

Psychological Well-being of Gig Workers: A Preliminary Study

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Abstract

Purpose: The present study aims to explore the predictors of the psychological well-being of the gig workers in Malaysia.

Design/methodology/approach: Data were collected via an online questionnaire from 30 respondents through snowball sampling.

Findings: The result shows low income is the main predictor of psychological well-being, followed by less social support from parents and friends.

Research limitations/implications: Due to the limited responses used in this preliminary study, future research should include more gig workers from different work prospects to increase the generalisation of the study.

Practical implications: This study provides the information of the predictors of psychological well-being of gig workers. Malaysia government, society, and organisations also understand the psychological well-being of gig workers.

Originality/value: Based on the results, this study identifies several predictors of psychological well-being of gig workers.

Keywords: Psychological well-being (PWB), Gig economy, Gig work, Gig worker, Income

1. Introduction

The term "gig economy" describes a type of work arrangement that allows for a more fluid and adaptable schedule, enabled by the use of digital platforms that connect freelancers, clients, and companies directly (Mohamed Jaafar & Nik Mat 2021). The concept of a "gig" originated in the 1920s during the height of jazz music's popularity in the United States,

where musicians often had flexible work schedules but lacked traditional employment benefits. Fast forward to the 1990s and the growth of the digital age, and the gig economy began to rapidly expand (Whitehead, 2019). Today, the gig economy is a prominent topic in discussions about current work patterns, as highlighted in recent independent reviews. Grab, Uber, and Foodpanda are examples of popular applications within the gig economy. The widespread usage of the internet and smartphone link the online users from different nations. This enables businesses to interact with employees remotely on digital platforms and communicate their talent requirements (Healy et al., 2017).

The gig economy in Malaysia offers a wide variety of job opportunities, and the population of gig workers is steadily expanding. According to statistics from the Social Security Organization (SOCSO), as of September 24, there were 194,800 people registered under SPS Lindung and 13,333 self-employed workers under the Penjana Gig program (Daim, 2021). Moreover, the number is anticipated to grow as gig work becomes more appealing as a result of the expansion of internet platforms, particularly following the Covid-19 outbreak (Daim, 2021). Many people involve in start-ups and e-hailing and it starts to dominate the gig economy. Grab Malaysia now has more than 10,000 food delivery riders and e-hailing drivers (Supramani, 2021).

Although gig work provides flexibility, it also introduces complexity to the gig economy. There are various concealed adverse effects of the gig economy concerning the mental health and general welfare of workers. Gig workers encounter numerous challenges. For instance, they often experience higher rates of depression compared to traditional employees due to the unstable nature of their income (Berger et al., 2019). Thus, it is important to view the future of work from well-being perspective instead of employment law or economic perspective only (Gross et al., 2018).

One of the crucial concepts in positive psychology, organizational behavior, and human resources is psychological well-being (PWB). The gig economy has a significant impact not only on the earnings of workers but also on their general health and well-being. Several other countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, France, China, and India, have investigated the well-being of gig workers (Aboobaker et al., 2021; Apouey et al., 2020; Berger et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the PWB of gig workers in Malaysia has not been extensively researched. Previous studies mainly focused on legislation issues of gig workers (Radzi et al., 2022; Uchiyama et al., 2022) and the labour workforce of gig workers (Ahmad, 2021; Harun et al., 2020; Rahim et al., 2021). Therefore, the objective of this study is to investigate the factors that contribute to PWB among gig workers in Malaysia, with the ultimate aim of improving the well-being of individuals employed in the gig economy.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Gig Worker

For a long time, full-time employment has been the norm, but with the annual growth of the workforce, digitalization, and recent economic downturns, many job seekers are struggling to secure permanent positions (Manyika et al., 2016). As a result of the scarcity of permanent job opportunities, individuals are being pushed towards taking on contractual assignments as independent workers, who are commonly known as "independent workers," "freelancers," or "gig workers." Europe and North America have approximately 150 million gig workers (Mohd Dahlan, 2020). Based on the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) data, the gig economy contributed 18.5% of Malaysia's GDP in 2018 (Supramani, 2021). The Employees Provident Fund (EPF) study conducted in 2019 predicted double the global

average, approximately 40% of Malaysians are expected to join the gig economy within the next five years (Yatim, 2021). As of 2021, approximately 26% of the Malaysian workforce, which is equivalent to four million people, were working as full-time gig workers (Supramani, 2021).

