

# Malaysian University Students' Understanding and Perceptions of the Gig Economy

Yosuke Uchiyama,<sup>a</sup> Siti Aminah Omar,<sup>b</sup> Fumitaka Furuoka,<sup>c</sup> Larisa Nikitina,<sup>d</sup> Khairul Hanim Pazim,<sup>e</sup> and Beatrice Lim<sup>f</sup>

**Abstract:** *Due to the development of digital technology and the diversification of working styles in the wake of the recession and pandemic, the demand for flexible task-based gig work is increasing in Malaysia. However, university students tend to be reluctant to enter the gig economy, preferring conservative full-time jobs. Knowledge of how well the younger generation understands and perceives the gig economy is lacking. Based on this gap, this paper investigates Malaysian students' understanding of and interest in the gig economy. Primary data collected through focus group interviews with five labour economics students were analysed using thematic analysis. The results revealed eight subtopics and three main themes, namely: (1) flexible and competitive open market, (2) recognition as a 'freelance gig', and (3) nature of labour diversification. Among practical implications, this study highlights the need for educators, policymakers and business entities to expand young people's knowledge and understanding of new economic realities, of which the gig economy and gig work are part.*

**Keywords:** Gig economy; Malaysia; Online platform; Youth; Flexibility

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<sup>a</sup> Corresponding author. Department of East Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Email: [yosuke@um.edu.my](mailto:yosuke@um.edu.my). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9522-3706>

<sup>b</sup> Department of East Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Email: [sitiaminah97@siswa.um.edu.my](mailto:sitiaminah97@siswa.um.edu.my)

<sup>c</sup> Asia-Europe Institute, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Email: [fumitaka@um.edu.my](mailto:fumitaka@um.edu.my). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1863-387X>

<sup>d</sup> Department of Asian and European Languages, Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Email: [larisa@um.edu.my](mailto:larisa@um.edu.my). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6061-5360>

<sup>e</sup> Faculty of Business, Economics and Accountancy, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Sabah, Malaysia. E-mail: [k\\_hanim@ums.edu.my](mailto:k_hanim@ums.edu.my). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0720-3524>

<sup>f</sup> Faculty of Business, Economics and Accountancy, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Sabah, Malaysia. E-mail: [beatrice@ums.edu.my](mailto:beatrice@ums.edu.my). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6201-813X>

## 1. Introduction

Technology development has facilitated the creation of various online platforms, bringing diversity to the ways people work (Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017). The shift away from long-term employment in a firm and towards flexible task-based working styles, such as freelancers and independent contractors (Friedman, 2014), has been influencing the global economy and marked the advent of the gig economy. In Malaysia, the gig economy has an increasingly important position within the national economy. According to the World Bank, about 26% of the Malaysian workforce is engaged in the gig economy sector (BNM, 2020). Moreover, under the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint, the government has identified improving access to gig work through social protection and education of the right skills for gig workers as part of the national economic strategy (EPU, 2021).

At the same time, there has been a discrepancy between the growth of the gig economy in recent decades and the institutional design to accommodate it (Koutsimpogiorgos et al., 2020). This has led to problems between gig workers and existing institutions. The proper labour classification of gig workers needs to be linked to all aspects of their lives, including social protection, benefits and minimum wages (Stewart & Stanford, 2017). This poses practical challenges and requires a proactive response from policymakers and businesses, particularly in how gig work is defined and framed.

Another pertinent issue is how the gig economy can embrace future generations and ensure sustainable economic growth. In 2018, there were 218 types of gig work in Malaysia offering flexible working hours and locations, with or without the introduction of digital apps (Harun et al., 2020). As unemployment in Malaysia increased due to the Covid-19 pandemic, gig work, such as food delivery and e-hailing, became a viable work and income generation option for Malaysians (Lim, 2021). However, university students tend to be reluctant to engage in gig work. Abd Rahman et al. (2020) reports that nine out of ten Malacca university graduates who had been out of work for more than a year after graduation were not interested in a career as a gig worker. The students sought jobs in the private sector, and only three of them had experience participating in the skills-based gig economy. This points to the need for curriculum review so that students receive some practical and experiential knowledge of gig work.

