ปีที่ 17 ฉบับที่ 2 (กรกฎาคม – ธันวาคม 2568)
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Challenges and Opportunities for Huachiew Chalermprakiet University Students within the GIG Economy

Yuelin Cai, Chatcharawan Meesubthong

Faculty of Business Administration, Huachiew Chalermprakiet University

18/18 Debaratna Road, Bangchalong, Samuthprakarn, 10540

E-mail: 1904655224@qq.com

Abstract

This study explores the challenges and opportunities faced by Huachiew Chalermprakiet University (HCU) students within the gig economy, where the rapid expansion of digital platforms and flexible work models in Thailand has led more university students to engage in part-time and freelance work for income supplementation and experience gain. While the gig economy brings benefits like career exploration, income generation, employment access, and skill accumulation, students encounter obstacles such as study–work imbalance, lack of rights and interests protection, unstable income, and health-related stress. Through an online questionnaire, 396 valid responses were collected from HCU students, and descriptive statistics and multiple linear regression analyses were used to examine their understanding of the gig economy, perceived challenges and opportunities, and influencing development factors. Results show that six variables—personal will, bargaining power, platform fairness, education quality, laws and regulations, and work experience—significantly affect outcomes, including study–work balance, income, health, brand building, and rights and interests protection. In contrast, gender and age exhibit no significant influence. The findings offer insights for HCU students to make informed decisions, support universities and platforms in formulating targeted strategies, and provide academic value for future research on student participation in the gig economy.

Keywords: Gig economy, Challenges, Opportunities, University Students, Influencing Factors.

ปีที่ 17 ฉบับที่ 2 (กรกฎาคม – ธันวาคม 2568)
Volume 17 Number 2 (July – December 2025)

คณะบริหารธุรกิจ
FACULTY OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
HUACHIEW CHALERMPRAKIET UNIVERSITY

วารสารบริหารธุรกิจและการจัดการปริทัศน์
Business Administration and Management Journal Review   329

Introduction

With the development of technology and the popularity of smartphones and apps, the gig economy has been booming globally (Bali, 2025; Sodales Solutions, 2024). As an important economy in Southeast Asia, Thailand has seen its gig economy market size expand rapidly, with the value of food delivery and online taxi-hailing businesses expected to rise from 1.1 billion US dollars to 7 billion US dollars between 2020 and 2025 (Leenoi, 2021). Driven by technological advances, the gig economy in Thailand features short-term contracts and high flexibility, relying on platform economies to match workers and employers (Mojeed-Sanni & Ajonbadi, 2019; Park University, 2024).

Thai higher education plays a crucial role in students' employment choices, yet education costs have been continuously rising. In 2024, the cost of attending school reached 60.322 billion Thai baht, an increase of 4.2% year-on-year, with 59.9% of respondents indicating tuition fee hikes and 45.6% of families facing insufficient funds (The Nation, 2024). Confronted with such financial pressures, university students increasingly engage in gig work to supplement income and gain experience, motivated by factors such as flexible scheduling and career exploration (Andriaansen, 2023).

Driven by technological advances and smartphones, the gig economy offers on-demand platforms that connect workers and companies, transforming traditional employment models (Donovan et al., 2016). While millennials and non-millennials prioritize work-life balance (Chayada Khiannok, 2020), college students face challenges such as work–study imbalance and lack of legal protections. A survey of 158 students found they spent 26% of their time on homework and 16% on work, with part-time jobs often lacking contracts and social welfare (Andriaansen, 2023; Du et al., 2018).

An extensive review of the gig economy literature reveals a relative dearth of in-depth research into the challenges and opportunities university students face in the gig economy. In CNKI and Google Academic databases, searches using the keyword "Challenges and opportunities for university students with the gig economy" yield limited literature. Huachiew Chalermprakiet University (HCU), located in Samut Prakan province of Thailand, has 14 faculties. HCU students, as part of the university population, are similarly affected by the gig economy. Therefore, the researcher decided to take HCU students as the research object to study the challenges and opportunities faced by HCU students in the gig economy and give corresponding feasible suggestions.

