Advantages And Challenges of The Gig Economy: Perspective from Potential Hospitality Employees

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Abstract

The gig economy has currently emerged as a trending type of workforce. However, there is not much research found within the Malaysian hospitality industry. This study aimed to explore the gig economy's advantages and challenges using a qualitative approach. Interviews were conducted with hospitality final-year students from Malaysian public universities. Ten students from five different universities participated in this study, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The results discovered three advantages of the gig economy from the participants' perspectives: flexibility, high pay, and low stress. Meanwhile, there were six challenges of the gig economy: absence of benefit, unpredictable, high competition, self-work equipment, personal development, and work environment. The results are anticipated to shed light on improving the gig economy in the Malaysian hospitality industry, particularly from related stakeholders such as policymakers, industry and higher education institutions.

Keywords

Gig economy; hospitality undergraduates; public universities; advantages; challenges

1 Introduction

The term gig economy is of recent origin. It was first recorded when workers made unemployed during the recession period had to take up part-time or short-term jobs to survive through the financial crisis (Johnes, 2019). As time advances, the advancement of technologies and the proliferation of smartphones together with the development of internet platforms reshaped the commercial landscape, where workers could gain this kind of equal employment. Grab is a well-known platform, which serves as a market that assembles those wanting to hire and those willing to supply car journeys. In the hospitality industry, Grabfood and Foodpanda are the two known platforms where they bring together food vendors that want to do food delivery but are unable to do so and those willing to supply the food delivery journey.

The youth unemployment rate (aged between 15 to 24 years) in January 2021 was 13.5 per cent as compared to the overall Malaysian unemployment rate of 4.9 per cent (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). Razali (2019) mentioned that graduates in Malaysia who were trained to be engineers and technical specialists were forced to jump into the gig economy or fill in the low-end retail service vacancies, as underemployment had been the actual issue affecting them. Even though the Malaysian youth employment rate is quite worrying, there might be a solution if the gig economy is well-promoted and managed (FMT Reporters, 2019).

According to Upwork, nearly half or 46% of today's youngest segment are freelancers from Gen Z, and the number is expected to grow in the next five years in the US. Even though the numbers are not local, Malaysia as a developing country is set to follow the trend, according to Favser.com, a local digital talents-focused hiring platform (Malek, 2019). This is further supported as the gig economy in Malaysia grew by 31% in 2017, and 40% of a company's workforce will be coming from contingent workers (Bong, 2019). There were 160,000 e-hailing drivers, 10,000 GrabFood riders and 13,000 FoodPanda riders in Malaysia as of the year 2019 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). It is reported that Malaysia needs to improve its data quality system to deal with unemployment and other problems arising from the so-called gig economy of part-timers, freelancers, and other informal sectors (Bernama, 2019). This information informs us that the gig economy is still a new thing in Malaysia as there was not much data about it. Thus, this study aimed to explore the advantages and challenges of the gig economy from the perspectives of hospitality undergraduates.

2 Literature Review

2.1 An overview of the gig economy

Platform, crowd-based, on-demand or sharing economy are the terms people describe for the gig economy (De Stefano, 2015; Stewart & Stanford, 2017). Besides, Abraham et al. (2018) mentioned that the term gig economy had been adopted to broadly refer to the less structured work arrangements and the subset of flexible jobs mediated through various online platforms. The gig economy is also best

grasped as applying digital processes to ease the application of long-standing labour extraction strategies by employers (Flanagan, 2017). The gig economy consists of work transacted via platforms but delivered locally and thus requires the worker to be physically present, and work transacted and delivered remotely via platforms (Huws et al., 2017). There are many terms for the gig economy with a similarity in every definition, in which the jobs must be accessed through a digital platform.

People working in the gig economy are known as gig workers, who may be referred to as independent contractors, agency workers, on-demand workers, project-based workers, freelancers, and temporary or part-time workers (Randolph, 2019). Jobs that are taken up through online platforms are known as gig work. Gig work can also be defined as a job for a specified period of time, a single project or task, or some other nonstandard work arrangement (Stewart & Stanford, 2017). Gig work is typically used to earn extra income to supplement their other income for gig work as most of them are not engaged fully in their activity (Stewart & Stanford, 2017). There are two types of gig work that is local gig work and remote gig work. Local gig work includes food delivery, couriering, transport and manual labour. In contrast, remote gig work involves the remote provision of a wide variety of digital services, ranging from data entry to software programming, via platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), Fiverr, Freelancer.com and Upwork (Wood et al., 2019).