In Malaysia, the Skills Mismatch Index more than doubled between 2007 and 2017 (Said et al., 2021). This phenomenon, combined with the massive economic disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, may make it more difficult for fresh graduates to find jobs. Alternative modes of employment, such as the option of having gig work, could ease the financial strains caused by being jobless. Gig work does expand fresh graduates' job and income-generation options. However, a skills mismatch, negative perceptions and a lack of proper regulations and policies hinder the attractiveness of gig work (Monogaran & Subramaniam, 2023). There is a dearth of available research studies on Malaysian students' knowledge and perceptions of the gig economy. To address this lack of knowledge, this article seeks answers to two research questions: How well do Malaysian university students understand the gig economy? What are the students' perceptions of the gig economy?

This study was conducted among students majoring in human resources economics (labour economics) at the Faculty of Business, Economics, and Accountancy, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). The rationale for selecting this group of students is that they are well-positioned to offer insights on the subject of interest and their responses can serve as preliminary indicators of gig work desirability among university students. This article hopes to provide meaningful academic and practical insights on the issues raised in this introductory section. From a scholarly perspective, this one-of-a-kind study focuses on the potential future participants in the Malaysian gig economy. It examines Malaysian university students' understanding and perceptions of gig work. Practically, the study hopes to suggest concrete measures to raise awareness of the gig economy among young people.

This article is structured as follows. The next section offers a literature review on the classification of gig work and the gig economy in Malaysia. The research methodology is described in Section 3, which is followed by a report of the main findings in Section 4 and discussion in Section 5. The article concludes with a summary of the findings, a discussion of study limitations and suggestions for future research in Section 6.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 *Gig work*

The definition of gig work has been debated by various scholars and the range of definitions tends to be dispersed. Watson et al. (2021) point out that there are features common to all gig work (temporary features) and those common to specific gig work (secondary features). The primary characteristic is short-term task-based flexible work intermediated by the online platform (Kuhn & Galloway, 2019). The flexibility includes various aspects such as time, schedule, geographical places, and legal bindings (Anwar & Graham, 2021; Collier et al., 2017). From the platform's perspective, this can be seen as employment, that is, as an independent contractor or self-employment with reduced labour costs (Kaine & Josserand, 2019). In terms of secondary features, the dimensions covered by the gig economy mainly divide into crowdwork and on-demand app work (De Stefano, 2015). Crowdwork refers to crowdsourcing, which connects many crowdworkers with clients such as firms, organisations, and individuals through online platforms. On-demand app work is characterised by managing traditional labour activities, including travelling, cleaning and administrative tasks through apps, and matching gig workers with users (De Stefano, 2015). These forms of labour can be easily distinguished by how they deliver performance. Crowdwork is a job style carried out remotely, using virtual online platforms to connect workers across the globe, whereas on-demand app work involves local offline work in the real world (Aloisi, 2015; De Groen et al., 2016).

Both crowdwork and on-demand app work vary from low- to high-skilled. Regarding crowdwork, these include high-skilled options like Upwork (academic literature review) and CoContest (interior design), and low-skilled microtasks such as review checking; on-demand app labour, meanwhile, is predominantly characterised by many low-skilled tasks, such as delivery, taxi and babysitting (De Groen et al., 2016). However, high-skilled gig workers may find it easier to find work beyond the gig framework than low-skilled gig workers due to their proactive psychological availability (Kost et al., 2020). Minter (2017) mentions some common characteristics of gig work: the presence of intermediary digital platforms that indirectly match gig workers and customers (Duggan et al., 2020); continued task-based

work with no guarantee of a permanent job; tasks assigned and paid for by the end-user; transactions managed by the platform company through the application; the price of the task set by the firm; the worker being considered an independent contractor by the platform; and the worker's remuneration being subtracted from the platform's margin (Minter, 2017).