ปีที่ 17 ฉบับที่ 2 (กรกฎาคม – ธันวาคม 2568)
330 Volume 17 Number 2 (July – December 2025)

คณะบริหารธุรกิจ
FACULTY OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
HUACHIEW CHALERMPRAKIET UNIVERSITY

วารสารบริหารธุรกิจและการจัดการปริทัศน์
Business Administration and Management Journal Review

Research problem

1. What are the challenges and opportunities for HCU students in the gig economy?

2. How can students be helped to thrive better in the gig economy?

Research objectives

1. To identify the opportunities and challenges faced by HCU students in the gig economy.

2. To identify the factors that influence the development of HCU students in the gig economy.

3. Provide suggestions to HCU students in the gig economy so that they can thrive better in the gig economy.

Research significance

This study contributes to both practical and theoretical knowledge by examining HCU students' gig economy experiences. Practically, it helps students understand gig economy opportunities and challenges to make informed career strategies, balance study and work, and gain practical experience. For platforms, it provides insights to optimize strategies and attract more student participants. Theoretically, the research on the challenges and opportunities of HCU students in the gig economy can contribute to this field to some extent, and can also provide ideas for other researchers to study the challenges and opportunities of Thai university students in the gig economy.

Scope and limitations

1. Scope: This study focuses on HCU students' cognition of the gig economy (including its concepts and characteristics), perceived challenges and opportunities, influencing factors on their development, and suggestions to enhance their gig economy participation.

2. Limitation: The study is limited to HCU students, and the sampling method may not fully represent all student groups. Questionnaire design and implementation may have deviations, potentially affecting data accuracy and reliability.

ปีที่ 17 ฉบับที่ 2 (กรกฎาคม – ธันวาคม 2568)
Volume 17 Number 2 (July – December 2025)

คณะบริหารธุรกิจ
FACULTY OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
HUACHIEW CHALERMPRAKIET UNIVERSITY

วารสารบริหารธุรกิจและการจัดการปริทัศน์
Business Administration and Management Journal Review 331

Literature Review

A number of scholars have discussed the challenges and opportunities of the gig economy from different angles. Based on their perspectives and literature review, this chapter explores the situation of HCU students in the gig economy through six key aspects: the concept and characteristics of the gig economy, the importance of the gig economy in students' study and life, students' performance and problems in gig work, influencing factors, improvement measures, and a theoretical framework.

The concept and characteristics of the gig economy.

The gig economy, driven by technological advances, differs from the traditional corporate employment model by segmenting and outsourcing tasks to individuals with relevant expertise, thus reducing business costs and improving efficiency while increasing income for gig workers (Mojeed-Sanni & Ajonbadi, 2019; Kosheleva et al., 2019). It typically involves project-based or temporary work such as delivery, housekeeping, or online services, performed by freelancers or part-timers, who may find jobs through platforms or social media like Facebook (Jitpromtham Nichapat, 2022). This model connects organizations, workers, and consumers through digital platforms, enabling high flexibility for workers to decide when, where, and for whom they work, with participants ranging from full-time earners to those seeking additional income (Mojeed-Sanni & Ajonbadi, 2019; Vallas & Schor, 2020). From a transactional perspective, gig workers can sign formal agreements via apps or platforms and provide services to company clients in return for payment (Donovan et al., 2016). Understanding these definitions and features supports the analysis of HCU students' cognition of the gig economy.

The significance of the gig economy to HCU students in their studies and lives.

The gig economy brings various opportunities to university students in terms of study and life. It provides financial support for tuition and living expenses and allows flexible work arrangements to match academic schedules (Mahmud et al., 2023). Its low entry barriers and diverse job types offer broad employment options, enabling students to cope with income shocks and develop confidence in financing higher education (Moser, 2020). Participating in gig work helps students understand the gap between beliefs and realities when making job decisions (Caza, 2020), enhances competitiveness through skills tests and micro-certificates (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2022), clarifies the direction of skills training (Ajonbadi & Adekoya, 2019),

enriches résumés with professional experience (Andriaansen, 2023), and broadens career horizons through exposure to different work types (Mohd Shariff, 2024).

The performance and problems of HCU students in the gig economy.