Many people begin to involve in gig economy to enhance their earnings (Joelle, 2022). By having gig works, the gig workers can have more than one work to earn extra money instead of just having one job and get mandatory monthly salary. Besides monetary compensation, many workers choose to have gig works because of the flexibility of job and they have more autonomy to control their working hours. In a survey conducted by the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) on Malaysian gig workers, the primary factors for joining in the gig economy were flexible hours and earning an additional income (Yatim, 2021). Furthermore, gig work can help individuals achieve a better work-life balance, which can lead to enhanced overall well-being.

Despite this, gig workers face significant time constraints and workload as they are compensated only upon the completion of their services (Christie & Ward, 2019). The amount they earn is directly linked to the number of orders they complete. In addition, two-thirds of the total 2,576 road deaths during the Movement Control Order (MCO) including p-hailing riders (Abdullah, 2021). Moreover, the benefits and working environment provided to gig workers are considered as poor compared to permanent workers. For instance, low-paid self-employed in United Kingdom workers may get housing benefits and working tax credits as their benefits to encourage work (Hutton, 2016). On the other hand, high-paid self-employed workers may find it is hard to obtain financial references and/or statement to rent, mortgage or apply loan. Since gig economy is a new trend, it is important to look into the well-being of gig workers.

2.2 Psychological Well-being

Well-being as per Ryff (1995) is pursuit of goals that lead to the achievement of one's actual potential, rather than just obtaining pleasure. There are various well-being concepts but the two major approaches to conceptualising well-being are hedonic well-being (HWB) and eudaimonic well-being (EWB) (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Flourishing refers to the state of having high levels of both HWB and EWB (Huppert, 2009; Huppert & So, 2013; Keyes, 2002). HWB emphasizes a person's emotional and cognitive assessment of their own lives. Flourishing involves experiencing positive emotions frequently, experiencing negative emotions infrequently, and having an overall sense that life is fulfilling. EWB encompasses several ideas. The underlying assumption of this framework is that specific needs or attributes are crucial for an individual's psychological advancement and progress, and by addressing these requirements, one can realize their maximum capabilities (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The EWB tradition is shown in the concept of PWB (Ryff, 1989).

PWB is a significant construct in positive psychology, organizational behavior, and human resources (Joo et al., 2016), as it is considered crucial for personal development and self-realization (Teimouri et al., 2018). PWB involves leading a meaningful and satisfying life (Ryff, 1989) and evaluating one's current situation (Campbell et al., 1976). The concept is intricate and encompasses elevated levels of positive emotions and contentment with one's life. It is linked with the integration of feeling good and performing effectively (Huppert, 2009). While negative emotions such as sadness and disappointment are normal, individuals can learn to manage them effectively to maintain their well-being. However, when negative feelings overwhelm and influence individuals' performing, PWB is compromised (Huppert, 2009).

Ryff & Keyes (1995) stated that PWB differs from subjective well-being and validated the hypothesised theoretical structure of psychological well-multidimensional being's concept.

Ryff (1989) proposed that PWB encompasses six dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Positive relationships with others entail having satisfying, trusting, and affirmative interactions with others. Self-acceptance involves having a positive outlook towards oneself and acknowledging all aspects, whether positive or negative. Positive relations with others involve having enjoyable, trusting, and positive relationships with others. Environmental mastery denotes the capability to adjust to and regulate one's surroundings. The capacity to recognize the direction and purpose of one's life, establish objectives for attainment, and experience a sense of significance is what defines purpose in life. Personal growth entails recognizing one's own competence and constantly striving for self-improvement. Finally, autonomy refers to the ability to maintain one's own beliefs and values independently, even when others may not accept them. Later, Diener et al. (1999) describe PWB as quality of life, subjective well-being, mentality, mood and affect. PWB encompasses various aspects such as social relationships, engagement, and a sense of purpose in life (Diener et al., 2010).