At first glance, gig work appears to be building a digital labour market that accommodates flexible working relationships for both workers and employers (Koutsimpogiorgos et al., 2020). Koutsimpogiorgos et al. (2020) also highlight that a common consensus on the gig economy is not clearly defined. This ambiguity may blur the position of gig workers and accelerate the lack of social security and benefits. Furthermore, gig workers provide some or all the capital equipment directly used in their work, along with irregular working arrangements. Payment is on a task basis, and a pay-per-unit-hour system is not guaranteed (Stewart & Stanford, 2017). At the same time, as a new way of generating a capitalist value surplus, gig work has undoubtedly become people's go-to source for supplementary income, that is, income aside from their primary income (Howcroft & Bergvall-Kareborn, 2019).

The system of digital technology in modern society places more value weight on capital than on workers, where firms with capitalist elements create profits from workers' labour (Spencer, 2017). Furthermore, Spencer (2017) points to collective ownership by workers of the output as well as state regulation and the creation of new rights regarding workers' benefits under the gig economy. Commons-like thinking, where workers own and manage platforms on behalf of platform firms, may be a new way for society to reap the benefits of digital technologies. This movement may also potentially change the existing taxonomies of gig work significantly.

## **2.2 *Gig economy in Malaysia***

Malaysia has a national strategy for economic growth through the promotion of digital labour, as symbolised by the Digital Malaysia Strategy 2012 and the 12th Malaysia Plan (12MP) from 2021 to 2025 (Graham et al., 2017; Uchiyama et al., 2022a). These strategies include the provision of micro-work and task-based jobs for the B40 group or those with income in the bottom 40% (Abdul Rahim et al., 2021; Harun et al., 2020), as well as the provision of skills training for freelance job opportunities. In this context,

task-based and flexible gig work is a significant component of the national strategy.

The academic view of the gig economy in Malaysia tends to perceive it as a countermeasure approach to unemployment. According to Said et al. (2021), the job mismatch index in Malaysia increased from 0.108 in 2007 to 0.273 in 2017. The idea of the gig economy before the Covid-19 pandemic symbolises increased value added to the labour market through learning new skills. Since 2019, the Covid-19 trend has led to a rise in unemployment in Malaysia, particularly in areas dependent on the travel and tourism industry (Nga et al., 2021). It has also reduced employment opportunities and unemployment for youth and women in the professional sector. The popularity of the gig economy increased as a way of alleviating this situation, and the number of e-hailing and online food delivery workers increased. However, the impression of gig work among Malaysian university graduates as the future working style remains low. Abd Rahman et al. (2020) conducted interviews with graduates who had been unemployed for more than a year after graduation on their employment options. Their findings reveal that students tend to choose jobs in the public and private sectors, with fewer opting for positions such as skill-based freelance gigs. This may indirectly suggest that gig economy education in higher education is not widespread.

Recently, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) was entrusted with training Bumiputera undergraduates and graduates to include specific theoretical and practical components of the gig economy into the teaching and learning process, notably in undergraduate and graduate syllabuses (Kassim et al., 2020). Although the authors recommend that gig economy teaching and learning be integrated into tertiary education, they add that more emphasis is required to ensure that students comprehend what the gig economy is and make it a reality in their daily lives. Likewise, job markets are changing too due to the emergence of online reputations and competency-based credentials, and graduates' tendency to compete depends on their degree qualification is gradually decreasing. Therefore, the undergraduate syllabus should include technical and business-like subjects.