University students, like other gig workers, face multiple challenges in the gig economy. They need to constantly improve their skills to avoid income instability and career stagnation (Kusujiarti & Kusdarjito, 2021). In a highly competitive global gig market, it is difficult to build a personal reputation and secure opportunities (Win & Mohamad, 2022). Working for multiple employers increases stress and disrupts routines (Rasheed et al., 2022). Gig workers often lack rights protection, face changing schedules, and are excluded from legal safeguards such as unemployment insurance and paid leave (MacDonald & Giazitzoglou, 2019; Abraham et al., 2017; Baxriddin et al., 2024). Payment issues arise from informal contracts (Behl et al., 2022), and they must bear health costs from work-related accidents (Ravenelle, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2021). Moreover, study-work balance remains a challenge, as more academic time reduces available work hours (Aucejo et al., 2024).

The factors influencing the development of HCU students in the gig economy.

Several factors influence HCU students' development in the gig economy. Personal will, such as the desire for flexible working hours, helps students balance academic and work responsibilities (Finn & Donovan, 2013). However, students face price competition due to low bargaining power on gig platforms (Anwar & Graham, 2021). Lack of platform fairness due to algorithmic control creates pressure and unfair penalties (Shevchuk et al., 2019; Fieseler et al., 2019; Liang et al., 2024). The decline in education quality caused by outsourcing in higher education weakens students' competitiveness (Fry, 2018; Ajonbadi & Adekoya, 2019; Scott & Kezar, 2021). In addition, weak laws and regulations in Thailand result in unclear worker classification and a lack of basic rights such as health insurance and pensions (Murillo et al., 2017; Muentawan Chullachakkawat, 2019).

Measures to help HCU students improve in the gig economy.

The development of the gig economy brings both opportunities and challenges to HCU students, requiring multi-level support. First, legal reforms are necessary to clarify platform responsibilities and protect gig workers' rights, such as minimum wage and paid leave (Kriangsak Teerakowitkajorn & Woradul Tularak, 2020). Universities should improve digital infrastructure and integrate digital skills training into curricula to enhance students' adaptability (Ajonbadi & Adekoya, 2019), while also collaborating with companies to offer internships that support

ปีที่ 17 ฉบับที่ 2 (กรกฎาคม – ธันวาคม 2568)
Volume 17 Number 2 (July – December 2025)

คณะบริหารธุรกิจ
FACULTY OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
HUACHIEW CHALERMPRAKIET UNIVERSITY

วารสารบริหารธุรกิจและการจัดการปริทัศน์
Business Administration and Management Journal Review 333

practical experience (Kirkman et al., 2002; Tetrevova & Vlckova, 2018). Teachers play a critical role and should improve teaching quality through ongoing development (Zagami et al., 2018). For mental health, students can adopt coping strategies to reduce stress, and companies should provide mental health resources (Singh, 2017; Gustems-Carnicer & Calderon, 2013; Hafeez et al., 2022; Rasheed et al., 2022). Students may also form worker associations to advocate for better working conditions (Tran & Sokas, 2017). Finally, companies can establish welfare funds to ensure student workers' benefits and compensation (Mehta & Kumar, 2020; Lehrer, 2016).

Demographic characteristics

This study includes three demographic characteristics—gender, age, and work experience—to examine their influence on students' gig economy development. Gender is included because a 5% income gap exists between male and female gig workers, and this gap is growing (Dokuka et al., 2022). Age is considered since younger workers are generally more represented in the gig economy, and older workers may face more health issues; this study categorizes age into four groups based on Thai higher education structures. Work experience is included because more experience in gig work may lead to higher income. Therefore, it is necessary to explore how these demographic factors affect students' engagement in the gig economy.

