

Digital Hustle, Domestic Strain: Family Life of Selangor's Gig Workers

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Abstract

The gig economy offers freedom, flexibility and fast money but it takes something important from the families of its workers. This qualitative research investigates the realities of gig work in Selangor focusing on the domestic struggles that include financial challenges, limited family involvement and emotional burden. Using a phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews were conducted among married male gig workers who support at least one child under 18. The thematic analysis produced five major findings which are financial management, family role dynamics, spousal support for emotional and practical needs, work-related stress and coping mechanisms. Findings suggest that increased household earnings from gig work while maintaining traditional family roles creating unstable working conditions which gradually damage workers' mental health. Participants faced difficulties in balancing their work and personal life due to unpredictable schedules, and feelings of socioeconomic instability. Nonetheless, families especially spouses emerged as essential support systems helping participants to manage stress and uncertainty. The economic benefits of digital gig work hide unperceived social and emotional expenses which impact both workers and their families. The findings require immediate policy action aims at advocating for family-inclusive policies within the gig ecosystem. Future research may adopt a quantitative approach to survey gig workers across genders and demographic backgrounds. This will provide a generalizable understanding of how gig work reshapes Malaysian family dynamics during digital era.

Keywords: Gig Economy, Family Wellbeing, Financial Management, Spousal Support, Work Stress, Coping

Introduction

The gig economy, characterized by short-term, flexible, and platform-mediated work, has grown rapidly in Malaysia. Digital platforms such as Grab, Foodpanda, and Lalamove connect workers to customers, offering income opportunities but often without stable earnings or comprehensive labour protections (Chen et al., 2023; Wood et al., 2019). By 2023,

approximately three million Malaysians were engaged in gig work, raising concerns about long-term job security and workforce skills development (Saieed, 2024).

Selangor, Malaysia's most populous state, has become a hub for gig activity due to its dense urban population, high demand for e-hailing and delivery services, and diverse socio-economic landscape (Bernama, 2024). While prior research in Malaysia has explored gig workers' financial and occupational well-being (Azim et al., 2024; Nasir et al., 2024), there is limited evidence on how gig work affects family life, particularly for fathers with under-age children.

Existing literature on Malaysian gig workers focuses mainly on income, job satisfaction, and individual well-being, with less attention to the broader psychological and social implications for families. Past research infrequently studies how irregular work schedules, unstable income and insufficient social protection systems affect the emotional and relational dynamics of family life (April, 2024; Aronsson, 2023). The gap in literature is concerning, especially for fathers who might experience changes in their caregiving and household responsibilities due to gig work. The lack of qualitative insights about these dynamics opens the way for welfare policies that may overlook the essential family-level considerations.

This study examines the lived experiences of gig-working fathers in Selangor, Malaysia. Specifically, the study focuses on how their work arrangements influence family well-being in terms of financial stability, family role dynamics, and coping strategies. This study has provided empirically grounded understandings that can inform policy and community interventions for families in the gig economy.

Literature Review

Evolution of Gig Economy

The music industry was the first to use the term gig to describe short-term performance contracts (Cloonan & Williamson, 2017). The term evolved to describe temporary and ad hoc jobs, which online platforms now connect workers in various industries. Nowadays, the gig economy represents a labour market which uses short-term contracts and freelance work that are enabled through digital platforms (Cloonan & Williamson, 2023). This transformation has been associated with both economic opportunities, such as income generation and entrepreneurship, while inevitable challenges include insecure work arrangements and limited access to benefits (Bulian, 2021; Kumari, 2024).

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the expansion of the gig economy. In Malaysia, lockdowns and economic disruptions pushed many workers toward platform-based jobs as alternative sources of income (Nawawi et al., 2023; Zhang, 2024). Digital platforms such as Grab and Foodpanda provided opportunities for income continuity, especially in delivery and e-hailing services, but also exposed workers to fluctuating earnings and lack of social protection (Bakar & Hassan, 2024). The pandemic further highlighted the vulnerability of informal workers and the urgent need for protective legislation (Lim et al., 2024).

