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**“Motivated, but Vulnerable”:
Exploring Malaysian youth participation in the gig economy**

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Abstract

This study examines the demographic characteristics and motivations of Malaysian youth engaged in the gig economy. Drawing on a quantitative survey of 385 gig workers in Kuala Lumpur, findings show that most participants are men aged 19–30 with tertiary education, working primarily full-time in food delivery and logistics, and earning RM2001–4000 monthly. They are motivated by flexibility, autonomy, and low entry barriers, reinforced by technological change and shifting labor trends. Despite these drivers, they remain vulnerable to unstable income and limited protections. The study calls for comprehensive policies to safeguard gig workers and sustain this growing labor sector.

Keywords: Gig Economy; Youth; Participation; Malaysia

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1.0 Introduction

The gig economy, characterized by short-term, flexible, and digitally mediated work, has expanded rapidly worldwide, accelerated by platform companies and digitalization. While not new, its contemporary form raises pressing debates about youth employment transitions, agency, and precarity. Global estimates place its value at over USD 200 billion and growing, with youth representing a significant share of this workforce. In Malaysia, the Department of Statistics (2020) reported that over a quarter of the labor force, around four million workers, are engaged in gig work, and nearly half of them are youth. This surge is linked to high graduate unemployment, underemployment, and the appeal of flexibility and autonomy. Existing scholarship highlights both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, the gig economy lowers entry barriers, offers flexible hours, and is perceived as a pathway to entrepreneurship or income supplementation (De Stefano, 2015). It also aligns with broader cultural shifts towards innovation and “side hustles.” On the other hand, critics underscore the precarity of gig work: income instability, lack of benefits, limited career progression, and risks of social isolation (Healy et al., 2017). This duality situates the gig economy at the heart of youth studies debates about agency under structural constraints and the uncertain nature of work transitions.

In Malaysia, research on the gig economy has primarily focused on its overall growth, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when a large number of displaced workers and graduates entered the delivery and logistics sectors (Wan Muzhaffar, 2020). Existing

scholarship has also highlighted the sector's flexibility and contribution to digital transformation (Nazruzila & Kamal Halili, 2020). However, two important gaps remain. First, there is limited empirical evidence on the demographic profiles and lived motivations of youth gig workers in urban Malaysia. Second, while international studies have examined the tension between opportunity and precarity, Malaysian scholarship has often stopped short of engaging with these broader youth studies debates. This paper addresses these gaps through a survey of 385 youth gig workers in Kuala Lumpur. Specifically, the study aims to: (1) examine the socio-demographic profiles of youth engaged in gig work; (2) identify the key motivations and perceived benefits driving youth participation in the gig economy; (3) analyze how young workers negotiate the tensions between agency and precarity within digitally mediated labor markets. Therefore, we argue that the Malaysian case both resonates with global debates and adds nuance: youth embrace gig work not only out of necessity but also as a strategy of agency in navigating uncertain labor markets. However, without institutional protections, this agency risks being undermined by structural vulnerabilities.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Youth and the Gig Economy in Developed Countries

In developed countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, youth are prominent participants in the gig economy due to its flexibility, autonomy, and compatibility with education or entrepreneurial aspirations (Codagnone, Abadie & Biagi, 2016). However, concerns persist about precarity: income instability, lack of benefits, and limited career progression (Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016). Studies highlight that millennials, who dominate gig work, value workplace flexibility as central to well-being (Deloitte, 2023). Technological advances have further enabled growth, with freelancing in the U.S. rising from 3.7 million in 2014 to over 62 million in 2019 (Roy & Shrivastava, 2020). Developed nations are also experimenting with policies to strengthen protections, such as reclassifying gig workers as employees (U.S.) or ensuring rights to pay and leave (UK).