Theoretical Framework

Based on the literature review, this study establishes a theoretical framework to analyze the development of university students in the gig economy. The independent variables include three demographic characteristics—gender, age, and work experience—as well as five key factors: personal will, bargaining power, platform fairness, education quality, and laws and regulations. The dependent variables include income, health, brand building, rights and interests protection, and study–work balance. This framework is used to examine how each independent variable affects students' outcomes in the gig economy and serves as the foundation for the questionnaire design and regression analysis.
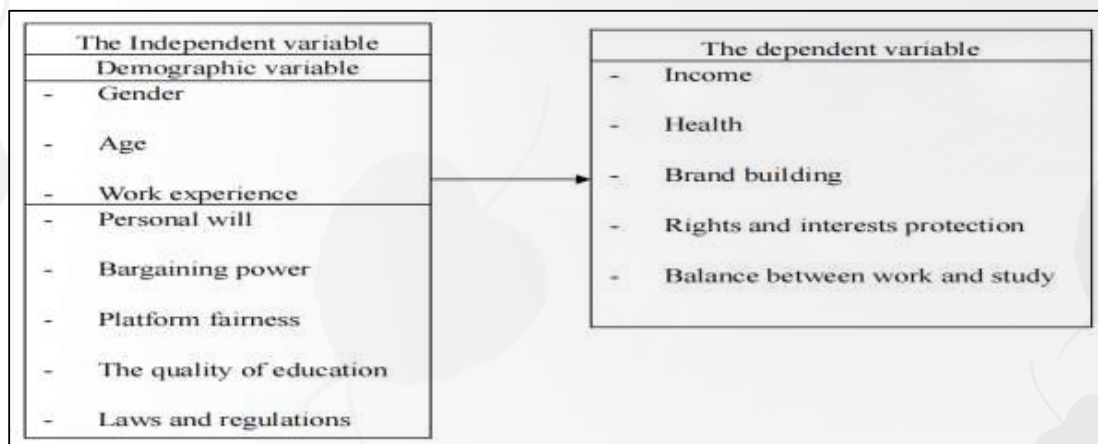
ปีที่ 17 ฉบับที่ 2 (กรกฎาคม – ธันวาคม 2568)
334 Volume 17 Number 2 (July – December 2025)

คณะบริหารธุรกิจ
FACULTY OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
HUACHIEW CHALERMPRAKIET UNIVERSITY

วารสารบริหารธุรกิจและการจัดการปริทัศน์
Business Administration and Management Journal Review

Figure 1 Theoretical Framework

Research Methodology

Research method

This study employs a literature review and a quantitative research approach. The literature review synthesizes existing research on gig economy challenges and opportunities, providing a theoretical foundation (Snyder, 2019). Quantitative analysis uses an online questionnaire to collect data, with items designed based on literature-derived constructs. A 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree) measures students' cognition, challenges, opportunities, influencing factors, and suggestions in the gig economy (Nemoto & Beglar, 2014).

Population and sample

The population comprised all 6,356 HCU students in 2024. Using Taro Yamane's formula in 1937 with a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, the minimum sample size was calculated as 377. A total of 396 valid responses were collected via online distribution (WeChat Questionnaire Star platform), exceeding the required sample size for robust representation.

Data collection method

Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via LINE and campus QR codes. The questionnaire included six sections: demographic information, students' cognition, opportunities, influencing factors, challenges, and suggestions in the gig economy.

ปีที่ 17 ฉบับที่ 2 (กรกฎาคม – ธันวาคม 2568)
Volume 17 Number 2 (July – December 2025)

คณะบริหารธุรกิจ
FACULTY OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
HUACHIEW CHALERMPRAKIET UNIVERSITY

วารสารบริหารธุรกิจและการจัดการปริทัศน์
Business Administration and Management Journal Review 335

Data analysis

Data analysis is conducted using computer statistical software, encompassing descriptive statistics to summarize sample demographics and variable distributions via frequency, mean, and standard deviation (Mishra et al., 2019), and multiple linear regression to examine the impact of six independent variables (e.g., personal will, bargaining power) on outcomes such as income and health, thereby validating theoretical framework relationships (Kafle, 2019).

Results

Reliability of Questionnaire

This study used Cronbach's alpha to test questionnaire reliability, with values >0.8 indicating good reliability. The overall alpha value was 0.984, far exceeding 0.6, confirming extremely high reliability and supporting further correlation analysis.

