured feedback, and fair compensation. A supportive work environment is important for maintaining freelancers' psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989). When task clarity, constructive evaluation, and fair remuneration are achieved, psychological burden and work stress can be reduced, allowing workers to allocate cognitive resources more effectively toward original problem-solving and creative activities (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Academically, this study addressed three main research gaps. First, a conceptual gap existed because previous studies tended to examine role clarity, feedback, and distributive justice separately, resulting in limited understanding of how these work resources interact within an integrated structural model in the gig economy context (Bourlakis et al., 2023). Second, a mediation gap remained because the internal mechanism explaining how contract governance factors were transformed into creative behavior through psychological conditions had not been sufficiently examined in this sector (Ashford et al., 2003). Third, a contextual gap existed because most studies on creative behavior focused on formal organizational employees, while research examining IT freelancers in developing countries such as Indonesia remained limited (Gilson et al., 2021).

The novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive examination of the combined effects of clarity of expectations, continuous feedback, and distributive justice on IT freelancers' creativity, with psychological well-being serving as a mediating mechanism. Unlike previous studies, this research (1) integrated three important job resources into a single structural model; (2) empirically examined the mediating role of psychological well-being as an internal mechanism linking work conditions to creative performance; (3) focused specifically on IT freelancers in Indonesia, a context that remains underexplored; (4) combined several theoretical perspectives, including Social Exchange Theory, the Job Demands–Resources Model, Self-Determination Theory, and Componential Theory of Creativity, to explain the phenomenon comprehensively; and (5) provided practical implications for clients, freelancers,

and digital platforms based on empirical findings. This study also positioned psychological well-being as an internal mechanism that explains how project governance support contributes to creative performance, expanding the literature on organizational behavior in non-traditional work arrangements (Hair et al., 2019) .

Based on the identified research gaps and practical challenges, this study aimed to analyze the effects of clarity of expectations, continuous feedback, and distributive justice on IT freelancers' creativity and to examine the role of psychological well-being as a mediating variable in these relationships. The conceptual framework of this study was developed through the integration of Social Exchange Theory, the Job Demands–Resources Model, and Self-Determination Theory, as presented in Figure 1.

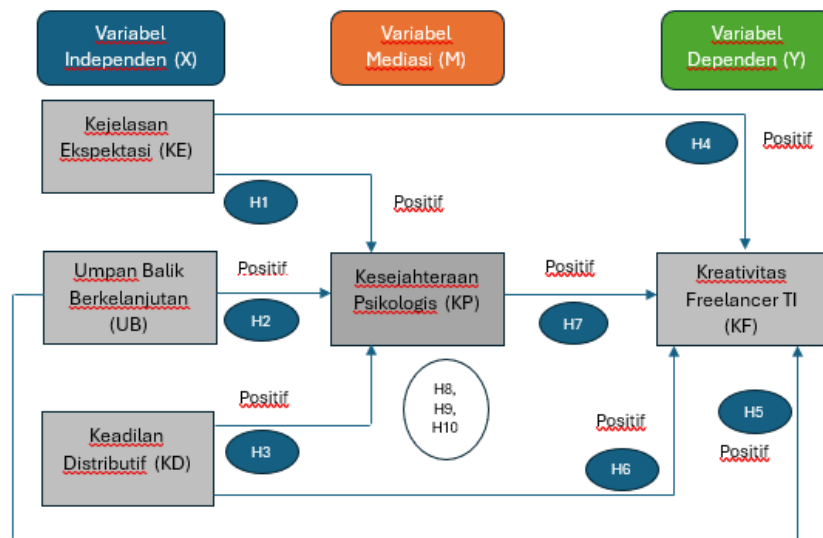


Figure 1. Research Model (Conceptual Framework)

According to this conceptual framework, this study formulated ten hypotheses, including the direct effects of clarity of expectations (H1), continuous feedback (H2), and distributive justice (H3) on psychological well-being; the direct effects of the three independent variables (H4, H5, and H6) and psychological well-being (H7) on creativity; and the mediating effects of psychological well-being on the relationships between clarity of expectations (H8), continuous feedback (H9), distributive justice (H10), and creativity.

