

## Understanding The Presence of the Gig Economy in Malaysia

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### Abstract

In Malaysia, there needs to be more explanation of the gig economy activities found in the literature. It is challenging to comprehend the size and growth of the gig economy in Malaysia due to the difficulty of obtaining accurate measures of revenue generated by digital platforms. This paper aims to address the knowledge gap by employing descriptive analysis of administrative data from the relevant agencies tasked with fostering the digital economy in Malaysia. The findings revealed that between 2016 and 2021, there was a substantial increase in the number of gig workers and digital platforms that provide gig workers with a stable source of income and an additional source of revenue for the Malaysian economy. Physical gig activities dominated the gig economy market compared to digital gig activities. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in the number of local digital platforms as a result of the increase in the demand for online services. The government must prioritise the regulation of the gig economy in order to protect gig workers and ensure equitable distribution of the wealth generated by the gig economy.

**Keywords:** digital platforms, gig economy, gig workers, growth

### 1.0 Introduction

The gig economy is a global phenomenon that has swept the globe in recent years, disrupting various industries through technological innovation and new business models (Roy & Shrivastava, 2020; Schwellnus et al., 2019). Past studies used the term sharing economy interchangeably with the gig economy (De Stefano, 2015; Donovan et al., 2016; Gorog, 2016). However, the gig economy is usually linked with providing services such as food delivery



services and digital freelancing. In contrast, the sharing economy is usually linked with asset sharing, such as temporarily renting unused accommodation (OECD, 2019). Generally, the gig economy is a collection of markets that match gig workers with clients on a per-gig (or per-job) basis through digital platforms (Donovan et al., 2016; Freudenstein & Duane, 2020; Heeks, 2017a; Lapanjuuri et al., 2018). Thus, the connectivity between gig workers, clients, and digital platforms became more straightforward and instantaneous.

The existence of the gig economy was claimed since jazz musicians performed "gigs" in 1915 (Friedman, 2014) but on a much smaller scale (Migai et al., 2019). However, the development of information and communication technologies (ICT), including widespread internet adoption and increasing smartphone penetration, has contributed to the exponential growth of the gig economy facilitated by digital platforms (Collins et al., 2019; Malik et al., 2021; Vallas & Schor, 2020). According to the Global Digital Report, 67.1 per cent of the world's population owns a smartphone, and 62.5 per cent are connected to the internet (Kemp, 2022). Thus, online talent platforms could increase worldwide employment by 72 million full-time-equivalent positions, equivalent to 540 million individuals by 2025 (Raja, 2018). The rapid expansion of the gig economy sector reflects the increasing unemployment rate and the limits of traditional offline labour markets, which have led to a demand-driven supply in the online market. Gig work has enabled the underemployed and unemployed to transition from full-time employment to a new online-based flexible, albeit precarious, form of work (Labib Fardany Faisal et al., 2019; Oyer, 2020).

In a study conducted by Zurich-Oxford University (Zurich, 2020) in 2018, it was discovered that 38 per cent of Malaysian respondents with full-time jobs intended to enter the gig economy within the following year. According to the Employees Provident Fund (2019), nearly 40 per cent of the workforce will be freelancers in the next five years, significantly higher than the global average of 20 per cent. In 2018, the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) reported that 2,859.2 individuals were self-employed or own-account workers, representing 19.6% of the 14.8 million employed individuals in Malaysia who were deemed to be potential gig workers. By 2020, approximately 26 per cent of the Malaysian labour force, or four million individuals, will participate in the gig economy as full-time gig workers (DOSM, 2020).



However, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the perception of gig workers as essential workers who play a crucial role in society (Friedland & Balkin, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia, restrictions on movement and the closure of public places and stores have led to a surge in sales and service purchases via online platforms, such as food delivery and grocery delivery apps. These digital platforms rely on informal short-term workers to provide these services, thereby providing income to workers who have lost their jobs due to the economic downturn (Nur Thuraya Sazali & Tan, 2019). While some of these workers may choose to return to formal employment as the economy recovers, a growing proportion is likely to remain in the gig economy to address the needs of short-term specialised skill sets and scalable operations (Mahato et al., 2021).

In Malaysia, several past studies focused on social protection and labour market inequalities (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Uchiyama et al., 2022), digital access and competencies (Tan & Gong, 2021), sustainability of the gig economy ('Ainatul Fathiyah et al., 2021) and the impact of the gig economy in tertiary education (Mohd Azraai et al., 2020). To date, large-scale official data have yet to be collected, and there remains considerable uncertainty about measuring the segment of the gig workforce in Malaysia. Existing large-scale labour force survey data from the DOSM may provide some insights but need more precise proxy measures of current gig economy participants. Except for a study by Nurfarahin et al. (2020), little empirical research has been conducted to characterise the gig economy workforce in Malaysia. Therefore, the objectives of this paper are to 1) gain a thorough understanding of the current Malaysian gig economy scenario by identifying the gig activities and their classification and 2) examine the rise of the gig workforce and its effects during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Gig Economy: Definitions and Classifications**

The number of workers participating in the gig economy has recently increased significantly. As the number of individuals participating in the gig economy continues to rise, there is a growing concern about the inability to obtain an accurate assessment of the actual number of individuals working in the gig economy due to the lack of a clear and consistent definition (De Stefano, 2015; Freudenstein & Duane, 2020; Jeon et al., 2019; Lapanjuuri et al., 2018). Inexplicably,



the diversity of terminology makes it challenging for scholars to define the concept clearly.