Participant Demographic Content

Table 1 Demographic Statistics

	Items	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	132	33.3
	Female	264	66.7
Age	16–18 years old	43	10.9
	19-21 years old	266	67.2
	22 years old and above	87	22.0
Have you ever worked while studying?	Yes	396	100.0
Work experience	Less than 1 month	86	21.7
	1–3 months	146	36.9
	4–6 months	101	25.5
	7 months and above	63	15.9

Table 1 shows the demographic statistics of participants, covering gender, age, work experience during the study, and work experience duration. Females accounted for the majority at 66.7% (264), while males made up 33.3% (132). In terms of age, the 19-21 age

ปีที่ 17 ฉบับที่ 2 (กรกฎาคม – ธันวาคม 2568)
336 Volume 17 Number 2 (July – December 2025)

คณะบริหารธุรกิจ
FACULTY OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
HUACHIEW CHALERMPRAKIET UNIVERSITY

วารสารบริหารธุรกิจและการจัดการปริทัศน์
Business Administration and Management Journal Review

group was the largest, accounting for 67.2% (266), followed by those aged 22 and above at 22.0% (87), and the 16-18 age group at 10.9% (43). All 396 participants (100%) had work experience while studying. Regarding work experience duration, 36.9% (146) had 1-3 months of experience, 25.5% (101) had 4-6 months, 21.7% (86) had less than 1 month, and 15.9% (63) had 7 months or more.

Table 2 Summary of Students' Cognition, Opportunities, and Suggestions in the Gig Economy

Dimension	Variable	Mean	S.D.
Cognition	1. Gig Economy Concept	4.12	0.70
	2. Gig Economy Characteristics	4.20	0.70
Opportunities	1. Explore jobs, expand horizons, plan careers	4.36	0.71
	2. Flexible income to support tuition/living costs	4.33	0.75
	3. Low entry barriers and diverse job types	4.31	0.76
	4. Gain experience and enrich résumés	4.31	0.72
Suggestions	1. Clarify platform employer responsibilities and labor law protections	4.49	0.68
	2. Students should actively cope with gig work stress.	4.43	0.70
	3. Provide mental health resources for student gig workers	4.41	0.74
	4. Strengthen digital skills training in universities	4.26	0.72

Summary of Students' Cognition, Opportunities, and Suggestions in the Gig Economy

This study reveals that HCU students' cognition, perceived opportunities, and improvement proposals in the gig economy exhibit the following characteristics:

Gig Economy Cognition: Students demonstrated clear awareness of gig economy concepts (M=4.12) and characteristics (M=4.20), with scores exceeding the midpoint of the Likert scale (3), indicating consistent understanding.

ปีที่ 17 ฉบับที่ 2 (กรกฎาคม – ธันวาคม 2568)
Volume 17 Number 2 (July – December 2025)

คณะบริหารธุรกิจ
FACULTY OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
HUACHIEW CHALERMPRAKIET UNIVERSITY

วารสารบริหารธุรกิจและการจัดการปริทัศน์
Business Administration and Management Journal Review 337

Perceived Opportunities: The top four opportunities identified were career exploration (M=4.36), flexible income (M=4.33), low-barrier employment (M=4.31), and experience accumulation (M=4.31), indicating students view the gig economy as a platform for exploring career paths, gaining experience, and ensuring financial flexibility during studies.

Improvement Proposals: Students prioritized platform legal clarification (M=4.49), active stress coping (M=4.43), and mental health support (M=4.41), showing students prioritize both external legal protection and internal stress-coping strategies, including mental health services, to manage gig work pressures.

Challenges in the Gig Economy

Table 3 Challenges in the Gig Economy

Challenge Dimension	Mean	S.D.
Rights and interests protection	4.35	0.71
Study–Work Balance	4.34	0.71
Health	4.33	0.73
Brand building	4.33	0.73
Income	4.30	0.75

Table 4 Key Items in Top Two Challenges

Challenge Category	Items	Mean	S.D.
Study–Work Balance	1.It is difficult to balance study and gig work due to limited time.	4.37	0.71
	2. Though flexible, gig work rarely allows students to find a true balance.	4.31	0.80
Rights & Interests Protection	1. Employers can change work hours arbitrarily, harming student rights.	4.36	0.75
	2. Students lack legal protections and social benefits in odd jobs.	4.35	0.76

Five challenge variables were measured, with mean scores ranging from 4.30 (Income) to 4.35 (Rights Protection). Notably, study-work balance (M=4.34) and rights and interests protection (M=4.35) emerged as the most pressing challenges:

ปีที่ 17 ฉบับที่ 2 (กรกฎาคม – ธันวาคม 2568)
338 Volume 17 Number 2 (July – December 2025)

คณะบริหารธุรกิจ
FACULTY OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
HUACHIEW CHALERMPRAKIET UNIVERSITY

วารสารบริหารธุรกิจและการจัดการปริทัศน์
Business Administration and Management Journal Review

Study-Work Balance: Students cited "limited time to balance study and gig work" (M=4.37) and "inability to find true balance despite flexibility" (M=4.31). These scores suggest that students struggle significantly with time conflicts, even when gig work offers flexibility on the surface.