Exploring the views of the Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) alumni and current students on the gig economy and their future expectations for the platform economy, Ahmad (2020) concludes that the younger generation is unaware of the changing nature of employment and how

gig jobs may affect the labour market in the future. They also seemed less concerned about their retirement plan. However, joining gig work by working part-time helped some of these students to get much needed income during the pandemic. The benefits equivalent to those offered to employees in permanent positions would keep gig workers in the sector and help the economy grow at the targeted rate (Ahmad, 2020). Considering this study is narrowly focused on examining the future direction of the gig economy, data obtained from students' perspectives helped provide a better understanding of how this new economy post-Covid-19 will be organised in the future by offering suggestions to the gig economy's key players. However, there is currently little understanding of the connotation of the gig economy among youths.

Another noteworthy point is that the current Malaysian legal system does not fully protect gig workers in their employment relationship with online platform firms. Under the Employment Act 1955, gig workers are classified as independent contractors, which also does not create rights and obligations between employees and firms (Jemon et al., 2021; Uchiyama et al., 2022a). Therefore, gig workers tend to be in a weaker relative position as they cannot obtain social protection or benefits from the firm. As many gig workers regard themselves as independent contractors or business owners, this may impact their rights to represent themselves when they encounter disputes or disagreements with service providers if they happen to seek aid from Malaysia's trade unions later (Radzi et al., 2022). The most well-known service providers in Malaysia are e-hailing platform workers from Grab and Foodpanda, each with over 10,000 riders in the Klang Valley (Salleh, 2019). On the contrary, Radzi et al. (2022) point out that the non-existence of worker's trade unions, such as gig workers' associations, might lead to the exploitation of the workers. For instance, if a genuine contractual bargain between parties is not disclosed to the workers, issues related to the interest of gig workers might be neglected.

Currently, third-party organisations such as the Social Security Organisation of Malaysia (Socso) are responsible for protecting gig workers. Under Socso, the Self-Employment Social Security Scheme Act (SESSS) provides social protection services to gig workers and self-employed individuals and gig workers engaged in e-hailing and online food delivery sectors (Jemon et al., 2021). However, such systems do not lead to social protection for government and business-led gig workers. They may lead to

the continued exploitation of gig workers in businesses (Uchiyama et al., 2022a). To change the situation, active social position of gig workers, such as establishing active trade unions and using collective bargaining against firms, is becoming increasingly important (Uchiyama et al., 2022b).

### **3. Data Collection and Analysis**

This study adopts a qualitative approach to gain deeper insights into the understanding of the gig economy among Malaysian university students. As the gig economy and gig work are becoming ubiquitous but still relatively new modes of working life, one of this study's aims is to explore perceptions or 'social representations' of these phenomena among Malaysian university students. Social representations as defined by Moscovici (1973, in Sammut et al., 2015) refer to collectively shared "systems of values, ideas and practices." Particularly, social representations appear and evolve when people and societies strive to understand new and unfamiliar phenomena, such as the gig economy and gig work, and to achieve socially shared perceptions of reality. Recognising that perceptions of social reality are held at the individual level and shared collectively, focus group interviews were deemed the most appropriate way to collect the data for this study.

The focus group interviews were conducted with students at the UMS. The research team targeted students with some understanding of the economic phenomena. UMS is one of the few universities in Malaysia that offers a Human Resources Economics (Labour Economics) programme, of which the gig economy is a part. The target group for the focus interviews was students at the Faculty of Business, Economics and Accountancy, UMS, who were taking courses in human resources economics. The focus group interviews allow for the collection of rich and diverse data generated by the social interaction of the group in a short time (Rabiee, 2004). It is necessary to facilitate in-depth discussion through the active participation of all participants by asking logical open-ended questions (Parker & Tritter, 2006). This in-depth discussion yields more meaningful and rich data than one-on-one in-depth interviews. Although there is no consensus on the most appropriate sample size for focus groups, the number of participants generally ranges from four to 20 (McLafferty, 2004).

Students were invited to take part in the study through social media groups within the faculty. Five participants were eventually recruited through



snowball sampling. The interview was conducted in a meeting room in the Faculty of Business, Economics and Accountancy at UMS. Nine people convened, four of whom were researchers and interpreters, and five students.

