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GIG WORKERS AMONG WOMEN, A BETTER CHOICE OF WORK? A CASE STUDY OF MAKCIK TRAVELS

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Abstract

The evolution of information technology has formed an information society whereby all activities can be reached by surfing through an online platform. Business organisations have also transformed virtually through which the physical absence of employees is less necessary. There are two types of gig works introduced, which are known as physical gig works (workers need to carry out tasks physically) or digital gig works (tasks will be conducted entirely through online platforms from beginning to end). These so-called gig works offer flexible work arrangements and a more family-friendly work environment that benefits married working women notably in achieving work-life balance. The present study would like to understand the motivational factors influencing women's participation in physical gig works towards achieving work-life balance. A qualitative method was used whereby nine respondents for interviews were recruited through convenience sampling from the case study. The findings derived from the thematic analysis revealed that flexibility in time management and autonomy in managing the work schedule were recorded as the second highest factors after generating income. As a majority of the participants were single mothers, these factors (income and flexibility) should be the major concerns for future research on the enhancement of policies for an effective gig work system so that these women can have freedom in managing their work-life balance.

Keywords: Gig works; women; flexibility; work-life balance; qualitative

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INTRODUCTION

In this era of modern technology, the usage of Internet communications has been widespread around the world and has recorded a gradual increment in the percentage of freelancers as gig workers. According to the World Bank Data (2021), the percentage of self-employment in Malaysia was recorded at approximately 27.4% in 2019 with the share of self-employed women increasing from 11.6% in 2010 to 19.5% in 2018 (Schaper, 2020). Previous research has reported that the percentage of women's labour force participation is still low in the world context and some of them are overqualified with the current positions as they have higher educational qualifications where some of them accepting bottom-level positions as a trade-off for higher flexibility in time management and autonomy in arranging their work schedule (Craig et al., 2018; Risse, 2018). Furthermore, the 'gender division of labour' among couples assigns women the primary role in domestic responsibilities and secondary earner in the household. Consequently, women become intentionally selective over gig works as they are able to juggle the work-family life in which it can reduce their work pressure and they can focus more on parenting activities (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Solomon, 2010). Having freedom in commuting is crucial for an individual to have a better quality of life (Othman & Ali, 2020). It has been proven from the study conducted in France, men spend about 27 minutes per day for commuting to the workplace and 22 minutes per day for domestic travel, while women spend about 15 minutes per day for commuting to the workplace and 27 minutes per day for domestic travel (Motte-Baumvol et al., 2017). Hence, it is questionable on the motivational factors influencing women in entering gig works and how this physical gig works such as e-hailing help women in achieving work-life balance. It is true that e-hailing services have become part of the famous gig works in Malaysia other than alternative modes of transport that partly contribute to the domestic economy (Jais & Marzuki, 2020). However, it is not yet proven how this gig works shapes travel patterns. Thus, the research objectives have been identified as follows:

1. To examine the motivational factors influencing women's participation in gig works.
2. To rationalise the women's travel patterns in balancing work-life demands.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dilemma of Work-Family Conflicts and Family-Work Conflicts

Over the past decades, the dilemma faced by working parents due to work-family conflicts and family-work conflicts has been highly debated among researchers in behavioural studies (Ismail & Gali, 2017). Regardless of the clear difference between both conflicts, the outcome is inter-related, leading to the concept of work-life balance. According to Netemeyer et al. (1996), work-family conflicts

refer to work demands including time constraints and workload stress that restrict working individuals in satisfying their family responsibilities, while family-work conflicts refer to the restraints in performing work duties due to family demands and stress. Therefore, the phenomenon occurred due to the conflicts result in imbalance of both roles, whereby work performance and productivity are affected. Hyperwallet (2017) conducted a study among 2,000 United States-based female gig workers on their behaviour and career motivations in joining the gig economy. One-quarter of women gig workers left their full-time jobs due to full-time jobs are more stressful, thus making them opt for flexibility, extra time required in taking care of children, parents, or other relatives, opting for other careers, laid-off from previous job, and difficulties in entering full-time jobs after having children. Extensive research was conducted on the experiences of work-family dilemma faced by dual-earner and single-earner families including couples with and without children. It was found that most of the couples with children were affected by work-family demands instead of childless couples or single persons (Allen & Finkelstein, 2014; Winslow, 2016).