The theoretical framework of this study was structured hierarchically, beginning with grand theory as the fundamental foundation, followed by middle-range theories that explain the relationship between motivation and the work environment, and applied theory that describes the formation of the dependent variable. The integration of these four theoretical perspectives positions client-provided assignment governance support as job resources that, through the fulfillment of psychological needs, contribute to psychological well-being and enhanced creative performance.

The primary theoretical foundation of this study was Social Exchange Theory (SET), introduced by Blau (1964). SET proposes that professional interactions within organizations and networks are based on the principle of reciprocity. Within the IT freelance ecosystem, the relationship between clients (project owners) and freelancers extends beyond formal economic transactions and involves the exchange of social, emotional, and cognitive resources. When

clients provide supportive work conditions through clarity of expectations, continuous feedback, and distributive justice, freelancers perceive these conditions as professional support. Based on reciprocal norms, such support may encourage healthier psychological states and greater allocation of cognitive resources toward innovative performance (Adams, 1965).

To explain the internal mechanism linking social exchange processes with psychological well-being, this study employed two complementary middle-range theories. First, the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) categorizes work characteristics into job demands and job resources. In an independent work environment characterized by uncertainty and limited organizational support, clarity of expectations, continuous feedback, and distributive justice function as job resources that may reduce psychological strain and prevent burnout. Second, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000) explains that individuals achieve optimal functioning when their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled. Client-provided job resources may contribute to the fulfillment of these needs, thereby strengthening the psychological stability of IT freelancers.

As an applied theoretical perspective explaining the final outcome of the model, the Componential Theory of Creativity (Kessler, 2013) was used to explain that creativity results from the interaction of domain-relevant skills, creativity-relevant processes, and intrinsic motivation. From this perspective, a fair, transparent, and communicative work environment reduces financial uncertainty and communication-related stress, thereby supporting psychological well-being and enabling freelancers to allocate cognitive resources toward developing algorithmic ideas, improving code efficiency, and creating original digital solutions (Mondo et al., 2023).

Clarity of expectations (KE) was defined as the level of transparency and objectivity regarding task requirements, responsibilities, and project success criteria communicated by clients to freelancers (Rizzo et al., 1970; Sawyer, 1992). Continuous feedback (UB) referred to periodic, constructive, and two-way evaluation communication regarding work progress throughout the project cycle (Steelman et al., 2004). Distributive justice (KD) referred to freelancers' perceptions of the fairness between received rewards and their contributions, workload, and task complexity (Colquitt, 2001). Psychological well-being (KP) as a mediating variable included dimensions related to autonomy, self-efficacy, positive professional relationships, stress resilience, and career meaning (Ryff, 1989; Spreitzer, 1995). IT freelancer creativity (KF) was defined as the ability to generate original and useful ideas, technical solutions, programming code, or digital innovations to address programming-related challenges (Zhou & George, 2001).

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative approach with a causal-explanatory research design to examine the cause-and-effect relationships among latent constructs involving independent, mediating, and dependent variables. The study focused on IT freelancers residing in Indonesia, with the unit of analysis consisting of individuals actively participating in the digital work ecosystem through platforms such as Upwork, Fiverr, Sribu, Projects.co.id, and Fastwork.

Respondents were selected based on specific criteria, including having worked as IT

freelancers for at least one year, completing at least three IT projects within the previous twelve months, remaining active within the previous six months, and providing complete questionnaire responses. Due to the absence of a random sampling framework, this study applied multi-stage non-probability sampling, combining purposive sampling through screening questions, convenience sampling through online forums and developer communities, and virtual snowball sampling (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). Primary data were collected from 145 valid respondents.

The research instrument was a structured questionnaire administered through Google Forms, measuring all variables using a 6-point Likert scale consisting of 37 indicators: clarity of expectations (7 indicators), continuous feedback (7 indicators), distributive justice (7 indicators), psychological well-being (9 indicators), and creativity (7 indicators). The measurement indicators were adapted from established instruments developed by Rizzo et al. (1970), Steelman et al. (2004), Colquitt (2001), Ryff (1989), and Zhou and George (2001).

Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0 through two evaluation stages. The measurement model (outer model) was assessed through convergent validity using outer loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), discriminant validity using the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT), and reliability testing using Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability. The structural model (inner model) was evaluated through the coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), and significance testing of direct and indirect relationships using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 subsamples at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$ (one-tailed test) (Hair et al., 2019).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Characteristics

Based on the tabulation of demographic data, respondents were dominated by men (82.88%) with the majority aged 17–25 years (55.48%) and 26–35 years old (34.25%). Most of them had high school education/equivalent (54.11%) and Bachelor/S1 (34.93%), had 1–2 years of independent work experience (74.66%), and completed 3–5 projects in the past year (66.44%). The dominant areas of expertise were web development (25.34%) and mobile applications (13.70%), with the majority of monthly income of IDR 1,000,000–IDR 5,000,000 (50.68%). Details of demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Detailed Description of Findings (Demographic Characteristics)

Characteristics	Categories	N	%
Gender	Male	120	82,88
	Women	25	17,12
Age	17–25 years old	80	55,48
	26–35 years old	50	34,25
	36–45 years old	12	8,22
	46–55 years old / >55 years old	3	2,05
Education	High School / Equivalent	78	54,11
	Bachelor (S1)	51	34,93
	Diploma (D1–D4)	13	8,90
	Master (S2)	3	2,05

Characteristics	Categories	N	%
Experience	1–2 years	108	74,66
	3–5 years	24	16,44
	6–10 years / >10 years	13	8,90
Project Completed (12 months)	3–5 projects	96	66,44
	6–10 projects	40	27,40
	11–20 / >20 projects	9	6,16
Areas of Expertise	Web Development	36	25,34
	Mobile App	20	13,70
	Data Science / Data Analysis	13	8,90
	System Admin / Cloud	13	8,90
	UI/UX design	12	8,22
	Others	51	34,94
Revenue/month	< IDR 1,000,000	46	32,19
	IDR 1,000,000–5,000,000	74	50,68
	IDR 5,000,001–10,000,000	15	10,27
	> IDR10,000,000	10	6,84
Employment Status	Part-time (<20 hours/mgg)	63	43,15
	Part-time (20–40 hours)	43	29,45
	Full-time (>40 hours)	38	26,71

Source: Primary data processed (2026), n = 145.

Evaluation of Measurement Models (Outer Model)

The test results showed that all indicators had an outer loading value above the critical threshold of 0.40 and an AVE value for all variables was above 0.50, so that the convergent validity was met. The HTMT ratio value of the entire construct pair was below 0.90 which confirmed the discriminant validity, while the Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values for all constructs exceeded 0.70, proving the internal consistency and good reliability of the instrument. A summary of outer loading and AVE is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of Convergent Validity Testing (Outer Loadings & AVE)

Variable	Indicator	Outer Loading	AVE
Clarity of Expectations (KE)	TO.1–TO.7	0,630 – 0,807	0,528
Continuous Feedback (UB)	UB.1–UB.7	0,724 – 0,829	0,608
Distributive Justice (KD)	KD.1–KD.7	0,659 – 0,832	0,612
Psychological Well-Being (KP)	KP.1–KP.9	0,657 – 0,836	0,565
IT Freelancer Creativity (KF)	KF.1–KF.7	0,578 – 0,851	0,604

Remarks: the whole loading > 0.40 and AVE > 0.50 (valid); HTMT < 0.90; CA & CR > 0.70 (reliable).

Evaluation of Structural Models (Inner Model)

The determination coefficient value (R^2) for the psychological well-being variable was 0.638 (moderate–strong category), which means that 63.8% of the psychological well-being variance was explained by the clarity of expectations, continuous feedback, and distributive fairness. The R^2 value for IT freelancer creativity was 0.714 (strong category), which confirms that 71.4% of the creativity variance was explained by this study model.

Judging from effect size (f^2), continuous feedback contributed the largest to psychological well-being ($f^2 = 0.103$), followed by clarity of expectation ($f^2 = 0.083$) and distributive justice ($f^2 = 0.062$). On creativity, psychological well-being ($f^2 = 0.252$) and continuous feedback ($f^2 = 0.191$) had a substantial impact in the medium category, while clarity of expectations ($f^2 = 0.006$) and distributive justice ($f^2 = 0.001$) did not have a substantial direct impact. The results of structural model testing through bootstrapping are presented in Figure 2.