Rights Protection: Concerns centered on "arbitrary work hour changes" (M=4.36) and "lack of legal safeguards" (M=4.35), reflecting a perceived lack of legal safeguards and contract security in the gig economy.

Other challenges (Health, Brand Building, Income) showed moderate mean scores (4.30–4.33), with items like "stress from multiple employers" (Health, M=4.35) and "income instability" (Income, M=4.31) indicating secondary but notable concerns. Overall, study-work balance and rights protection require immediate attention due to their highest ratings.

Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

Five variables—personal will, bargaining power, platform fairness, education quality, and laws and regulations—influencing students' gig economy development had mean scores >4.20, indicating broad importance. Selected for regression analysis, they were examined for impact on gig economy outcomes via multiple regression.

Table 5 Model Summary of All Regression Models

Model	Dependent Variable	R	R²	Adjusted R²	F	Sig.
1	Study–Work Balance	0.736	0.542	0.541	466.59	<.001
2	Income (Bargaining Power)	0.529	0.28	0.278	152.16	<.001
3	Brand Building	0.415	0.172	0.17	82.41	<.001
4	Income (Platform Fairness)	0.291	0.085	0.082	36.52	<.001
5	Health (Platform Fairness)	0.263	0.069	0.066	29.83	<.001
6	Rights Protection	0.551	0.304	0.302	171.91	<.001
7	Brand Building (Education)	0.448	0.201	0.199	99.31	<.001
8	Health (Laws & Regulations)	0.567	0.321	0.319	186.22	<.001

This table presents the overall model summary for each regression analysis. R, R², Adjusted R², F values, and significance levels (p-values) are used to determine whether each model is statistically significant.

ปีที่ 17 ฉบับที่ 2 (กรกฎาคม – ธันวาคม 2568)
Volume 17 Number 2 (July – December 2025)

คณะบริหารธุรกิจ
FACULTY OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
HUACHIEW CHALERMPRAKIET UNIVERSITY

วารสารบริหารธุรกิจและการจัดการปริทัศน์
Business Administration and Management Journal Review 339

Personal Will had the strongest predictive power on Study–Work Balance (R^2 = 0.542, p < 0.001), indicating that students with higher internal motivation were more capable of managing study and work simultaneously.

Bargaining Power significantly influenced both Income (R^2 = 0.280) and Brand Building (R^2 = 0.172), suggesting that students with higher negotiation ability had better financial and branding outcomes.

Platform Fairness showed notable influence on Income (R^2 = 0.085), Health (R^2 = 0.069), and Rights and Interests Protection (R^2 = 0.304).

Education Quality impacted Brand Building with R^2 = 0.201.

Laws and Regulations positively affected both Health (R^2 = 0.321) and Rights and Interests Protection (R^2 = 0.304).

Table 6 Coefficients of All Regression Models

Model	Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	Constant (B_0)	B	β	t	Sig.
1	Study–Work Balance	Personal Will	1.358	0.695	0.736	21.601	<.001
2	Income	Platform Fairness	0.671	0.303	0.291	5.108	<.001
		Bargaining Power		0.543	0.529	9.287	<.001
3	Brand Building	Bargaining Power	0.592	0.417	0.415	8.838	<.001
		Education Quality		0.449	0.448	9.552	<.001
4	Health	Platform Fairness	0.692	0.267	0.263	4.942	<.001
		Laws and Regulations		0.580	0.567	10.670	<.001
5	Rights & Interests Protection	Platform Fairness	0.694	0.306	0.311	6.255	<.001
		Laws and Regulations		0.546	0.551	11.071	<.001

This table includes the unstandardized coefficients (B), standardized coefficients (β), t-values, and significance values for each variable, enabling the construction of regression equations.