Transition to Flexible Work Arrangements

The growth of flexible work arrangements particularly among parents has become significant as more individuals choose the work-life balance concept to achieve a maximum level of work-life productivity with minimum conflicts. This concept was first introduced by the United Kingdom's Work-Life Balance Campaign on March 2000 by promoting work-life balance policies and practices, which enhance the employee-employer welfare (Department of Business Innovation and Skills (BIS), 2011). It reported a diversity of flexible work arrangements availability, whereby 56% were part-timers, 34% with flexi-time, 30% homeworking, 19% job-sharing, 19% with compressed hours, and 16% with term-time (Wheatley, 2012; van Wanrooy et al., 2013). There are four types of flexible work arrangements, namely part-time (regular type of flexible work arrangement that symbolises work-life balance), flexi-time or compressed hours (flexible work focusing on work arrangement with greater flexibility without reducing monthly income, favourable for working mothers who often combine domestic responsibilities with their work schedule), homeworking (offers greater flexibility and autonomy as most of the tasks are basically conducted at home, reducing commuting trips), and job-share (less popular among flexible work arrangements due to other flexible work choices). However, according to Russell et al. (2009), mothers mostly choose job-sharing to reduce work responsibilities by dividing the work scope equally between employees, and thus, increasing their 'family time' and securing the paid employment jobs.

Opting for Work-Life Balance Concept

The evolution of the work-life balance concept from the role theory indicated that individuals who undertake several distinctive roles in life are often confronted with difficulties in balancing the work-life demands, notably women (Freeney & Stritch, 2017; Matos, 2015). In fact, it was reported that the percentage of women's participation in the labour force has been increasing in the past centuries leading to a majority of married women experiencing a higher level of work-family conflicts and opting for greater flexibility and family-friendly environments (Cortes, 2018). In addition, the cultural elements and religion in some societies, such as Africa, Arab, and Palestine, demand certain obligations on women due to marriage sustainability, restricting them in achieving balance between both lives (Adisa et al., 2019). Comprehensive research on work-life balance has been conducted in alleviating the burden by concentrating on different aspects such as flexibility, autonomy, gender division of labour, and family-friendly policies (Smithson & Stokoe, 2005; MacInnes, 2008). Since most individuals choose flexible work arrangements for the greater autonomy in managing work schedule activities, it has been revealed that both genders acquire different rationales, whereby men opt for a greater degree of work choices with associated benefits while women opt for a greater degree of time management due to several constraints (Sullivan & Smithson, 2007; Atkinson & Hall, 2009).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Scope of Study

The study focused on three components: (1) women, (2) motivational factor in participating gig works, and (3) daily travel patterns. The researcher adopted a case study to be included as part of the research process due to several reasons such as: (1) the percentage of individuals especially women entering gig works is still lacking in terms of official statistical records capturing gig works and gig economy issues at large and (2) the limitation on research timeline, followed by unintended causes due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overview of MakCik Travels as Case Study

MakCik Travels is a transportation company in Malaysia and has been operating since November 2018. Similar to other e-hailing companies, this company also provides transportation service. The uniqueness of MakCik Travels services is that it was created for a social entrepreneurial project with the concept of 'by women for women', focusing on helping others, especially elderly or disabled people and school children. It offers four types of services: MakCik Chaperone (helper), MakCik Drive (driver), MakCik Runner (personal shopper), and MakCik Explorer (travel guide). The clients mostly consist of women, children, college students, elderly, and disabled persons. MakCik Travels was selected as a case study as the research intention is to understand the motivational factors

influencing women's participation in gig works and how the factors reflected their daily travel patterns and activities in balancing and managing the work-life demands, notably among married working women with dependent children. As these women are required to travel almost every single day to meet job demands, MakCik Travels services would be a suitable option in recruiting the sample as it meets the criteria given: (1) women, (2) participating in gig works, and (3) given job requires daily commute.