Two themes were discussed during the focus group interview, namely: (1) connotations of the gig economy (working style, types of gig work, and types of employment), and (2) impressions about the gig economy (impressions, education in the school, attraction, concerns, and interests to join the sector). Interview questions on each topic were prepared in advance to facilitate the focus group discussions. Table 1 shows the interview protocol questions.

**Table 1:** Interview Protocol

Theme	Question	Descriptions
Connotations of the gig economy	Q1	Do you know the meaning of the gig economy?
	Q2	Do you know the feature of the gig economy?
	Q3	Do you know the gig work style?
	Q4	Do you know the types of gig work?
	Q5	Do you know the types of employment?
	Q6	Do you know the difference between traditional work and gig work?
Impression of the gig economy	Q7	What is your impression when you hear the word 'gig economy'?
	Q8	Have you learned about the gig economy at the university?
	Q9	Are you attracted to the gig economy?
	Q10	Do you have any concerns about the gig economy?
	Q11	Do you think gig workers can receive enough money to live?
	Q12	Do you think gig work is stable?
	Q13	Do you think gig work is decent work?
	Q14	Do you have any interest to join the sector?

Upon receiving the participants' permission, the interview was recorded. The researchers also took notes throughout the interview to facilitate data collection. This interview was conducted in English and Malay. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allows for the identification of patterns in the data from detailed descriptions of small amounts of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Douglas et al., 2009). Table 2 details the steps in the analytical procedure.

**Table 2:** Thematic Analysis Process

Step	Descriptions
Data familiarisation	Produced English scripts from the data recorded in English and Malay. The textual data were read and re-read many times, together with the notes taken during the interview
Generating initial codes	Coding and labelling were performed to identify distinctive parts of the data
Theme search	Created themes to answer research questions based on the patterns in the codes.
Review potential themes	Examined the validity of the relationship between the themes and data. Scrutinised and deconstructed the codes; some codes were reallocated in another theme
Determination and naming of themes	Determined themes within a coherent scope. Established sub-themes where appropriate
Producing the thematic map	Generated convincing and consistent results from the data

Source: Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006).

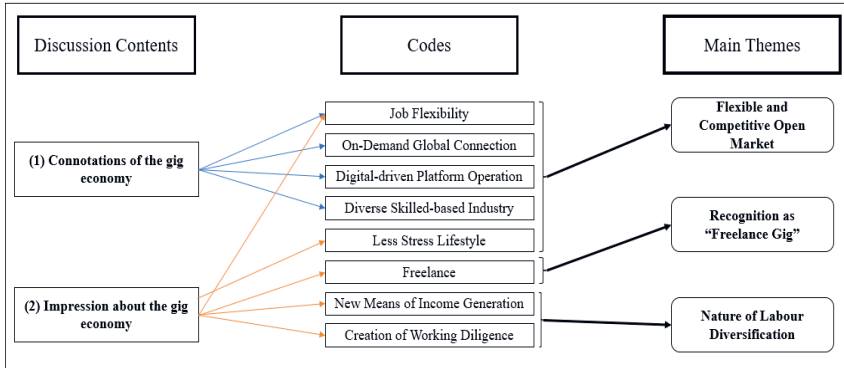
To give further details, first of all, the researchers created English language scripts from the data recorded in English and Malay. The translation was done by bilingual speakers for whom Malay is the mother tongue. Secondly, coding and labelling were carried out to produce initial codes for the data. To increase reliability in identifying distinctive patterns in the data, recording was done (Coyle & Lyons, 2021). Thirdly, we looked for themes in the patterns of the generated codes to answer the research questions. In the fourth step, some of the codes were either discarded or reassigned to other themes, which boosted the validity of the interpretative step. Fifthly, the main themes were determined, and appropriate sub-themes were established. Lastly, we created thematic maps to ensure that the analytical process yields compelling and consistent results.