2.2 Development of the Gig Economy in Malaysia

Malaysia has followed global trends, with rapid growth in urban areas driven by digital platforms, e-commerce, and youth unemployment. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified this shift, as displaced workers and graduates turned to gig work, especially in food delivery and logistics (Wan Muzhaffar, 2020). Local and global platforms such as Grab and Foodpanda have become central to this expansion (Shaw et al., 2023). Research highlights flexibility, supplementary income, and work experience as primary drivers (Nursilah, 2020; Norhafiza & Nur Arina, 2025). However, Malaysia's regulatory frameworks and labor protections remain underdeveloped compared to developed countries (Uchiyama, Furuoka & Nasrudin, 2022). The government has acknowledged gig work's potential through policies and programs such as the Global Online Workforce (GLOW) initiative and by positioning the gig economy within the 12th Malaysia Plan (Wan Muzhaffar, 2020). Yet despite such efforts, gaps in social protection, career progression, and legal recognition persist.

2.3 Gaps in the Literature

Past research largely addresses the general growth and structural features of the gig economy, often using qualitative document analysis. While developed country studies engage deeply with debates on youth agency and precarity, Malaysian studies have primarily highlighted flexibility, unemployment, and digitalization. Few empirical studies examine the profiles, motivations, and vulnerabilities of youth gig workers in Malaysia.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed a quantitative survey design to examine the profiles, motivations, and challenges of youth gig workers in Kuala Lumpur. Youth were defined as individuals aged 15–30, in line with the Youth Societies and Youth Development Act 2007. Kuala Lumpur was selected as the study site because it represents an urban setting with the highest number of gig workers. A total of 385 respondents were chosen using stratified random sampling across 11 parliamentary constituencies (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). Data were collected through online and face-to-face questionnaires distributed between October 2023 and March 2024. The survey instrument included demographic questions and items measuring internal (e.g., autonomy, flexibility) and external (e.g., technology, labor market pressures) motivations for gig participation. Data were analyzed using SPSS 27.0. Descriptive statistics (percentages, means) summarized demographic and motivational profiles. To ensure construct validity, factor analysis was performed. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($p < .001$), and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was .70, confirming suitability for factor analysis.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Demographic Analyses

Table 1 presents several demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of 385 gig workers in Kuala Lumpur. Among the respondents, the majority were male (76.4%), reflecting the dominance of men in physically demanding sectors like delivery and transport, often shaped by cultural norms and greater risk tolerance (Codagnone et al., 2016). Women were more likely to engage in flexible, remote gig work that better aligns with caregiving responsibilities, highlighting gendered labor segmentation. In terms of age, most workers were 19–24 years old (60.5%), followed by 25–30 years (33.2%), with only 6.2% aged 15–18, reflecting that younger youth are largely still in school. This concentration of young adults underscores the gig economy's role as a transitional space between education and stable

employment (Katz & Krueger, 2019). Regarding education, nearly half (46.8%) held a Bachelor's degree, with others reporting SPM (29.4%) or Diplomas (23.4%). The high presence of degree holders reflects issues of overqualification and underemployment, where graduates enter gig work as an interim solution (Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016). By ethnicity, Malays formed the majority (80.5%), with Indians (11.4%) and Chinese (8.1%) reflecting national demographics. Occupationally, the largest group was food delivery workers (51.9%), followed by goods delivery (19.7%), with fewer in digital or professional freelance roles. This aligns with the rapid expansion of on-demand platforms and consumer demand for delivery services (Schor et al., 2020). Most respondents worked full-time (66.5%), earning between RM3001–4000 (48.1%) or RM2001–3000 (30.4%) monthly. Few earned above RM5000 (3.9%), reflecting the prevalence of low- to mid-skill gig jobs with limited income mobility.