Data Collection and Sampling Technique

The sampling technique used in this study was a qualitative method whereby the targeted respondents were selected using the convenience sampling technique. The recruitment process was handled by both parties in which the management team of MakCik Travels would list out the respondents' details while the researcher would reach out to the respondents in receiving their consent. The respondents were the travel companions of MakCik Travels (women who provided the services) and a total of nine respondents agreed to participate in the interview session. The one-to-one interview sessions were carried out through phone calls and were guided with a semi-structured interview. The session took about 40 to 50 minutes and before conducting the interview, the researcher must obtain written consent from all respondents as an ethical consideration. For validity purposes, audio recording and notetaking were performed during the process.

Data Analysis

This study referred to several previous research studies in designing the sampling and conducting the analysis method such as Dousin et al. (2020), Bhattacharjee (2020), and Dobbs (2007). All these prior works have conducted a similar study but with different research scopes. Due to the limitation in time frame and unexpected events of the COVID-19 pandemic faced by the researcher that eventually slowed down the research progress, the researcher decided to only conduct the qualitative method. In fact, there were several limitations in terms of gig works data, academic publication on women's mobility in gig works, and data from the management. This research method has been reported to offer various opportunities in addressing the research process, which has been designated to take into account the participants' background and experience in detail or else, it remains invisible apart from ensuring the accuracy of data (Dobbs, 2007; Caelli et al., 2003). Thematic analysis was conducted using a six-phase approach that included data familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing a write-up based on the linkages created (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

From the findings, a majority of the respondents were single mothers with dependent children aged below 12 years old. Apart from that, most of them were previously working women with greater experiences in their field of expertise coming from either the government sector or private sector before they entered gig works. The reason for resignation varied among the respondents, but the most highlighted reasons were because of company downsizing, workload pressure, and desire to focus more on their children. Undeniably, the pandemic issues of COVID-19 recently have affected these women because several companies were greatly affected, resulting to downsizing the number of staff or even closing down. In addition, some of them acquired multiple gigs work in order to support them financially as they were the sole breadwinner for the family, and because of the unstable income and limited number of jobs offered. As most of the respondents were dependent on the gig jobs to generate income, it can be seen that women with a larger household size or greater commitment would search for more gig works in supporting them financially. A large number of the respondents were at the age of 30 to 50 years old in which logically, most of them were still young, able to work, and probably still had a dependent school child. In fact, it was found that women who acquired a strong support system were able to conduct multiple gig works even though they had a higher number of dependent children. In Asian countries, it has been reported that joint families with grandparents or other nonworking family members will help the working mother in taking care of the children while they are at work. It is because in joint families, the working mother plays a crucial role in supporting the household; thus, it is important for other members to support the working mother and enable her to perform the dual role efficiently (Poduval & Poduval 2009). Therefore, it can be concluded that the motivational factors for women who acquire a strong support system in taking care of their children would be focusing more on generating income for their families and having freedom in work arrangements. Nevertheless, single mothers with a lack of a support system tend to have a dilemma in balancing the work-life demands as they need to focus on both children and financial stability. Apparently, it can be seen that the crucial reason influencing the women's participation in joining gig works was because they wanted to focus solely on their children, especially for single mothers. According to the Department of Labour of the United States on the Family and Medical Leave Act (1993), there is a lack of employment policies in addressing the needs of working couples, leading them to choose either job security or parenting responsibilities.