Policy Context and Workers' Protection

Regarding the policies for gig workers' protection, the challenges across the Asia regions is to find the balance between flexibility and adequate safeguards. Aggarwal and Dixit (2025) have

documented the progress made in several Asia countries regarding legal protections for the gig workers. For example, in India, the Code on Social Security 2020 formally recognizes gig and platform workers, mandating that platform companies contribute to social security funds. However, the practical mechanisms for enforcement are still being refined. China then, has introduced regulatory measures to improve working conditions and expand social insurance for delivery platform workers, reflecting broader state concerns over labour stability in the rapidly growing platform economy.

Singapore government is committed to phased implementation of stronger protections, including mandatory Central Provident Fund (CPF) contributions, work injury coverage, and representation rights for platform workers. These measures are now legislated under the Platform Workers Act effectively January 2025. Japan has sought to balance labour flexibility with expanded coverage for non-standard workers. Japanese policies have focused on clarifying tax obligations and improving access to social insurance, particularly given its ageing population and acute labour shortages.

In Malaysia, gig work is expanding rapidly particularly in delivery, e-hailing, and freelance services, yet protections remain limited. Malaysia has taken initial steps toward protecting gig workers since 2017, through the Self-Employment Social Security Scheme (SESSS), administered by the Social Security Organization (SOCSO). But it offers limited protection such as medical coverage, disablement benefits, and dependents' benefits in cases of work-related death. Coverage remains partial as participation is voluntary for most gig workers, resulting in low enrolment. Gig workers are commonly treated as 'independent contractors' or classified as 'self-employed' thus excluded from labour protections such as minimum wage, paid leave, retirement savings contributions and union rights (Bakar & Hassan, 2024; Radzi et al., 2022; Uchiyama et al., 2022).

Gaps in the Employment Act 1955 and the Employee Social Security Act 1969 also leave the workers vulnerable to work-related injuries and lacking proper compensation. Therefore, it has also been recommended to amend Section 2 of the Employment Act to explicitly include "platform worker" and "gig worker" as employees to ensure better legal and social protection (Abd Razak & Abdul Shukor, 2025). While discussions on extending social security coverage are emerging, there is no comprehensive framework comparable to other Asia countries (Bakar & Hassan, 2024; Radzi et al., 2022). The legislative frameworks are essential and must align with the lived experiences of gig workers to be truly effective.

Financial Instability and Household Impact

The literature about gig work identifies financial instability as its primary concern. Research indicates that gig workers often experience unstable earnings, debt accumulation and insufficient savings, which exposes them to financial risks during times of crises (Daud et al., 2024; Mitchell & Li, 2021; Zelma, 2024). These workers lack protection because their employers do not provide health insurance or paid leave benefits, which situation was worsened during global crises like COVID-19 (Auguste et al., 2022; Apouey et al., 2020). Similarly in Malaysia, studies show that gig workers experience unstable earnings, job instability and restricted access to social protection programs (Salleh et al., 2023; Radzi et al., 2022). The economic pressures create challenges beyond personal finances to impact overall household budgeting and financial planning.

Gig workers also experience significant physical and psychological risks. The physical demands of their work lead them to develop musculoskeletal issues, including chronic back pain due to the nature of gig work (Abdul Samad et al., 2023). Kurian and Bindu Madhavi (2024) show that financial instability, unpredictable earnings, and insufficient benefits in gig work also led to substantial stress, which negatively affects the well-being of Gen Y and Gen Z gig workers. A higher level of psychological distress has been reported among the dependent platform workers compared to secondary platform workers, wage workers, and the traditional self-employed (Glavin & Schieman, 2022). The absence of a conventional workplace and social support further exacerbates feelings of loneliness and mental strain, with long-term health and well-being negatively impacted (Siew et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022).