#### 4. Empirical Findings

The thematic analysis in this study allowed for gaining a more profound insight into the implications, impressions and attractors of the gig economy among Malaysian university students. Five main themes were identified, namely: flexible and competitive open market, recognition as a ‘freelance gig’, nature of labour diversification, differentiation from existing labour and protection, and diverse educational opportunities. Figure 1 is a thematic

map showing the process by which 12 codes were extracted from the focus group interview questions, consisting of three sections. These codes were then dragged into five themes through a review and theme naming process.

Figure 1: Thematic Map



#### 4.1 Flexible and competitive open market

All respondents commonly identified the gig economy as a market offering flexible work. The term adjustable specifically included a place to work (S-3), time (S-1), low barriers to entry (S-4) and temporary employment (S-3, S-5). Some consider this flexibility a part-time function, and others think it is less of a priority than full-time. As the reason why there are no more extended restrictions on where and when to work, S-1 pointed out that “most work in the gig economy is digitally based.” This digitisation of work connects people worldwide through online platforms (S-2). Furthermore, students understood the following characteristics of the gig economy business model.

*For me, the gig economy is a free market without being bound by any contract. The gig economy is good for companies that do not need to spend the higher cost to hire permanent workers. For example, Foodpanda and Grab have a lot of workers, but they do not need big companies to accommodate the workers, and they can work from home. The companies won't have to rent an office, and the workers are not bound by any contract where the working hours are flexible and can do various work at once. (S-3)*

Due to the above feature, online platforms offer high returns at a low cost. These large digital markets are positioned as diverse skill-based industries, encompassing many workforces, from low-skilled to highly skilled workers. A high level of education is not necessary. You can join the industry if you have a device that can connect to the internet. It allows people to learn new skills and explore more advanced skills through their labour as gig workers.

*It does not require a permanent qualification or certificate to venture into the gig economy industry. For example, Foodpanda riders only need to know the application and the gadget, and no need to attend difficult tests before becoming riders. Also, you do not need to be highly educated to enter the gig economy. You can join the gig economy if you own a device with internet access. The gig economy also allows us to educate ourselves and explore different skills. (S-4)*

In other words, it combines a custom element with the ability to realise a worker's ideal work style depending on their efforts. It is an effort-based source of income, as opposed to the traditional fixed salary system, where the more skills you develop, and the more you work, the higher salary you can expect. As a result, this flexibility can contribute to "a less stressful lifestyle" (S-1).

#### **4.2 Recognition as 'freelance gig'**

Most students identified employment under the gig economy as a freelance. In the interview, they came up with several types of gig work such as graphic design, tutors (S-1), ghost-writers, content creators (S-2), copywriters and accountants (S-3). In terms of employment and types of gig work, they tended to envisage freelance digital work, with on-demand application-based gig O2O (online to offline) services, such as e-hailing and online food delivery not mentioned despite being particularly prevalent types in Malaysia. In terms of perceptions of gig work types, students thought of skills-based freelance jobs. On the other hand, when it comes to the business model of the gig economy, they tend to think of O2O-based operations. One corollary to this reason is that on-demand app labour, mainly e-hailing and p-hailing, is more prevalent in Malaysia than online crowd work so they may have some understanding of that business model. However, from a

terminological and employment perspective, students learn and input into the composition of 'gig work = freelance'. This difference between the practical and educational aspects may create nuanced differences.

#### 4.3 Nature of labour diversification

Students see the rise of this gig economy as a diversification of labour options in Malaysia. Gig work has had a significant impact on students and fresh graduates, the working generation and those affected by Covid-19. Many recent new graduates have avoided highly competitive full-time jobs by having two options: full-time and gig work. The outbreak of Covid-19 forced many businesses to close, leading to increased unemployment. Gig work served as a new alternative and relatively stable source of income for the unemployed. At the same time, financial concerns about the rising cost of living can also motivate people to join the gig economy in the future (S-3).