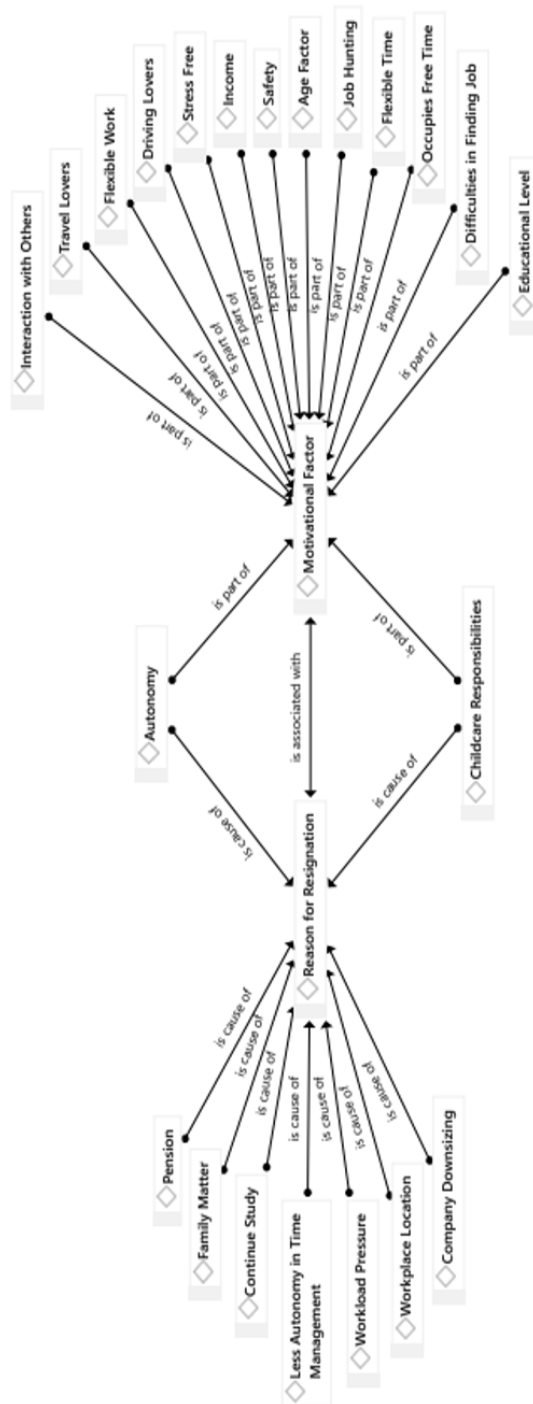


Figure 1: Motivational factors influencing the women's participation in gig works
Source: Data from *fieldwork* generated using *Atlas.ti Software*

Due to the nature of the men's and women's roles in the society, the primary obligation in caretaking often falls on women, which eventually affects the work lives of women more than men.

“If there is no support system from my mother and grandmother, I think I would just consider MakCik Travels jobs as my permanent job rather than sales promoter due to the fixed working hours, which is difficult for me to handle my children (Interviewee 2).”

“The reason why I choose freelance and flexible working hours [is] because of the responsibility in taking care of the children as I am the sole guardian, [so it] is part of my duties (Interviewee 3).”

The motivational reasons are differed for women who had a strong support system than the ones who did not. This indicated that they put more focus on their children's welfare, aside from achieving financial stability. Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis (2015) reported that single parents, especially mothers, would suffer a higher risk of poverty due to household demands, as they usually bear the full responsibilities in taking care the children after separation, apart from issues with gender pay gap and lack of job opportunities.

“As for now, I am living with my mother and grandmother. So, I am not too worried about my children's welfare because both of them are my strong support system in taking care of the children when I am not around or when I am at the office. So, my focus is on generating more additional income for the family (Interviewee 2).”