2.2 Characteristics of gig work

There are a few main features of gig work. Firstly, gig work has irregular work schedules driven by fluctuations in demand for their services (Stewart & Stanford, 2017). Gig workers can only accept the jobs when there is an opening for them. There are times when there will be no jobs opening for your expertise. For instance, wedding functions and university convocation happens once a year, but there will be times when you have a busy work schedule or none as a freelance photographer at different times of the year. Workers may also juggle multiple jobs at one time as one gig ends and the other begins (Randolph, 2019).

Gig worker has to provide some or all of the capital equipment used directly in their work (Stewart & Stanford, 2017). It means that the gig worker has to use their own money to purchase the equipment needed for the job. Then, most of the gig jobs are paid at a piece rate. Their payment is defined according to specific tasks rather than per unit of time worked (Stewart & Stanford, 2017). Completing a single task would grant the worker their income, and workers could take multiple jobs at one time at their capability. Jobs such as food delivery rider for Foodpanda receive a rate of RM5 to RM7 per delivery order sent, and if the worker wishes to earn more money, they would have to complete more orders (MalayMail, 2019).

2.3 Advantages of the gig economy

Gig workers can enjoy the flexibility that exists in gig jobs (Randolph, 2019). Flexibility is one of the things demanded by the current generation to achieve their work-life balance. Hence, gig workers can choose what project they want and when

they want to work. They do not need to apply for leaves if they want to go on vacation. For gig jobs that only require a laptop and internet, the job can be done while travelling. Gig workers can have the opportunity to try out different types of available jobs in the market and explore their preferred career options (Randolph, 2019).

Besides, individuals who do not have sufficient educational qualifications will be given a chance for employment in the gig economy (Graham et al., 2017). People with low education levels will be provided with more job opportunities. For example, individuals who joined the gig economy as food delivery riders do not require educational qualifications.

The gig economy can also provide individuals who have been made redundant at a mature stage of their career the opportunity to access work (Graham et al., 2017). Individuals who have worked long in the company have the highest probability of being redundant due to their high pay during the recession. Even though they have been made redundant, they would earn income by taking up jobs related to their profession in the gig economy. In addition, seniors who are near retirement or have retired will have a second chance to utilize their skills in the gig economy. They are not ready to call it a quit yet, and some of them prefer to work due to monetary issues or to keep their brain sharp. Out of the 56 million American adults who have freelanced in 2018, 30% of the workers were over 55 years old, and baby boomers are moving into freelancing to earn extra income (Loudenback, 2019).

2.4 Challenges of the gig economy

Despite the advantages that can be obtained from the gig economy, some challenges exist. Kaine and Josserand (2019) stated that gig work is a risky business. With the precarious nature of gig work, a safety net associated with more traditional work forms is not offered (Chen, 2018). The risk of operation is shifted from employer to workers without training and retirement benefits (Bajwa et al., 2018). Besides, capital in the form of tools or equipment had to be provided by workers to support the fluctuation of business and income, or they could be deactivated from an app (Stewart & Stanford, 2017).

Without health insurance benefits or workplace health and safety programmes, the health and well-being risk was another challenge faced by gig workers (Bajwa et al., 2018). Malaysian gig workers such as GrabFood and Foodpanda riders are not covered by social protection under Social Security Organisation (MalayMail, 2019). Moreover, gig workers face difficulty in the management of income and hours. There is a disparity between a minority of gig workers who engage in highly specialized occupations that result in flexible and autonomous jobs, compared to most gig workers who work without specialization (Ahsan, 2020). Even with long working hours, their earnings can be less than their traditional work counterparts (Friedman, 2014). Besides, they often need to take on multiple occupations and work at a different time from formal work. For instance, gig workers have to work during weekends or holidays due to low and unpredictable earnings (Arenas et al., 2018; Doucette & Bradford, 2019). Also, weekly or monthly income is not guaranteed for

an individual to earn in the case of crowd work, as it all depends on their online reputation (Kaine & Josserand, 2019).