*The gig economy diversifies the available jobs in Malaysia, many students who graduated now have other options to opt for gig work rather than stressing over finding full-time working hours. So, the gig economy has made it easier as there won't be a lot of competition to secure one job. (S-1)*

*Before Covid-19 affected our life, we didn't give too much attention to this sector. However, after Covid-19, many businesses were shut down, full-time workers lost their jobs, and they considered gig work an alternative way to earn income. Thus, gig work is good because even during Covid-19, they provided opportunities to get better income during difficult times, especially during the lockdown. (S-4)*

In addition, the gig economy's diversity in exploring different skills was a significant factor in attracting students. It is supported by the tendency for students to view gig work as a skill-based freelance job, as discussed above. They can develop specific skills, including soft skills, learning new marketing strategies and the ability to communicate with different types of people. Moreover, S-3 noted that,

*As a freelancer, I need to have an attractive appearance and that crowdwork requires people to develop their software skills. S-2 stated that I need to gain a lot of experience and make new contacts through gig work. Finally, I can be a leader and not blame others if I fail.*

Overall, students were optimistic about entering an environment where they could improve their skills. Interestingly, students experiencing gig work were not working as skill-based freelancers, which was the factor that triggered them. They worked as low skill-based offline service workers with relatively low barriers to entry on an O2O basis, working like part-timers for short periods. Both had favourable impressions of this type of gig work.

*I worked as a food delivery rider before during semester break, and I could say I learned a lot of things. For example, I must have had good patience and good communication. Heavy rain made it hard for me, and some customers even spoke Chinese, so I needed good communication skills. (S-2)*

*I used to work as a part-timer in an online shopping business. I joined this job on weekends as the business owner needed a lot of gig workers to pack packages. Although I didn't do it, I also worked as a personal shopper and in other jobs where I travelled overseas to take orders. Through this experience, my impression of the gig economy is positive rather than negative. (S-5)*

On the other hand, S-1 points to the stability of internet connectivity as a concern in the spread of gig work. In Sabah, gig work such as food delivery only occurs in urban centres, whilst food delivery services are less common in rural areas due to internet connection problems.

The quality of the local internet connection also determines whether gig work can be carried out in the place. Unlike crowd work, which can be done online and with Wi-Fi at home, food delivery riders may have to go to areas with poor reception for delivery. Based on the opinion of S-1, an improved internet environment in O2O services can potentially induce the spread of rural populations to the low-entry barrier job such as the online food delivery sector.

## 5. Discussion

This study aims to identify Malaysian university students' understanding and impressions of the gig economy. The empirical findings reveal that Malaysian students studying human resource economics (labour economics) in Sabah have a very rich and insightful knowledge and a strong interest in the gig economy. Interestingly, this study provides different and deeper insights from what Abd Rahman et al. (2020) finds on students' unfavourable perceptions of and work options in the gig economy. The findings characterised five main themes from thematic analysis and eight insightful codes supporting them. Their impression of the term 'gig economy' is epitomised by the word 'flexibility', which is perceived to have created a vaster, global, and diverse task-based market driven by digitalisation. This extensive market has lowered the barriers to entry and exit and has successfully attracted people from different backgrounds. The global impact of Covid-19 has mainly been reflected within Malaysia, where gig work has become a catchment area for those who have lost their full-time jobs and for fresh graduates who find it challenging to find work.

On the one hand, students saw 'gigs' as a more competitive and skill-intensive freelance and crowd-working jobs. It is important to emphasise here that there is a discrepancy between their knowledge of gigs as students and the level of awareness of the on-demand gigs (e-hailing and online food delivery) characteristic of Malaysia. It can be seen from the fact that subsections 4.1 and 4.2 above (flexible and competitive open market, recognition as a 'freelance gig') emphasise freelance and crowdwork (fully online), whereas 4.3 (nature of labour diversification) mentions O2O. This is due to the hybrid knowledge acquisition of students. At university, students learn the gig economy from the viewpoint of more skill-based freelance work. In daily life, contact with on-demand app-based gig workers and work experience gave them a direct sense of their problems. The study deliberately selected students with a certain level of knowledge about the gig economy to benchmark their understanding and impressions. The results provide new insight into how they absorb their knowledge of the gig economy for further dissemination. It would apply to all Malaysian students and all students, especially those from Asean countries in similar circumstances.