“After divorce, my prominent focus is generating income for my family as I am [a] single mother and do not [have] to worry about my children's welfare because I have [hired a] maid. So, she will be taking care of my mother and my children, making it easier for me to handle the household duties (Interviewee 6).”

Meanwhile, it was discovered that a majority of the respondents shared one thing in common apart from their differences in the background profile and field of expertise, namely they enjoyed driving and travelling.

“It is stress-free and I do enjoy driving till late night while listening to my favourite songs (Interviewee 2).”

“Driving is one of my hobbies and the e-hailing services [are in] demand nowadays. So, I have decided in joining MakCik Travels because I love driving and my safety is more secured (Interviewee 9).”

The highest factors reported were flexibility and autonomy, which refer to two situations, either they are resigning from the previous job because they are seeking for flexibility and autonomy in life, or they are entering gig works because they are choosing flexibility and autonomy in achieving work-life balance due to circumstances. In fact, Van Gasse and Mortelmans (2017) also stated that flexibility can be classified into acquire flexi-time, acquire flexi-place, or work arrangements.

“My previous job is too demanding and stressing. In fact, at that time, I do have family issues where my husband was paralysed due to [a] stroke attack and I need to take care of him and generate income for the family at the same time (Interviewee 4).”

“As my priority is basically my daughter, so I do prefer jobs that are more flexible and have autonomy in managing [my] routine schedule because I need to juggle the jobs in between my daughter’s activities as well (Interviewee 7).”

It can be said that some of the respondents were looking forward to participating in gig works because they lacked job options or opportunities due to circumstances such as educational or age factors.

“Before this, I have applied [for a] few other office jobs with stable monthly income, but the rate of success is low due to age factors and lacking in terms of educational qualifications in which all I have is only my previous work experiences. Therefore, I have decided to join MakCik Travels because that is the only option and I do have a driving licence (Interviewee 4).”

Based on the respondents’ daily travel patterns and routine, it can be seen that a majority of them had dependent children and juggled both work-life demands by producing a “convenient” work schedule beforehand. Indeed, they are the sole breadwinner for their families, notably single mothers; thus, reducing other expenditure costs including transportation is highly recommended.

“Since the school distance is near to my house and my workplace about 500m (2–3 minutes), normally I will send my children either by motorcycle or just walking and will fetch them after school hours (Interviewee 2).”

“My daily routine is that I will send my children to school every day. At 6.30 a.m., I will send them and during lunch break, which is at 12.00 p.m. till 2.00 p.m., I will fetch them from school because after that, they need to attend other classes in the afternoon. Then at 6.00 p.m., I will fetch them after classes (Interviewee 4)”.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, gig works have the potential to offer women flexibility in time management and freedom in work arrangement based on the job opportunities in improving work-life balance. In Malaysia, most women start working at the age of 24 to 26 years old after graduating from universities; however, the conflict starts when they get married and starting families while they just recently entered the workforce. The concept of work-life balance emerges, yet the struggle is different for every individuals. Commonly, women and single parents are reported to have the worst work-life balance among all (Van den Eynde et al., 2019). Findings have indicated that motivational factors of women’s participation in gig works are because of flexibility in time and financial stability. It is also believed that without having a greater passion in driving for instance, these women would choose another career path. Although gig works offer financial freedom in relation to higher demands and engagement received from clients, the income is still unstable and very competitive. Despite these situations, several women have considered gig works as their primary source of income to support their families, supplement their income with another part-time job or full-time job, or even to support their spouse’s income. Last but not least, women could be an important growing gender in leading the gig workforce in future. Therefore, the government and stakeholders need to address several key drawbacks including ambiguity of employment laws and regulation, inconsistency of the gigs’ income, and lack of employee benefits in establishing and achieving sustainable development for gender equality and equity. A study conducted by Jais and Marzuki (2020) reported that the success of gig works such as e-hailing services in Malaysia is highly based on the method used in encountering the issues of consumer’s safety and driver’s income by the regulatory bodies.

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