Examples of regression equations:

ปีที่ 17 ฉบับที่ 2 (กรกฎาคม – ธันวาคม 2568)
340 Volume 17 Number 2 (July – December 2025)

คณะบริหารธุรกิจ
FACULTY OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
HUACHIEW CHALERMPRAKIET UNIVERSITY

วารสารบริหารธุรกิจและการจัดการปริทัศน์
Business Administration and Management Journal Review

Study–Work Balance = 1.358 + 0.695 × Personal Will

Income = 0.671 + 0.303 × Platform Fairness + 0.543 × Bargaining Power.

Brand Building = 0.592 + 0.417 × Bargaining Power + 0.449 × Education Quality

Health = 0.692 + 0.267 × Platform Fairness + 0.580 × Laws and Regulations

Rights and Interests Protection = 0.694 + 0.306 × Platform Fairness + 0.546 × Laws and Regulations

All coefficients were significant ($p < 0.001$), confirming the strong impact of these independent variables on students' development outcomes in the gig economy.

Regression of Demographic Variables

Table 7 Regression of Demographic Variables and Outcomes

Demographic Variable	Dependent Variable	β	R^2	Sig. (p)	Outcome
Gender	Income	0.069	0.005	0.17	Rejected
Age	Health	0.065	0.004	0.197	Rejected
Work Experience	Income	0.148	0.022	0.003*	Accepted

Linear regression was conducted to test whether three demographic variables significantly influenced students' outcomes: Linear regression was conducted to test whether three demographic variables significantly influenced students' outcomes:

Gender did not significantly predict Income (β = 0.069, R^2 = 0.005, p = 0.170), which contrasts with Dokuka et al. (2022), who found that male workers report larger income gaps.

Age had no significant effect on Health (β = 0.065, R^2 = 0.004, p = 0.197), which differs from Rasheed et al. (2022), who indicated that younger workers often face more stress.

Work Experience had a significant but weak relationship with Income (β = 0.148, R^2 = 0.022, p = 0.003*), partially supporting Mahmud et al. (2023), who stated that increased exposure to gig work enhances income sensitivity.

ปีที่ 17 ฉบับที่ 2 (กรกฎาคม – ธันวาคม 2568)
Volume 17 Number 2 (July – December 2025)

คณะบริหารธุรกิจ
FACULTY OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
HUACHIEW CHALERMPRAKIET UNIVERSITY

วารสารบริหารธุรกิจและการจัดการปริทัศน์
Business Administration and Management Journal Review 341

Summary of Theoretical Framework

Table 8 The relationship among variables in the theoretical framework

The Independent Variable	The Dependent Variable	Outcome	Value
Gender	Income	Rejected	β=0.069, P> 0.05
Age	Health	Rejected	β=0.065, P> 0.05
Work experience	Income	Accepted	β=0.148, P< 0.05
Personal Will	Study–Work Balance	Accepted	β=0.736, P< 0.001
Platform Fairness	Health	Accepted	β=0.263, P< 0.001
Platform Fairness	Income	Accepted	β=0.291, P< 0.001
Platform Fairness	Rights and Interests Protection	Accepted	β=0.311, P< 0.001
Bargaining Power	Income	Accepted	β=0.529, P< 0.001
Bargaining Power	Brand Building	Accepted	β=0.415, P< 0.001
Education Quality	Brand Building	Accepted	β=0.448, P< 0.001
Law and Regulation	Health	Accepted	β=0.567, P< 0.001
Law and Regulation	Rights and Interests Protection	Accepted	β=0.551, P< 0.001

Regression analysis revealed significant findings aligned with prior research: Personal will strongly influenced study-work balance (β=0.736, p<0.001), consistent with Finn & Donovan (2013)'s assertion that intrinsic motivation enhances students' multi-responsibility management. Bargaining power significantly predicted income (β=0.529, p<0.001), confirming Anwar & Graham (2021)'s finding that low bargaining power undermines fair earnings. Platform fairness impacted health (β=0.263, p<0.001), supporting Shevchuk et al. (2019)'s emphasis on algorithmic control harming worker well-being. Education quality influenced brand building (β=0.448, p<0.001), in line with Ajonbadi & Adekoya (2019)'s conclusion that educational foundations boost professional competitiveness. Laws & regulations enhanced rights protection (β=0.551, p<0.001), echoing Murillo et al. (2017)'s stress on legal frameworks for gig worker safeguards.