On the other hand, new challenges have arisen in terms of how to disseminate the potential of gig work to students studying other majors

and educational settings. Caza (2020) states that the gig economy would have new implications for management education, including for students, faculties, and institutions. By targeting those studying human resources economics, the present study finds that they have a certain understanding of the gig economy. This means that a basic understanding of the gig economy can be provided through education. At the same time, educators need to prepare students for the gig economy. However, the gap between the ideal and reality that exists here is that graduates tend to be engaged in traditional labour rather than entering the gig economy, and current students with an understanding of the gig economy are also reluctant to enter it. This implies difficulties in the inclusion of the gig economy sector in the curriculum. In fact, while several educators are familiar with the gig economy, it is unclear how this is reflected in the education of their students. As Caza (2020) highlights, few current teachers (permanent staff) may have experienced gig work, whereas part-time university lecturers may be familiar with it. Thus, educators may be able to acquire new practical insights from their immediate community.

In addition, both students and educators need to be keenly aware that education no longer provides job security in the form of formal employment (Churchill et al., 2019). Churchill et al. (2019) state that graduates with a Bachelor's degree or VET (vocational education and training) tend to have a relatively low probability of finding a job in a specialised field and low job satisfaction rates. Finally, it is necessary to consider how organisations and educational institutions, including universities, could be transformed in line with the rapidly changing economic realities and the advent of the gig economy. For example, organisations might have to establish stronger links with university career centres and advice on the development of new courses and academic programmes. Business entities might also offer opportunities for on-campus internships as a way of imparting to students practical knowledge and skills that are increasingly relevant in the context of the gig economy.

## **6. Conclusions and Limitations**

This study explores Malaysian university students' understanding and collective perceptions of the gig economy and gig work. While gig work functions as an alternative way of working for people seeking more



flexibility, the attractiveness of this specific career path for the younger generation is less known. The insights obtained from the focus group interview might serve as preliminary indicators of gig work desirability and attractiveness among university students. The findings of this study could be applied to identify socially shared representations of the gig economy among young Malaysians. However, as Koutsimpogiorgos et al. (2020) and Stewart and Stanford (2017) point out, conceptual ambiguity and discrepancies in classifying the gig economy need to be addressed in future studies on young people's opinions about participating in the gig economy.

Despite the e-hailing and online food delivery sectors being the main on-demand gig work options in Malaysia, the university students focused on skill-based gig work related to freelancing and entrepreneurship. Although there were commonalities in their opinions regarding flexibility and competitive markets, the students had gained knowledge about on-demand gig work from various sources as well as from their daily life social interactions. Therefore, universities, education policy makers and business entities might want to seek ways in which university students' understanding and knowledge of new economic realities can be expanded to include educational, practical as well as experiential perspectives. Expansive measures would also be required to make gig work decent work.

There are several limitations to this study. Among them is limited applicability of the findings, as we did not explore the perceptions of the gig economy among young people from a wide range of backgrounds. The study's target audience was students at a higher education institution. Furthermore, the students in the focus group already had knowledge of the gig economy, and for this reason the findings may not be generalisable to all university students. It also should be noted that the data were only collected in Sabah, as the study aims to explore the perceptions of human resources economics students who have a general knowledge of gig work. The prevalence of gig work and the working conditions of gig workers differ between the Peninsular and East Malaysia. Therefore, future studies need to expand the research scope and explore representations of the gig economy and gig work among various strata of youth in Malaysia. Despite these limitations, this research endeavour has provided some notable insights and highlighted gaps in the students' knowledge and understanding of gig work.

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