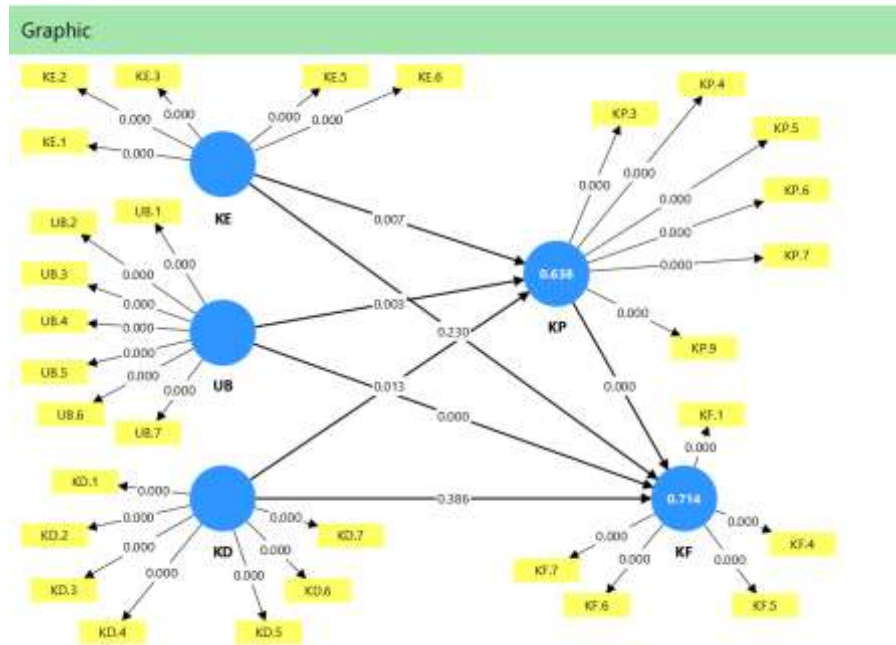


Figure 2. Structural Model Test Results (Bootstrapping)

Direct influence hypothesis testing showed that clarity of expectations ($\beta = 0.265$; $p = 0.007$), continuous feedback ($\beta = 0.384$; $p = 0.003$), and distributive fairness ($\beta = 0.236$; $p = 0.013$) had a positive and significant effect on psychological well-being (H1, H2, H3 accepted). For direct influences on creativity, continuous feedback ($\beta = 0.488$; $p = 0.000$) and psychological well-being ($\beta = 0.446$; $p = 0.000$) had a positive and significant effect (H5, H7 accepted), while the clarity of expectations ($\beta = -0.067$; $p = 0.230$) and distributive justice ($\beta = 0.023$; $p = 0.386$) were not significant (H4, H6 was rejected). Summary is presented in Table 3

Table 3. Testing the Direct Effects Hypothesis

Hip.	Relationship Pathway	β	T-Stat.	P-Values
H1	Clarity of Expectations → Psychological Well-Being	0,265	2,437	0,007*
H2	Continuous Feedback → Psychological Well-Being	0,384	2,765	0,003*
H3	Distributive Justice → Psychological Well-Being	0,236	2,232	0,013*
H4	Clarity of Expectations → Creativity	-0,067	0,740	0,230
H5	Continuous Feedback → Creativity	0,488	3,657	0,000*
H6	Distributive Justice → Creativity	0,023	0,290	0,386
H7	Psychological Well-Being → Creativity	0,446	4,770	0,000*

Caption: *significant at $\alpha = 0.05$ (one-tailed).

The results of testing the indirect effects through bootstrapping proved that psychological well-being significantly mediated the influence of expectation clarity ($\beta = 0.118$; $p = 0.012$), continuous feedback ($\beta = 0.171$; $p = 0.017$), and distributive justice ($\beta = 0.105$; $p = 0.017$) on creativity (H8, H9, H10 received). The form of mediation for clarity of expectations and distributive justice is full mediation, while for continuous feedback is partial mediation, as presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Indirect Effects Hypothesis Testing

Hip.	Mediation Pathway	β	T-Stat.	P-Val.	Properties
H8	KE $\rightarrow$ KP $\rightarrow$ Creativity	0,118	2,271	0,012*	Full
H9	UB $\rightarrow$ KP $\rightarrow$ Creativity	0,171	2,111	0,017*	Partial
H10	KD $\rightarrow$ KP $\rightarrow$ Creativity	0,105	2,121	0,017*	Full

Remarks: *significant at $\alpha = 0.05$. KE = Clarity of Expectations; UB = Continuous Feedback; KD = Distributive Justice; KP = Psychological Well-Being.