Gig work is often criticized for its potential for surveillance and precariousness, which can result in worsening worker health conditions (Griesbach et al., 2019; Lewchuk, 2017). However, there have been little efforts made to confirm either perspective in relation to the well-being of platform workers (Freni-Sterrantino & Salerno, 2021). While the PWB of platform workers is not well understood, qualitative research on their job quality can provide some insights. Research has indicated that platform workers are at particular risk of stressors, including job insecurity, irregular work hours, and low wages, all of which are widely recognized as factors that can have adverse effects on mental well-being (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Shapiro, 2018).

2.3 Predictors of Psychological Well-being

Generally, higher socioeconomic status and income level are linked to higher levels of well-being and less health problem (Dolan et al., 2008), albeit this impact declines as income levels increases. Income inequality is linked to both psychiatric disorder and well-being. There is a positive correlation between a country's wealth gap and the prevalence of mental disorders (Pickett et al., 2006) and worse well-being levels (Alesina et al., 2004). Financial difficulty can affect one's emotional stability and cause high stress level which result in mental health problem. The condition becomes worse during the pandemic as job opportunities reduce and the challenges grow bigger. Many workers decide to work as food riders to earn money (Harun et al., 2020).

Research has consistently found that positive emotions are strongly linked to higher levels of PWB. The positive emotion emerged as a powerful predictor of subjective well-being in a meta-analysis conducted by Lyubomirsky, King and Diener (2005). Positive emotion expression was found to be associated with higher levels of optimism, life satisfaction, meaning in life, and social well-being (Coffey et al., 2022). In addition, employer change, life satisfaction, and job satisfaction were the strongest predictors of their PWB in a study of audit firm employees (Broberg et al., 2020).

While most studies find that those with greater education levels have better mental health, a few have discovered an inverse association between education and mental health. For instance, Chevalier and Feinstein (2006) stated that high educated men are more prone to experience depression than low educated men. They contend that the connection between

depression and education level is due to the job-related stress where the occupation requires a degree. Hence, improving academic achievement or educational level does not ensure higher level of well-being.

Job autonomy is found to enhance employees' well-being in previous studies (Protta & Thompson, 2006; Saragih et al., 2021). Allowing employees sufficient job autonomy can enable them to effectively carry out their responsibilities by utilizing their skills, knowledge, and capabilities, ultimately leading to improved well-being for the employees (Ghazzawi et al., 2021; Park & Jang, 2015; Park & Searcy, 2012). On the other hand, some studies indicate that certain platform workers experience autonomy and flexibility, which are typically linked to better well-being (Huws et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2019).

Social support is one of the determinants of well-being. The practical and theoretical of PWB, including interpersonal ties and support, demonstrates the importance of investigating the idea of social support in well-being perceptions (Ibarra-Rovillard & Kuiper, 2011). Numerous studies have established a positive correlation between social support and well-being (Mojahed et al., 2019; Wardani et al., 2021), mental health (Khoury et al., 2021), and quality of life (Subramanian et al., 2021). Moreover, the perceived social support from friends and significant others were stronger determinants of PWB in a study in healthcare industry (Mojahed et al., 2019).

Gig workers had lower levels of mental well-being and life contentment compared to full-time and part-time employees, but higher levels compared to those who are jobless (Wang et al., 2022). Understanding the predictors of PWB can help gig workers identify strategies to improve their mental health and well-being. For example, gig workers can focus on building strong social connections, practicing self-care, and seeking out support and resources to help them manage stress and anxiety. Facilitating gig workers' PWB is also a responsibility of policymakers and employers, who can aid by granting access to resources, benefits, and support.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

This preliminary study used cross-sectional design and involved 30 participants who work as gig worker in Malaysia. All respondents are required to complete the online questionnaire.