Kaine and Josserand (2019) reported that the gig economy had been denounced as one of the worst forms of workforce exploitation by manipulating flexibility and freedom. A few countries have implemented a law on the gig economy like the United Kingdom, the European Union, and the birthplace of the gig economy, the United States of America (Zubir, 2019). It is suggested to regulate gig work by imposing new obligations and mandatory conditions such as worker protections, compensation, training and minimum wages. California enacted a new law that requires companies such as Uber and Lyft to treat their workers as employees (Kaine & Josserand, 2019). The Malaysian government is now considering creating new laws to regulate the new economy and protect gig workers, as the gig economy had been identified as a new source of economic growth. It will be made part of the 12th Malaysia Plan (Buang, 2019).

3 Methodology

A qualitative approach was employed to explore the advantages and challenges perceived by hospitality undergraduates. There are 20 Malaysian public universities, where six universities offering hospitality or hospitality-related degree programs (StudyMalaysia.com, 2020). The sample of this study was final year students taking hospitality degree programs, including culinary arts management, food service management, hotel management, hospitality management, and entrepreneurship in hospitality.

Purposive sampling was conducted in this study. The criteria for selecting the participants were as follows: i) must be a final year student and ii) taking hospitality courses in public universities. The reason for selecting the final year undergraduates in this study was due to their potential to be part of the gig economy after graduation. They also have a clearer picture of the employment compared to their juniors.

The data collection was conducted from June to July 2020. The researcher approached lecturers from the identified universities via email and phone to ask if they allowed their students to participate in the study. After getting the contact details of the students, an invitation email will be sent to them to ask them if they are willing to participate in the research interview. The follow-up email, calls or messages were necessary and had been carried out several times when there was no response from the potential respondents. The interview purposes and research objectives were clearly stated in the email to ensure they understood the research topic better.

The interviews were done in hybrid methods, where face-to-face interviews were conducted with the students from the university that is near to the researcher, and online interviews were done with respondents who stay far from the researcher.

The data from the interview has saturated at the tenth participant, in which there was no repeating of codes. The trustworthiness of the data was achieved via peer review and inter-coder agreement.

4 Results

The results of this study comprise the participants' profiles, the themes extracted for both the advantages and challenges of the gig economy from the perspective of hospitality undergraduates.

4.1 Participants' profile

The results of this study were derived from ten hospitality undergraduates. Table 1 presents the participants' profiles, where they studied in five different public universities in Malaysia. They were final year students from the program field of foodservice management, hotel management, tourism planning and hospitality management, hospitality management, and entrepreneurship in hospitality. The program names are not displayed in the table to ensure the anonymity of the university.

Table 1: The participants' profile

Participant Code	Program field	University Code
P01	Food Service Management	University A
P02	Food Service Management	University A
P03	Food Service Management	University A
P04	Food Service Management	University A
P05	Hotel Management	University B
P06	Tourism Planning and Hospitality Management	University C
P07	Hospitality Management	University D
P08	Hospitality Management	University D
P09	Entrepreneurship in Hospitality	University E
P10	Entrepreneurship in Hospitality	University E

4.2 Advantages of the gig economy

This study extracted three advantages of the gig economy from the perspective of hospitality undergraduates, namely: 1) flexibility, 2) high pay, and 3) low stress. Each of these advantages is elaborated in the following sub-sections.

4.2.1 Flexibility

The hospitality undergraduates agreed that one of the main advantages of working in the gig economy is obtaining flexibility. The themes of flexibility consisted of three codes, which were a) flexible work time, b) flexible workplace, and c) flexible attire. Flexibility in work is employees ability to control their time, the location of work, and the ability to schedule work offered by an employer (Atkinson & Hall,

2011). Flexibility is one of the appealing aspects of Generation Z work ethics. Hence, this advantage would attract Generation Z to work in the gig economy.

4.2.1.1 Flexible work time

One of the participants mentioned that he would spend more time with his family or have more time to do another job for additional income by having flexible work time. Another expressed that being a gig worker, they would have the ability to control their work time as they could choose to accept or reject the job offers. The flexibility in the work time will enable them to do something else in the middle of their job contract.