Table 1: Demographic Analysis

		N	%
Gender	Male	294	76.4
	Female	91	23.6
	Total	385	100.0
Age Groups	Early Youth (15 - 18 tahun)	24	6.2
	Middle Youth (19 - 24 tahun)	233	60.5
	Late Youth (25 - 30 tahun)	128	33.2
	Total	385	100.0
Levels of Education	SPM and equivalent	113	29.4
	Diploma and equivalent	90	23.4
	Bachelor's Degree	180	46.8
	Master's Degree	2	.5
	Total	385	100.0
Ethnicity	Malay	310	80.5
	Chinese	31	8.1
	Indian	44	11.4
	Total	385	100.0
Types of Gig Economy	Management Workers	25	6.5
	Self-employed (Vehicle Rental)	23	6.0
	Self-employed (House Rental)	15	3.9
	Software Developer/Content Creator	23	6.0
	Goods Delivery Worker	76	19.7
	Food Delivery Worker	200	51.9
	Graphic Designer	23	6.0
	Total	385	100.0
Types of Employment	Part-Time	129	33.5
	Full-Time	256	66.5
	Total	385	100.0
Net Monthly Income	RM1001 - RM2000	31	8.1
	RM2001 - RM3000	117	30.4
	RM3001 - RM4000	185	48.1
	RM4001 - RM5000	37	9.6
	RM5001 and above	15	3.9
	Total	385	100.0

(Source: Study Sampling)

4.2 Factors Motivating Youth's Involvement in the Gig Economy in Kuala Lumpur

The rise of the gig economy, characterized by short-term, flexible, and independent jobs, has dramatically altered the employment landscape, particularly for youth. Table 2 shows the five highest-rated motivations provide clear insight into why youth in Kuala Lumpur are increasingly drawn to the gig economy. The strongest factor is that gig work is not constrained by education level ($M = 4.96$). This underscores the accessibility of gig opportunities, which allow young people to participate regardless of formal qualifications. In a context where graduate underemployment remains high, this inclusivity makes gig work particularly appealing. The second strongest driver is interest in entering the gig economy ($M = 4.93$). This indicates that participation is not purely a response to economic pressures but is also fueled by enthusiasm, curiosity, and the perception that gig work represents a modern, relevant career path. Closely related to this is the motivation of meeting new people ($M = 4.91$), suggesting that social interaction and networking opportunities play a significant role in shaping youth engagement.

Flexibility also features prominently, with both flexible working hours ($M = 4.84$) and freedom to choose work location ($M = 4.84$) ranking within the top five. These factors highlight how autonomy in managing time and place of work is central to the appeal of gig work. For youth, especially those balancing studies, caregiving, or other commitments, this flexibility represents a level of control not typically found in conventional employment. Together, these five factors suggest that youth participation in the gig economy is motivated less by external pressure and more by agency, inclusivity, and lifestyle appeal. Gig work is seen not merely as a fallback but as an

attractive, self-directed choice that offers autonomy, social opportunities, and freedom from traditional barriers such as education requirements.

Table 2. Factors Motivating Youth into the Gig Economy in Kuala Lumpur

Items	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	SD	Interpretation
	%	%	%	%	%			
1. Flexible Working Hours	0.0	0.0	0.0	15.8	84.2	4.84	.366	High
2. Supplementing Income	0.0	0.0	0.0	27.5	72.5	4.72	.447	High
3. Higher Earnings	0.0	0.0	7.3	8.6	84.2	4.77	.569	High
Compared to Conventional Jobs								
4. Easy and Not Burdensome	0.0	0.0	8.6	19.0	72.5	4.64	.635	High
5. Freedom to Choose Work Location	0.0	0.0	0.0	15.8	84.2	4.84	.366	High
6. Interest in Entering the Gig Economy	0.0	0.0	0.0	7.3	92.7	4.93	.260	High
7. Not Constrained by Education Level	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.5	94.5	4.96	.280	High
8. Variety of skills and services.	0.0	0.0	11.7	8.6	79.7	4.68	.673	High
9. Meeting New People	0.0	0.0	0.0	8.6	91.4	4.91	.280	High
10. Peer Influence	25.5	21.31	11.7	0.0	41.6	3.11	1.70	Moderate
11. Family Encouragement	25.2	22.6	11.7	7.3	33.2	3.01	1.62	Moderate
12. Gig Job Trends	0.0	0.0	11.7	15.8	72.5	4.61	.688	High
13. Technological Advancements	0.0	0.0	11.7	8.6	79.7	4.68	.673	High
14. Difficulty Finding Permanent Jobs	0.0	5.7	19.0	0.0	75.3	4.45	.986	High