The above-mentioned occupational hazards affecting gig workers will also disrupt their parenting roles, family cohesion, and emotional well-being of the family. Research indicates that dependent gig workers, i.e. those relying on gig work as their primary income, experience higher psychological distress (Glavin & Schieman, 2022). This can be inferred that gig workers supporting children or families primarily from gig income experience lower psychological well-being compared to those with fewer family responsibilities. Fathers with health problems can limit their physical availability, energy for childcare and household responsibilities. Extended, unpredictable working hours could lead to increased stress and reduced family interaction, deepening work-to-family conflict and disrupting family life. The stress that comes from being lonely due to the nature of gig work can lead to poor mental health and affect family dynamics and emotional climate at home. It is even more crucial to explore how gig-working fathers manage these challenges within their family contexts.

Shifting Family Roles

Past studies have documented the changes in family roles among gig workers. The flexible nature of platform-based work changes how people care for their families and perform household duties, which may impact family relationships (Trógolo et al., 2022; Yun et al., 2022). The irregularity of work schedules and unpredictable workloads creates disruptions to family routines, which leads to increased work–family conflict (Wang et al., 2022). The resulting tensions create wider effects on family stability and emotional well-being. The cultural norms in Malaysia, which place the father in the role of primary breadwinner, generate more pressure on the family when income becomes unpredictable. Research on the effects of role changes on marital relationships, parenting involvement and child well-being remains scarce.

Coping Mechanisms

The coping strategies that gig workers use differ significantly from one another. Gig workers who adopt positive coping strategies obtain support from others, engage in regular exercises and learn adaptive skills (Sariraei et al., 2022 & Giunchi et al., 2019), while denial and disengagement are considered less effective strategies that can worsen stress (Sariraei et al., 2022). The well-being of workers depends on structural elements of the gig work, such as algorithmic management and the absence of collective bargaining, which leads to a call for platform design participation by the workers and enhanced labour protections (Zhang et al., 2022; Yan, 2023; Hsieh et al., 2023).

For gig-working fathers, particularly those supporting underage children, job-related pressures often spill over into family life (Pouliakas & Conen, 2023), affecting their availability and emotional presence at home. Yao et al. (2021) demonstrate that digital platforms and social media peer support networks function as buffers between work and family responsibilities. However, the advantages of peer networks remain limited because workers compete and hoard information, which prevents gig-working fathers from accessing these benefits. Thus, peer support cannot substitute structural protections such as income security, social benefits and regulated work hours because these elements directly impact family stability. The cultural coping strategies of reliance on the extended family in Malaysia remain understudied within the context of gig work research.

While these studies provide valuable insights into financial instability, role changes, and coping mechanisms among gig workers, significant gaps remain. Research in Malaysia has largely examined economic and occupational aspects of gig work but has rarely focused on fathers with under-age children or on the family-level impacts of gig employment. There is a lack of qualitative research that captures the nuanced, lived experiences of gig-working fathers in the Malaysian context, which is addressed in the current study.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to capture the lived experiences of gig-working fathers in Selangor, Malaysia. Through phenomenology, an in-depth exploration of personal stories is significant to reveal the challenges and coping strategies fathers use to manage their work and family responsibilities.

Study Location

The State of Selangor, Malaysia, has been chosen as the study location as it has a high concentration of gig workers in platform-based services.

Population and Sampling

Approximately four million Malaysians are engaged in gig economy work, particularly in digital platform services such as ride-hailing and food delivery (Abdullah et al., 2024). Using a purposive sampling technique, four participants who met the inclusion criteria, i.e., male and married, currently engaged in gig work (Grab, GarbFood and Lalamove platforms), and have at least one child under 18 years old, were selected for the study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects of Universiti Putra Malaysia (JKEUPM). Informed consents from participants were obtained before participation, and anonymity was preserved with pseudonyms and secure data storage.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which are well-suited for exploring participants' experiences while allowing for flexibility in probing emerging themes. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted via face-to-face meetings or video conferencing, depending on participant preference.