"We will have flexible work time. So which mean that if I like I to finish the job earlier, so for the remaining time I will have more time with my family or maybe time to find another job." (P01)

"If I were to do a normal fixed hour job like I need to go to work at the fixed hours from 8 to 5. But then if I am going to continue my studies for a Master's or PhD, maybe considering a gig work is a better choice because I can focus on my studies as well as having a part-time job. When I am free I can work, when I am not free then I can postpone the work to another time or another day." (P03)

4.2.1.2 Flexible workplace

Besides flexible work time, there is also a flexible workplace as working in the gig economy does not require the employee to work in an office, and they could do their work anywhere as long there is internet access.

"You don't need to travel to the office which might be far from your workplace and then you might also be able to get the work done through your phone or laptop anywhere which you have access to the internet." (P03)

"Flexible lifestyle is like you can just work from home or anywhere that has internet access so you can even work when you go travelling." (P08)

4.2.1.3 Flexible attire

The flexibility of choosing an attire is vital to the participant of this study as jobs in the gig economy do not require a fixed attire.

"The flexibility of choosing an attire. You don't need to wear uniforms for example like if you work as a full-time worker in a food and beverage, you need to wear the uniform for the whole day, the whole week. But if you work as a Foodpanda or Grabfood driver, you don't need to wear a fixed attire." (P09)

4.2.2 High pay

The second advantage in the gig economy found in this study was high pay. The majority of the participants perceived gig jobs offered high payments based on their friends who worked as gigger.

"I heard about this one story from my friend. He worked as a food delivery person. He said that like one to three hours, he already gets two hundred and I was like wow and the pay is already high for two hours. So imagine if he worked for twelve hours. So I think the gig economy really pays them handsomely." (P04)

"The payment for the job is usually high because my friend said that he can earn about 20 ringgit per hour as a grab rider." (P08)

4.2.3 Low stress

According to the World Health Organisation, work stress is defined as the response people may have when work demands and pressures are not matched to their knowledge and abilities. Several factors cause work-related stress: poor work organization, poor work design, poor management, unsatisfactory working conditions, and the lack of support from supervisors and colleagues (World Health Organisation, 2020). Some participants perceived that working in the gig economy does not give as much stress as a full-time job.

"Compared to normal employment jobs, you do not need to deal with a lot of different people and you know your workplace usually will have politics. So for the gig economy, you will be working for yourself and you only need to deal with the people who give the job." (P08)

"Why do I think it will be less stressful because you don't need to deal with other workers in the company as well as the boss. Working in the gig economy means you will be working for yourself and don't need to face workplace politics." (P10)

4.3 Challenges of the gig economy

On the other hand, there were six challenges of the gig economy found in this study: 1) absence of benefit, 2) unpredictable, 3) high competition, 4) self-work equipment, 5) personal development, and 6) work environment. Each of the challenges is described in the following sub-sections.

4.3.1 Absence of benefit

According to Martocchio (2014), employee benefit is defined as compensation other than hourly wage or salary. It is also a critical component of the total compensation packages offered by employers. However, gig workers do not receive

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benefits compared to full-time workers, and the absence of benefits is perceived as a challenge to the gig economy.

"I would say like people working in the gig economy will have less benefits or do not have benefits such as EPF, health insurance compared to those working in full-time employment." (P08)

"No benefits mean like people working in a full-time employment will be entitled different kind of benefits such as annual leave, EPF, health insurance and others whereas people working in the gig economy do not have this kind of benefits." (P10)

Working without benefits is a great challenge. Workers will be unprotected for vast amounts of employment rights, with no health insurance, pension plans, statutory sick pay, maternity leave and other essential benefits that a standard employer-employee relationship provides (De Stefano, 2015). This finding is further supported by Bajwa et al. (2018), where the operation risk is shifted from an employer to a worker in the absence of training and retirement benefits.

4.3.2 Unpredictable

The majority of the participants expressed concern regarding the unpredictable work as a challenge in the gig economy. The availability of clients for food delivery or e-hailing drivers tasks contributes to the irregularity of work as explained by the second participant.