4.3 Analysis of Motivational Factors (Factor Analysis)

The rotated component matrix in Table 3 reveals four distinct constructs that shape youth motivations for entering the gig economy. These constructs highlight how different factors cluster together, reflecting both personal agency and structural conditions that influence participation. The factor analysis shows that youth motivations are best understood through four interrelated constructs: flexibility and autonomy, economic opportunities and accessibility, social and experiential appeal, and social influences. The strongest factors lie in autonomy and inclusivity, but technological accessibility and cultural acceptance also drive engagement. Meanwhile, social influences, although weaker in mean importance, form a coherent construct that cannot be ignored. Overall, the findings confirm that youth participation in the gig economy is shaped by a blend of agency, structural necessity, and cultural trends.

4.3.1. Flexibility and Autonomy (Factor 1)

This construct includes flexible working hours, freedom to choose work location, higher earnings compared to conventional jobs, not constrained by education level, and interest in entering the gig economy. High loadings on these variables (ranging from .839 to .993) indicate that autonomy and inclusivity are central to youth motivations. The ability to manage one's time, location, and entry regardless of educational attainment reflects the appeal of gig work as a self-directed and accessible pathway.

4.3.2 Economic Opportunities and Accessibility (Factor 2)

This factor clusters supplementing income, ease of work, variety of skills and services, technological advancements, and gig job trends. With strong loadings above .67, this construct reflects how economic necessity intersects with technological opportunities. Youth are motivated not only by the chance to supplement income but also by the ease of entry and the opportunities created by digital platforms. The cultural popularity of gig job trends further strengthens this appeal.

4.3.3. Social and Experiential Appeal (Factor 3)

The third construct groups meeting new people with negative cross-loadings from interest and difficulty in finding permanent jobs. This highlights the social dimension of gig work, where networking and interpersonal engagement are attractive, even though they intersect with the pressures of unstable job markets. It suggests that some youth see gig work as not just a means of survival but also a space for building social capital.

4.4.4. Social Influences (Factor 4)

Finally, the fourth construct includes peer influence and family encouragement, both of which load strongly ($> .83$). While these factors scored lower in mean analysis, their grouping into a distinct factor indicates that social expectations still play a role for some youth. They may act as reinforcing mechanisms, nudging young people toward gig work, even if they are not the primary motivators.

Table 3. Rotated Component Matrix

Variables	Component			
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Flexible Working Hours	.949	.164	.268	-.025
Supplementing Income	.593	.798	.044	-.016
Higher Earnings Compared to Conventional Jobs	.993	.089	-.071	-.016
Easy and Not Burdensome	.620	.671	.404	-.026
Freedom to Choose Work Location	.949	.164	.268	-.025
Interest in Entering the Gig Economy	.839	-.035	-.532	.001
Variety of skills and services.	-.052	.986	.119	-.007
Meeting New People	.459	.246	.844	-.033
Peer Influence	-.003	-.121	-.313	.833
Family Encouragement	-.038	.098	.233	.880
Gig Job Trends	.267	.950	-.085	-.007
Technological Advancements	-.052	.986	.119	-.007
Not Constrained by Education Level	.979	.236	.189	-.007
Difficulty Finding Permanent Jobs	.216	.585	-.555	.024