Interview Protocol

An interview protocol was developed to address the study's objectives. With consent of the participants, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy of transcription. Field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, was employed to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data. The steps included:

Familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. To enhance trustworthiness, member checking was conducted by sharing summaries of the interpreted data with participants for validation. Debriefing with the research experts was also undertaken to reduce researcher bias. An inductive approach was used, allowing themes to emerge directly from participants' narratives without imposing a predetermined theoretical framework.

Findings and Discussion

Participants' Background

The study involved four married male gig workers from Selangor, each with at least one child under the age of 18. Their ages ranged from 31 to 50 years, and all maintained full-time employment alongside their gig work. Core occupations included a factory worker, a lawyer, a firefighter, and an auxiliary police officer. All respondents' spouses were also employed, and each supported between two and five dependents. In addition to their main jobs, the participants were involved in various e-hailing or delivery platforms such as Grab, GrabFood, and Lalamove. Their years of experience in these services ranged from one to six years. The diversity in professional backgrounds, household sizes, and duration of gig work provided varied perspectives on how gig employment interacts with financial stability, family roles, and emotional well-being.

Themes Emerging from Data

Thematic analysis generated five themes: financial management, family roles, work challenges, coping with stress and social support. These themes were derived from initial codes as illustrated in Table 1 below and the discussion was made according to the three research objectives of the study.

Table 1

Themes and Illustrative Codes from Thematic Analysis of Interview Data

No.	Themes	Illustrative Codes from Data
1	Financial Management (Obj. 1)	Supplementing daily household income; paying for food, petrol, utilities, and children's education; building emergency savings; separating gig and main income; using gig income for non-essential but planned expenses.
2	Family Roles (Obj. 2)	Maintaining role as head of family; primary decision-maker; main financial provider; balancing work with caregiving; limited time for leisure with family; reinforcing traditional breadwinner identity.
3	Work Challenges (Obj. 3)	Order competition; high platform commission; unpredictable fare structures; long-distance/unrealistic orders; customer communication barriers; unpleasant passenger behaviour; scams and non-payment; time pressure from customers.
4	Coping with Stress (Obj. 3)	Flexible goal setting (no strict daily targets); rest and sleep after shifts; casual conversations with passengers; spending time with friends; finding enjoyment in riding; singing during deliveries; quiet reflection with coffee; positive mindset.
5	Social Support (Obj. 3)	Emotional encouragement from spouse; practical help with household chores and childcare; children's verbal encouragement; concern for safety from relatives; understanding of gig schedule; moral support from friends.

Objective 1: To analyze how gig workers in Selangor manage income stability and its impact on family financial planning.

Theme 1: Financial Management

Participants described diverse strategies for managing income from gig work, which was typically used to supplement household expenses such as food, transportation, children's education, and utilities. For some, particularly those with higher numbers of dependents, gig income was essential for meeting daily needs, leaving little room for savings. As one participant explained, gig work contributed *"maybe 30%... just to top up the fixed salary"* (Participant Q).

Others with more stable primary employment treated gig earnings as supplementary funds for emergencies or long-term goals. For example, Participant S (a fireman) delegated household budgeting to his spouse, ensuring gig income was channelled into savings and planned expenses. Participant H (an auxiliary police officer) maintained his gig income in a separate account, which he used for unexpected expenses instead of everyday costs. The different methods of handling gig income depended on household size, job stability and financial planning practices. The additional financial flexibility from gig work did not translate to better long-term financial stability because regular salaries failed to meet essential expenses. Overall, financial management practices determined how effectively gig work supported family needs and future planning.

Objective 2: To explore the effects of gig work on family roles and dynamics.