The Crucial Role of Sustainable Feedback

The finding that continuous feedback was the predictor with the most dominant direct influence on creativity ($\beta = 0.488$) confirmed that iterative evaluative interactions (agile review) act as a cognitive catalyst that directly stimulates innovative technical problem-solving (debugging). These results are in line with the Feedback Intervention Theory (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) and the Componential Theory of Creativity (Amabile & Pratt, 2016), and reinforce the findings of De Spiegelaere et al. (2016) and Gilson et al. (2021) that evaluative communication is a motor of innovation in remote work environments.

The Mediation Function of Psychological Well-Being

The proven role of psychological well-being mediation—both full and partial—confirms that the stimulus of the work environment in the form of clarity of instruction and compensation justice is not necessarily transformed into innovative digital solutions without a bridge of excellent mental state. In line with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017) and Broaden-and-Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2001), the fulfillment of basic psychological needs and emotional stability are prerequisites that free the cognitive memory capacity of freelancers to think divergently. The fact that clarity of expectations and distributive justice only affect creativity through full mediation shows that both are positioned as fundamental prerequisites (baseline requirements), not direct cognitive triggers.

Dynamics of Work Resources and Comparison with Previous Studies

Judging from the Job Demands–Resources Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), all three external factors of the client act as essential job resources: detailed task specifications reduce role ambiguity (Rizzo et al., 1970), evaluative communication provides a sense of competence and connectedness, while equitable compensation prevents workers from feeling exploited (Adams, 1965; Colquitt, 2001). These findings reinforce the conclusions of Zhao et al. (2023) and Mondo et al. (2023) regarding the importance of mental stability for independent digital workers. The novelty's contribution lies in its context: most of the classical literature (Amabile & Pratt, 2016; Bakker & Demerouti,

2017) focuses on formal corporate employees, while this study presents empirical evidence of Indonesia's IT gig economy ecosystem that is full of communication asymmetry and price competition, so that fair governance of clients becomes an absolute support for creativity (Shevchuk et al., 2018).

Implications

Theoretically, this study expands the literature on organizational behavior on non-conventional work models by positioning psychological well-being as an internal translational mechanism (black box mediator) (Dumitriu et al., 2025). In practical terms, clients are advised to move from passive evaluation at the end of the project to an Agile-style iterative approach (weekly sprint review), develop a standard Software Requirements Specification (SRS), and allocate an additional fee budget in the event of scope creep. Freelancers need to establish boundary management and request periodic evaluation sessions, while gig economy platforms can provide templates for project coverage protection and strengthen escrow payment systems to ensure distributive fairness.

CONCLUSION

Empirical testing of the structural model within the gig economy ecosystem of the Information Technology sector in Indonesia produced several conclusions. Clarity of expectations, continuous feedback, and distributive justice were found to have positive and significant effects on the psychological well-being of IT freelancers (H1–H3 supported). Regarding creativity, only continuous feedback and psychological well-being had significant direct effects (H5 and H7 supported), whereas clarity of expectations and distributive justice did not show significant direct effects (H4 and H6 were not supported).

The main finding of this study was the confirmed mediating role of psychological well-being across all examined pathways (H8–H10 supported). Psychological well-being fully mediated the relationships between clarity of expectations and distributive justice with creativity, while it partially mediated the relationship between continuous feedback and creativity. These findings indicate that within the self-employment ecosystem, governance factors such as task clarity and compensation fairness function as important external resources but require psychological well-being as an internal mechanism to facilitate the transformation of work support into creative performance. This study was limited by its cross-sectional design and geographical focus on Indonesia. Future research is recommended to employ longitudinal designs and incorporate additional mediating variables, such as intrinsic motivation and cognitive load, as well as moderating variables related to digital work platforms.

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