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

5.0 Discussion

Our study examined the profiles and motivations of Malaysian youth in the gig economy, revealing two key findings. First, the majority are young males aged 19–24 with tertiary education, working full-time in delivery and logistics. This aligns with the MyDigital (2024) report, which shows that individuals under 24 are most active in ride-hailing and delivery services. Similarly, the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2023) notes that 97.71% of ride-hailing workers are youth earning RM1,500–2,500 monthly, with most relying on this as their primary income. The appeal lies in low entry barriers, requiring only a motorcycle and smartphone, and flexible hours, making gig work a practical alternative to scarce formal jobs, particularly for humanities and social science graduates who face high rates of underemployment (Siti Nur Aisyah et al., 2023). Second, the results demonstrate that the strongest motivations for youth engagement in the gig economy are linked to flexibility, autonomy, and inclusivity. Factors such as freedom to choose working hours and locations, not being constrained by education level, and strong personal interest in gig work show that young people view the sector as an opportunity to exercise agency in navigating uncertain labour markets. This reflects what De Stefano (2016) calls the empowerment potential of platform work, where workers choose tasks and set schedules in contrast to rigid conventional employment. While youth demonstrate agency in choosing gig work, their decisions are not made in isolation from structural conditions, particularly social and experiential appeal, as well as technological accessibility. The chance to meet new people ($M = 4.91$) reflects Malaysia's collectivist culture, where social interaction is integral to well-being. Gig platforms offer youth not just financial income but also opportunities to connect with others, build networks, and foster community (Karlsson & Wranne, 2019). Similarly, the variety of skills and services ($M = 4.68$) illustrates how gig work allows youth to diversify their competencies and income sources, enabling them to adapt to shifting labour demands. Finally, technological advancements ($M = 4.68$) have lowered barriers to entry, with smartphones, internet access, and platforms such as *Grab*, *Foodpanda*, *Shopee*, and *TikTok Shop* normalising gig work as a legitimate employment option (Farah Diba et al., 2025). The findings also demonstrate the cultural resonance of gig work. The popularity of gig job trends and the normalisation of platform work underscore the extent to which gig work has become embedded in youth culture, associated with independence, entrepreneurship, and social mobility. Yet, alongside these opportunities, gig work exposes youth to precarity. The absence of benefits, income instability, and limited career progression mean that autonomy and social appeal coexist with significant vulnerabilities. This reflects ongoing debates in youth studies about the tension between agency and structure: while gig work enables young people to navigate uncertainty with confidence, their autonomy is undermined by fragile protections and weak labour frameworks (Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016; Healy et al., 2017).

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

This study demonstrates that Malaysian youth are strongly motivated to participate in the gig economy due to its flexibility, autonomy, and inclusivity, supported by digital platforms and opportunities for social engagement. However, these attractions are tempered by vulnerabilities such as income instability, lack of social protection, and limited career pathways. Youth are, therefore, motivated but vulnerable. They embrace gig work as a form of agency in navigating uncertain labor markets, yet remain exposed to precarious and insecure conditions. Several key recommendations emerge from the findings. First, future research should extend beyond urban centers such as Kuala Lumpur and incorporate rural and semi-urban contexts to capture more diverse youth experiences. Mixed-method designs, combining surveys with in-depth interviews, would also allow for a deeper understanding of youth agency, coping strategies, and long-term career trajectories within the gig economy. Second, policy interventions are urgently required to balance empowerment with protection. Social safety nets should be strengthened by extending mechanisms such as Employees Provident Fund (EPF)

contributions, health insurance, and accident coverage to gig workers. These measures would reduce economic vulnerability while recognizing gig work as a legitimate form of employment. Third, capacity-building initiatives should be prioritized. Training, upskilling, and certification programs can enable youth to transform gig work from short-term income generation into more sustainable and progressive career pathways. Taken together, these recommendations suggest that, with appropriate institutional support and regulation, the gig economy can move beyond a strategy of short-term survival to become a more sustainable contributor to youth development and national economic growth.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper advances the field of youth studies and labor research by providing empirical evidence on the demographic and motivational profiles of Malaysian youth gig workers, a topic that remains underexplored in the local context.

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