"What I know... just like a freelancer if someone finds them to work for a few days, then they only get paid for that few days." (P07)

"You might not even get the job, which also leads to job inconsistency and your income every month will be not the same." (P08)

"If you compare to the full-time workers, they will have a fixed salary for the month. If you don't work, you will not have an income at all." (P09)

4.3.3 High competition

Working in the gig economy for some sectors is competitive as the worker has to compete with people worldwide. When a task can be taken remotely, people working in the gig economy will compete with other individuals locally or globally (Brought et al., 2018). The competitive gig market would make it hard to secure a job and build a reputable profile. Many people are competing for the same type of job with their skills and experiences. Some participants perceived gig workers face high competition if and this is one of the challenges for them.

"Right now we are facing the COVID pandemic... so many people do not have a job... especially people who work in the tourism or hospitality areas have to

rely on the food application to work for food delivery. There might be many competitors in this area." (P04)

"Let's say we take the data analyst job as an example, the employer has the power to choose who they want to do the job for them, and you need to remember that you are not alone. You are competing with other people with the same talent or experience." (P08)

4.3.4 Self-work equipment

Different types of self-work equipment were needed according to the nature of work in the gig work (Brought et al., 2018). According to a study by Stewart and Stanford (2017), capital in the form of tools or equipment had to be provided by workers. This study explored two codes under the challenge of self-work equipment: availability of self-work equipment, and maintenance of self-work equipment.

4.3.4.1 Availability of self-work equipment

The availability of self-work equipment would determine if a person could take up a gig job. Gig workers who want to work in the food delivery sector like GrabFood or Foodpanda would invest in initial capital to purchase a vehicle such as a motorcycle. This is further supported as workers in the gig economy must invest some capital into a business over which they have little control (Mills & Jan, 2017).

"GrabFood rider needs to have a motorcycle to do the work. So those who do not have a motorcycle will not be able to do the work and they have to fork out their money to buy one." (P08)

"Let's take an example... photographers or video editors, they all need a camera or a high-tech processor laptop in order to do their job. So before they can do the job, they need to have the equipment or not they have to invest their money to get the equipment first." (P10)

4.3.4.2 Maintenance of self-work equipment

As there is no benefit provided in the gig economy, gig workers have to bear their own cost, including maintenance of their equipment. One of the participants agreed that a food rider would definitely spend more on vehicle maintenance.

"For the delivery riders, they have to frequently change the engine oil as the kilometre will be increased immediately." (P02)

4.3.5 Personal development

The deciding factors in personal development are soft skills that help to enhance career prospects. Soft skill is a range of abilities including work ethics, courtesy, teamwork, self-discipline and self-confidence, professional presence, language proficiency, cultural sensitivity, communication skills, ability to accept and learn from

criticism, ability to handle client relationships, networking, creativity, ability to self-motivate and lead others, time management, leadership and interpersonal skills (Kunbakonam, 2016). This study revealed that a gig economy did not contribute to personal development, represented by two codes: no career advancement and no skill improvement.

4.3.5.1 No career advancement

A career reflects an employee's progress in one company from a lower to a higher work position throughout the employment (Chlebikova et al., 2015). Participants from this study expressed that no career advancement will challenge the gig economy as gig workers will remain to perform the same job. There is limited opportunity for career progression as gig workers do not receive formal training or on-the-job training, as provided to full-time employees for their career development (Brought et al., 2018).

"I think working in the gig economy will not have any career advancement opportunity because they will be doing the same job." (P08)

4.3.5.2 No skill improvement

According to the type of job and industry, the skills required to work in the gig economy vary. Gig works such as food delivery or e-hailing limit the development of new skills, and the jobs are not beneficial to be done for an extended period of time.

"I want to add the disadvantage of the gig economy which is yes you have the flexible time to work and you can work at any time, but the work is repeated so you cannot improve your soft skills or other skills, which is not an advantage for you." (P02)

4.3.6 Work environment

According to Tripathi (2014), the work environment can be defined as the environment that includes physical setting, job profile, culture and market condition. The working environment comprises policies, rules, culture, resources, working relationships, work location, internal and external environmental factors, all of which influence how employees perform their job functions (Opperman, 2002). This study extracted two codes that reflect the unfavourable work environment: 1) workplace and schedule, and b) the internet facility.

4.3.6.1 Workplace and schedule

A participant viewed the workplace and schedule in the gig work environment negatively, where she expressed that she will get distracted if she works from home, which will lead to the poor work quality.