ปีที่ 17 ฉบับที่ 2 (กรกฎาคม – ธันวาคม 2568)
342 Volume 17 Number 2 (July – December 2025)

คณะบริหารธุรกิจ
FACULTY OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
HUACHIEW CHALERMPRAKIET UNIVERSITY

วารสารบริหารธุรกิจและการจัดการปริทัศน์
Business Administration and Management Journal Review

Demographic analyses showed gender (β=0.069, p=0.170) and age (β=0.065, p=0.197) had no significant effects, contrasting with Dokuka et al. (2022)'s gender income gap findings and Rasheed et al. (2022)'s youth stress conclusions. Work experience slightly impacted income (β=0.148, p=0.003), partially supporting Mahmud et al. (2023)'s insight that longer gig exposure heightens income instability awareness.

Key influencing factors emerged as work experience, personal will, bargaining power, platform fairness, education quality, and legal regulations.

Conclusion

This study examined the cognition, challenges, opportunities, and influencing factors shaping HCU students' development within the gig economy. Students showed a clear understanding of its concept and characteristics, and perceived strong opportunities such as career exploration, income generation, and résumé enhancement. Major concerns included study–work balance and lack of legal protection.

To support students' development, three levels of recommendations are proposed: Policy and Legal Reform to clarify platform responsibilities and enhance legal protections for student gig workers, which was the top-rated student suggestion (M = 4.49) and aligns with Kriangsak Teerakowitkajorn and Woradul Tularak (2020)'s call for updated labor frameworks; University Initiatives to address study–work balance (M = 4.37) by offering training in time management, self-discipline, and digital literacy (aligning with Ajonbadi & Adekoya (2019) and Wheelahan & Moodie, 2022), providing critical mental health support (M = 4.41) consistent with Singh (2017), Hafeez et al. (2022), and Gustems-Carnicer & Calderón (2013), and establishing partnerships with platforms to provide internships and mentoring (Tetrevova & Vlckova, 2018); and Student Empowerment for students to strengthen awareness of rights and pursue micro-credentials and gig-based skill development (Gregory & Knox, 2022).

Although limited to one university, the study offers insights into the gig economy's implications for students. Future research may include broader samples or track students' attitudes toward the gig economy over time.

ปีที่ 17 ฉบับที่ 2 (กรกฎาคม – ธันวาคม 2568)
Volume 17 Number 2 (July – December 2025)

คณะบริหารธุรกิจ
FACULTY OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
HUACHIEW CHALERMPRAKIET UNIVERSITY

วารสารบริหารธุรกิจและการจัดการปริทัศน์
Business Administration and Management Journal Review 343

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ปีที่ 17 ฉบับที่ 2 (กรกฎาคม – ธันวาคม 2568)
344 Volume 17 Number 2 (July – December 2025)

คณะบริหารธุรกิจ
FACULTY OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
HUACHIEW CHALERMPRAKIET UNIVERSITY

วารสารบริหารธุรกิจและการจัดการปริทัศน์
Business Administration and Management Journal Review

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Volume 17 Number 2 (July – December 2025)

คณะบริหารธุรกิจ
FACULTY OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
HUACHIEW CHALERMPRAKIET UNIVERSITY

วารสารบริหารธุรกิจและการจัดการปริทัศน์
Business Administration and Management Journal Review   345

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ปีที่ 17 ฉบับที่ 2 (กรกฎาคม – ธันวาคม 2568)
346 Volume 17 Number 2 (July – December 2025)

คณะบริหารธุรกิจ
FACULTY OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
HUACHIEW CHALERMPRAKIET UNIVERSITY

วารสารบริหารธุรกิจและการจัดการปริทัศน์
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ปีที่ 17 ฉบับที่ 2 (กรกฎาคม – ธันวาคม 2568)
Volume 17 Number 2 (July – December 2025)

คณะบริหารธุรกิจ
FACULTY OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
HUACHIEW CHALERMPRAKIET UNIVERSITY

วารสารบริหารธุรกิจและการจัดการปริทัศน์
Business Administration and Management Journal Review 347

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