Theme 2: Family Roles

Across participants, gig work did not substantially alter established family roles. Most male participants continued to see themselves as the primary providers and decision-makers, with gig income serving only to supplement their main salary. As one explained, *"I'm still the one*

supporting the family... gig work just adds a little extra” (Participant Q). This reflects a traditional view in which financial leadership remains firmly in male hands, regardless of additional income sources.

While some, like Participant Z, balanced gig work with professional duties and household caregiving such as transporting family members and cooking. These contributions were framed as extensions of their existing responsibilities rather than role redefinitions. His flexible gig work schedule allowed him to maintain active domestic involvement, yet financial authority remained his. For others, such as Participants S and H, gig work was clearly secondary to their stable primary employment. Both emphasized that their household roles had “not changed at all” despite participating in the gig economy. Gig earnings were supplementary, and the core identity of “head of the family” remained linked to their formal, full-time jobs.

Overall, these narratives indicate that participation in gig work rarely challenges traditional household leadership structures. Instead, it reinforces patriarchal norms where men retain authority over financial and decision-making roles, and gig income is integrated as a financial top-up rather than a catalyst for shifting family dynamics.

Objective 3: To identify coping mechanisms used by gig workers and their families in managing work-related stress.

Three themes emerged from data related to this objective, which are work challenges as sources of stress, coping with stress, and social support.

Theme 3: Work Challenges as Sources of Stress

Participants described multiple operational and interpersonal challenges that contributed to the psychological strain of gig work. Common stressors included unfair fare structures, high platform fees, and unpredictable order allocation, which reduced net earnings despite long hours and travel. As one noted, *“Sometimes after petrol, toll, and platform deductions, what’s left is only a few ringgit” (Participant Q).*

Customer-related difficulties were also a source of tension. Participant Z mentioned that language barriers, unpleasant passenger behaviour and cash payment disputes were among the issues he faced because some customers opted *“pay by cash but have no cash.”* Participant S shared similar problems when he encountered *“orders that are too far”* (in terms of delivery location), unrealistic delivery expectations and occasional scams. Participant H also experienced financial loss when a customer accepted delivery service but failed to pay the bill. The unpredictability of gig work becomes evident through these experiences because workers have no control over payment disputes, platform policies and customer misconduct. The financial instability gig workers face, combined with emotional stress, makes it difficult for them to handle while caring for their families.

Theme 4: Coping with Stress

The participants used different coping methods to handle the psychological demands of their gig work. The ability to set flexible goals and maintain low personal performance standards helped specific individuals manage their stress levels. Participant Q explained his approach to gig work by saying, *“I don’t set daily targets... no stress,”* which shows his perspective of

viewing gig work as for extra income rather than primary income to help him balance work and life. Some people used rest as well as casual social interactions to cope. Participant Z explained his relaxation methods included sleeping after work, followed by conversations with passengers and socializing with friends, *“If I’m stressed or tired... stop, have a drink with friends.”* His energy was restored through a combination of physical rest and social contact.

Some participants transformed their gig work activities into a form of enjoyment. Participant S used to sing while riding on his motorbike, *“When I’m tired, I sing on the motor... that’s my entertainment,”* as he found it to be both a source of income and a personal freedom. The freedom to choose his work schedule and the pleasure he derived from it helped him manage his work-related stress. Participant H preferred solitary relaxation as he used *“sitting and thinking”* while drinking coffee to help him disconnect from work pressures.

These accounts show that coping approaches were shaped by personal preferences, job demands, and available social support. Strategies ranged from active engagement (socializing, finding enjoyment in work) to passive relaxation (rest, reflection). Such personalized coping methods helped workers sustain their roles as both income earners and family members despite the challenges of gig work.

Theme 5: Social Support

Family support played a central role in helping gig workers manage the psychological demands of balancing multiple jobs. For many participants, emotional encouragement from spouses and relatives provided motivation and reduced stress. As one explained, *“My family sees my effort... they appreciate and respect me” (Participant Q)*. His wife’s understanding of his weekend gig work allowed him to contribute financially without causing family conflict.