3.2 Procedures

Online questionnaires were distributed to B40 gig workers through snowball convenience sampling method. We started from contacting the friends who are involve in gig works such as food delivery riders through WhatsApp. Furthermore, we attempted to increase the sample size by asking each of them if they knew anyone else who met the sample criteria (involve in gig works) and could participate in the study. Next, we requested them to send the online questionnaire link to their colleagues or friends that they have identified earlier. Overall, total of 30 responses were collected. The period of data collection started on 29th September 2021 and ended on 3rd October 2021. Participants were given a set of questionnaires which consist of four sections which are informed consent, demographic information, Flourishing scale, and predictors of PWB respectively. The purpose of informed consent procedure is to affirm the participant willingness to participate in this study. The second part is demographic information, including gender, age, marital status, and work position. The third part is the psychological well-being measurement tool which is the adapted Flourishing Scale. It has eight items which describe the significant aspects of human

functioning and eight dimensions. The dimensions of the Flourishing Scale include: purpose and meaning, supportive relationship, engaged, contribute to others, competence, good person, optimistic, and respected. The participants are required to select the options which describe the situation that they experience. The last part which is predictors of psychological well-being, asking participants to state the predictors.

3.3 Measure

The Flourishing Scale by Diener et al. (2010) comprises eight items that measure different areas of human functioning. The scale intends to evaluate positive functioning in various domains that are commonly considered important, producing a single PWB score. The scale has strong psychometric properties and is positively correlated with other scales that measure PWB. Sample items included, “Feel I am not a good person and do not live a good life” and “People disrespect me.”

4. Findings

4.1 Socio-Demographic Characteristic

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the participants in this study.

Table 1: Demographic profile of the respondents

Criteria	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	26	87%
	Female	4	13%
Age Group	20-30	26	87%
	31-40	4	13%
Marital Status	Single	25	83%
	Married	5	17%
	Divorced	0	0%
Work Position	Food delivery rider	24	80%
	Freelancer	3	10%
	E-hailing driver	3	10%

Among the 30 respondents, majority of the respondents are male (87%). Moreover, most of the respondents are between 20 to 30 years old (87%) and single (83%). Furthermore, most of them are food delivery riders (80%).

4.2 Psychological Wellbeing

The results confirmed that the respondents in this study have low level of PWB, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Flourishing Scale

Items	Frequency	Percentage
Lack a sense of purpose and meaning in life	20	15%
Having unsupportive and unrewarding social relationship	14	10%

Are not engaged and interested in daily activities	19	14%
Inactively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others	21	16%
Feel incompetent and incapable in the activities that are important to me	14	10%
Feel I am not a good person and do not live a good life	22	17%
Pessimistic about future	17	13%
People disrespect me	6	5%

The finding shows that 15% of the respondents feel lack a sense of purpose and meaning in life. 10% of the respondents have unsupportive and unrewarding social relationship. 14% of the respondents are not engaged and interested in daily activities. 16% of them inactively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others while 10% of them feel incompetent and incapable in the activities that are important to them. 17% of them feel they are not a good person and do not live a good life. 13% of them are pessimistic about future and 6% of them experience the situation when people disrespect them.

4.3 Predictors of Psychological Well-being

The participants stated the predictors of low PWB and the predictors are listed, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Predictors of Psychological Well-being

Predictors	Frequency	Percentage
Income	16	40%
Parent and friend support	8	20%
Workload	2	5%
Time pressure	4	10%
Respect	2	5%
Work-life imbalance	6	15%
Demotivation	2	5%

Majority of the respondents state the main reason of experiencing low PWB is low income (40%). Less social support from parents and friend is the second highest factor affecting PWB (20%). The other reasons are high workload, high time pressure, people look down on them, work-life imbalance and demotivation.