"Maybe if you are doing work at home, you get distracted by some activities happening at your home. Sometimes your other family members come to visit you, so you need to go down and entertain them instead of doing your work. When your working area is near your bed, you get distracted. Every time after having your lunch, you feel tired and easily go to take some rest. So most of the job might be procrastinated due to these situations." (P03)

4.3.6.2 The internet facility

The participant of this study also expressed concern about internet access, which could be a challenge for people in rural areas. A large percentage of the gig economy depends on a digital platform, where internet access is crucial and might not be available in remote areas (Kingsley et al., 2014).

"Maybe for those in the rural area, they don't have good internet access. For freelance workers, it will be difficult for them because they will need to find an internet connection to get the work done. Or maybe when there is anyone who is trying to contact them to get the work done by a few days, they cannot be done." (P03)

Table 2 summarizes the findings of this study, comprising three advantages and six challenges of the gig economy perceived by hospitality undergraduate students from Malaysian public universities.

Table 2: Advantages and challenges of the gig economy perceived by the hospitality undergraduate students from Malaysian public universities

Advantages	Challenges	
Flexibility	Absence of benefits	
 Flexible work time 		
 Flexible workplace 		
 Flexible attire 		
High pay	Unpredictable	
Low stress	High competition	
	Self-work equipment	
	 Availability of self-work equipment 	
	 Maintenance of self-work 	
	equipment	
	Personal development	
	 No career advancement 	
	 No skill improvement 	
	Work environment	
	 Workplace and schedule 	
	 The internet facility 	

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The advantages and challenges of the gig economy found in this study could be the reasons that motivate or stop fresh graduates from becoming gig workers. This study identified three advantages of the gig economy: flexibility, high pay, and low stress. The flexibility was an identical advantage of the gig economy, as reported in the previous studies (Randolph, 2019). On the other hand, the hospitality undergraduates from this study expressed six challenges of the gig economy. The challenges were the absence of benefits, unpredictable, high competition, self-work equipment, personal development and work environment. Some of the challenges were supported by the previous research. The absence of benefits and unpredictable jobs were found to be similar to the findings reported in the previous studies (Arenas et al., 2018; Bajwa et al., 2018; Doucette & Bradford, 2019; Friedman, 2014; Kaine & Josserand, 2019; MalayMail, 2019).

The findings of this study are anticipated to provide implications for both theoretical and practical aspects. This study may expand the literature related to the gig economy, particularly in the Malaysian context. Relevant stakeholders such as the industry players, government, and agencies may have insight into the advantages and challenges of the gig economy perceived by undergraduates, specifically the hospitality undergraduates. The stakeholders may comprehend the gig economy challenges expressed by the undergraduates, which may discourage their participation in working in the gig economy. As the gig economy can be one of the solutions to the unemployment issues in Malaysia, it is anticipated that the Malaysian government will improve the laws and regulations to improve the gig economy implementation. Since the implementation of the MCO, there has been an increase in demand for services and employment based on the gig economy. Hence, The PENJANA Gig programme is a government support project launched in 2020 by PENJANA to safeguard the social security and welfare of self-employed people in the gig economy through matching grants (PERKESO, 2020). This is one of the improvements made by the Malaysian government to ensure giggers' welfare.

Several limitations existed in this research, including time constraints, sample selection, and the interview mode. With regards to time restrictions, it took a long time to obtain confirmation from the potential participants. Most of them were busy with their assignments, exams, final year project, and some were in the internship program. Hence, quite a number of the undergraduates refused to be interviewed for this study. In terms of the sample selection, this study only involved hospitality undergraduates from public universities in Malaysia. It may lead to an imbalance of information that may derive from the perspectives of hospitality undergraduates from private universities. Another limitation is the interview mode. Due to the COVID-19, there was no physical interview conducted for this study. The participants were verbally interviewed through phone calls. A telephone interview was often depicted as less attractive than a face-to-face interview due to the absence of visual cues. The duration of the telephone interview was commonly shorter (Novick, 2008).

Hence, it is suggested that future research include hospitality undergraduates from private universities to obtain more diverse information, and the results

between these two groups of undergraduates can be compared. It is also suggested to involve third-year undergraduates, as they may yet to be fully occupied with all the requirements for graduation. Future research may also examine the undergraduates' preference to join the gig economy via quantitative or qualitative approaches. It is hoped that the suggested studies may extend and improve the current findings.

6 About the Author

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