For Participant Z, spousal support was not only motivational but also therapeutic. Experiencing stress and low mood when inactive at home, his wife’s encouragement to take up gig work *“reduced my stress... before this, I was depressed just sitting at home doing nothing.”* Gig work became a source of purpose, with family backing contributing to improved mental well-being. Similarly, Participant S reported that his wife and children openly accepted his side work. His child’s light-hearted suggestion to *“go do Grab”* when money was low reflected both understanding and positive reinforcement within the household. This supportive environment fostered resilience and reduced work-life tension. For Participant H, support from his wife and mother-in-law was expressed through concern for his safety as a motorcycle-based gig worker. While not directly involved in his work decisions, their protective reminders to *“be careful riding”* conveyed care and acceptance.

Across all cases, social support, whether emotional, practical, or protective helped participants cope with the mental and emotional strain of gig work. Understanding spouses, engaged children, and concerned relatives provided a buffer against stress, enabling workers to sustain their dual roles as earners and family leaders.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Financial Management

The findings indicate that financial management was a key driver of participation in gig work. For most, earnings were directed towards daily needs such as food, fuel, utilities, and

children's education. Thus, gig work primarily fills short-term financial gaps rather than enabling long-term stability. Pew Research Center reported that workers with more secure primary jobs directed gig income into savings or for occasional expenses, while those need to cover the gaps or changes in income have limited capacity to save (Anderson et al., 2021).

Family Roles

Family roles remained firmly rooted in traditional breadwinner norms. Participants continued to see themselves as primary providers and decision-makers, even when engaged in domestic tasks, reflecting persistent patriarchal structures reinforced not only by gender role ideology but also by religiosity, as highlighted in Malay family studies (Boo, 2021). While gig work added to financial contributions, it often reduced time for leisure with family, aligning with Pouliakas and Conen (2023) finding that multiple jobholding erodes work-life balance especially for those with children.

Work Challenges

Work challenges were intensified by platform practices. High commission fees, unpredictable fares, inefficient order allocation, and unrealistic delivery requests reduced earnings, while customer disputes and poor communication added stress. Echoing Wood et al.'s (2018) observations, algorithmic management offered flexibility but also drove overwork, irregular hours, and economic precarity, compounding psychological strain.

Coping Strategies

Coping strategies varied individually as some workers deliberately avoided high-pressure targets (problem-focused coping), while others turned to rest, socializing, or finding joy in their tasks to manage stress (emotion-focused coping). The enjoyment reported by some participants reflects intrinsic motivation highlighting autonomy and competence as protective psychological resources in line with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Social Support

Social support primarily from spouses was central to sustaining gig work participation. Support ranged from emotional encouragement to practical assistance in household management, and in some cases, protective concern for workers' safety. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that spousal support encompassing emotional encouragement and practical assistance is part of a broader set of family-based resources that can reduce work-family conflict (French et al., 2017). In the context of gig work, such support served as a critical buffer, mitigating stress and helping sustain participation, consistent with earlier findings on the role of family support in alleviating work-related strain (Voydanoff, 2004).

Gig work offers crucial supplementary income for married fathers in Selangor but reinforces traditional gender roles and contributes to time poverty and psychological strain. Family support and adaptive coping strategies help sustain participation, but without stronger institutional protections and fairer platform practices, the sustainability of gig work to support family well-being remains uncertain. Addressing these gaps is essential for ensuring that gig work enhances, rather than undermines, both livelihood security and family harmony. The findings require immediate policy action aims at advocating for family-inclusive policies within the gig ecosystem. Future research may adopt a quantitative approach to survey gig workers

across genders and demographic backgrounds. This will provide a generalizable understanding of how gig work reshapes Malaysian family dynamics during digital era.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this research.

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