5. Discussion

Among the 30 respondents, the majority of the respondents are male (87%). Moreover, the majority of the participants fall within the age range of 20 to 30 years (87%)

and single (83%). Furthermore, most of them are food delivery riders (80%). Many workers decide to work as food riders to earn money during the COVID-19 pandemic as job opportunities reduce and finding a job during the pandemic has become challenging. (Harun et al., 2020).

The results confirmed that the respondents in this study have low level of PWB. There were many predictors of PWB has been identified but the main predictor was low income (40%) and followed by less social support from parents and friends (20%). Generally, higher income level are linked to higher levels of well-being and less health problem (Dolan et al., 2008), albeit this impact declines as income levels increases. Financial difficulty can affect one’s emotional stability and cause high stress level which result in mental health problem. Furthermore, the income of the gig workers is unstable (Berger et al., 2019). The workload of gig workers is directly linked to their earnings, as they are only compensated after completing a service (Christie & Ward, 2019).

Gig work can be unpredictable and unstable (Jiang et al., 2015). Gig workers often do not have a steady stream of income or a predictable work schedule, which can create stress and anxiety. Gig workers may feel isolated and disconnected (Sariraei et al., 2022). Many gig workers work from home or work alone, which can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Based on the findings, we proposed the research theme that focus on lower income group among gig workers for future research may address. In addition, four substantial predictors have been selected in developing the conceptual framework as depicts in figure 1.

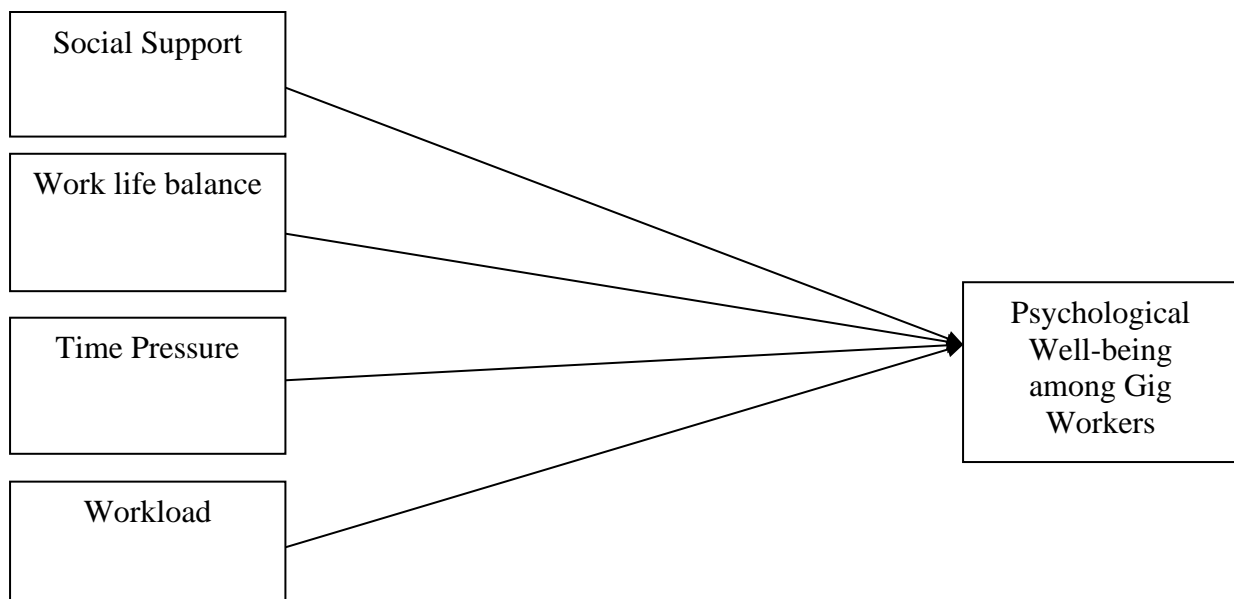


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model is a widely used framework for examining well-being in the workplace (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004). This model predicts that job demands can lead to stress and burnout, while job resources can boost engagement and motivation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). The JD-R model has found extensive application in various organizations and has spawned numerous empirical studies, leading to the development of the JD-R theory.

Job demands refer to various aspects of a job, including social, organizational, physical, and psychological factors, that require continued psychological and/or physical effort and incur psychological and/or physiological costs for the worker (Demerouti et al., 2001). Workload and time pressure are job demands.

Algorithmic management and digital monitoring in the gig economy heavily rely on workload as a crucial aspect. Digital labor platforms aim to enhance the number of tasks completed by gig workers. Overload and underload have long been shown to have a negative influence on psychosocial outcomes. Gig workers are susceptible to experiencing quantitative overload due to the vast amount of data they are exposed to (Poutanen et al., 2019). Being bombarded with a plethora of information from different sources and in diverse formats can overwhelm gig workers cognitively. Despite having the freedom to choose their work assignments, gig workers can still experience stress due to the high workload.

Time pressure induces high tension, which can lead to avoidance behaviour and unfavourable affect (Gevers et al., 2001). Time pressure is often suggested and appeared as challenging work stressor (Crawford et al., 2010). However, experiencing excessive level of time pressure is overburdening and serves as a hinder stressor, resulting in poor well-being. In a study of drivers' well-being, time pressure is one of the predictors of well-being (Silla & Gamero, 2018). Time pressure increases burnout and brings negative impact on general health.

Job demands have been characterized as a single type of demand, which may have a detrimental impact on employees (Sarwat et al., 2021). Empirical research shows workplace with high job demands significantly affects employees' well-being (Hakanen et al., 2006). Thus, time pressure and workload have been hypothesized as negative relationship with PWB in this framework.

Job resources are believed to enhance work environment through a motivational process by satisfying the fundamental psychological needs (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Job resources can be found at interpersonal and social interaction level (e.g., social support and work life balance).

Social support is necessary for employees (Fisher & Cassady, 2019) but gig workers are experiencing social alienation as they work online. Research has shown that social support can decrease depression and anxiety levels and improve well-being. This was demonstrated in a study involving victims of cyberbullying (Hellfeldt & Laura, 2019). However, Soulsby and Bennett (2015) contended that despite the stress level, individuals with greater social support generally exhibit have higher levels of PWB, whereas those with lower levels of social support tend to have lower levels of PWB.

Due to the flexibility of being able to choose their own working hours and schedules, platform workers are believed to have better control over their work-life balance and financial goals. The flexibility standpoint implies that platform work should be linked to greater well-being since it can help alleviate work-life conflicts or financial difficulties (Schieman et al., 2009).

Job resources play a crucial role in safeguarding employees' health through both external and internal motivation. Externally, Job resources are instrumental in helping workers attain their objectives, mitigate work demands, and enhance their performance. Internally, they foster personal growth, development, and learning, as well as meeting basic psychological needs such as autonomy, belongingness, and competence (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). Numerous empirical studies have supported the positive relationship between job resources and PWB (Tims et al., 2013). Thus, social support and work life balance have been hypothesized as positive relationship with PWB.

6. Conclusion

A preliminary study on the PWB of the gig workers in Malaysia was conducted. The finding suggested that the gig workers in Malaysia have a low PWB level and the main predictor is low income. Given the ongoing expansion of the gig economy, it is crucial to prioritize the well-being of individuals working within it. Due to the limited responses used in this preliminary study, future research should include more gig workers from different work prospects to increase the generalisation of the study. Diener & Seligman (2004) pointed out the problem of using economic indicators to develop economic policies and argued that noneconomic predictors are more useful to measure well-being.

Berger et al. (2019) emphasized that non-financial indicators play a vital role in shaping the well-being of gig workers. It should be noted that the gig economy is a relatively recent phenomenon. Future study should also investigate other possible predictors. In terms of theoretical contributions, this study aims to provide insights into the factors that predict the PWB of gig workers. Regarding theoretical contributions, the goal of this study is to offer valuable insights into the predictors of PWB among gig workers. On a practical level, the study can offer valuable information for the Malaysian government, society, employers, and employees, in terms of enhancing the understanding of the PWB of gig workers.

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