The gig economy generally refers to economic activity associated with individuals' short-term, project-based, and outcome-defined work. In addition, the gig economy involves exchanging labour for money between individuals or organisations (Lepanjuuri et al., 2018) and online marketplaces (Donovan et al., 2016) that match providers to consumers mediated through digital platforms on a short-term and payment-by-task basis. Similarly, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defined the gig economy by limiting it as a provision of a service such as delivery passengers (i.e. Grab) and delivery foods (i.e. FoodPanda) that match workers and consumers through digital platforms (OECD, 2019).

Individuals providing services in the gig economy are typically called independent contractors (Nadler, 2018), who are frequently informal and non-standard workers (Nur Thuraya & Tan, 2019). These gig workers were categorised as (1) freelancers performing professional or digitally skilled jobs, (2) gig workers performing digitally enabled tasks, and (3) crowd workers performing digital micro-tasks (Deloitte, 2020; Manyika et al., 2016). In the basic model, gig workers enter into formal contracts with the digital platform, which acts as an intermediary in providing client services. Customers use web-based digital platforms to locate the requested service providers. The customers, not the digital platform, are responsible for compensating gig workers upon completing a job for which digital platforms have hired them.

In the meantime, gig workers could also be differentiated according to four main types of platform work: (1) highly skilled employees and independent contractors; (2) cloud-based consultants and freelancers; (3) gig workers (food delivery, home repair, and care work); and (4) entirely online tasks requiring minimal training and experience (Vallas & Schor, 2020). Based on this categorisation, Ziegler, McCallum, Porter and Beketa (2020) proposed four new typologies of gig workers, including (1) the platform professionals, (2) the entrepreneurial influencer, (3) the asset enabler and (4) the tasker. These typologies were influenced by the amount of capital (human, economic, and social capital) that gig workers are willing to leverage.

Another point to consider in establishing the definition of the gig economy is the gig activity arrangements. Accordingly, Heeks (2017b) and Schmidt (2017) distinguished the gig works into (1) physical or



location-based, in which web-based applications were used to deploy gig workers to perform tasks based on the location of the client, and (2) digital or web-based, in which transactions or jobs were performed entirely online, and gig workers were located anywhere. The first category requires platform-arranged location-specific work such as ride, food delivery, logistics, and delivery services. This gig work is more well-known to the general public and more likely to be utilised by private individuals. In contrast, digital or web-based, also known as online labour, in which jobs can be performed remotely via the internet by an individual (i.e., project work) or group of individuals (i.e., scalable micro-task).

Table 1 presents an example of global digital platforms based on the above categories. In terms of digital gig activities, the Online Labour Indicator (OLI) developed by Oxford University identified six tasks: administrative and data entry; creative and multimedia; professional services; sales and marketing support; software development and technology; and writing and translation (Stephany et al., 2021).

Table 1 : Digital Platforms, Classification and Activities

Digital platforms	Classification	Activities
Uber, Grab	Physical gig	e-Hailing services
Handy, TaskRabbit	Physical gig	Household services
Deliveroo, Ubereats	Physical gig	Food delivery services
LalaMove, Amazon Flex	Physical gig	Delivery and logistic services
AM Turk, CrowdFlower	Digital gig	Micro tasking/crowd work
Upwork, Fiverr	Digital gig	Freelance work

Source: Author's compilation

Therefore, the gig economy can be defined as an economic activity characterised by three features: on-demand services, independent contractors and digital platforms (Freudenstein & Duane, 2020). Based on Figure 1, it is clear that the dominant feature of the gig economy definition is the existence of digital platforms as the intermediary between consumer and worker. For this paper, this definition will exclude individuals who use digital platforms to provide assets-sharing, such as Airbnb, and online transactions through the company's digital platform, such as Pizza Hut Delivery which are not precisely labour-related.



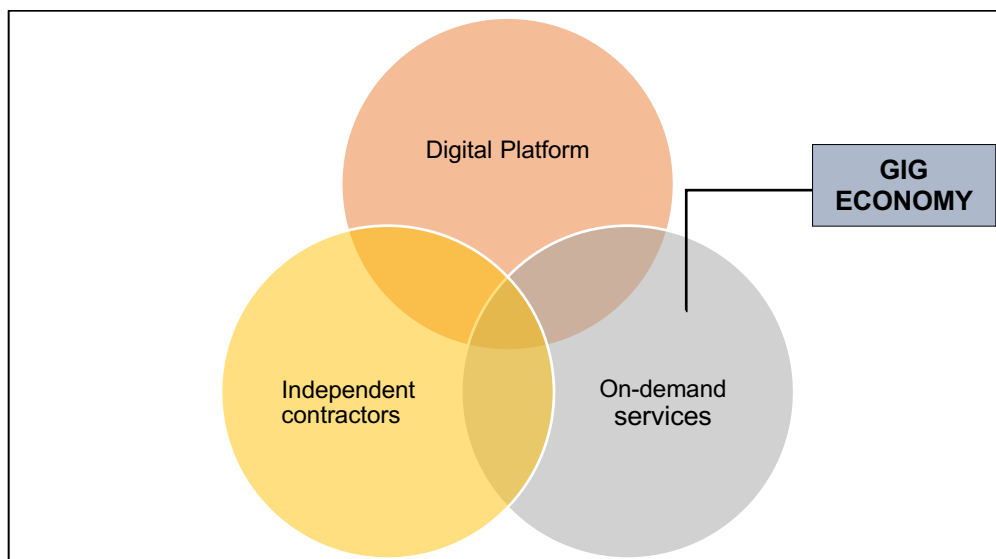


Figure 1 : Definition of the Gig Economy  
(Adapted from Freudenstein and Duane (2020))

## 2.2 The Rise of the Gig Workforce Worldwide

Even as the gig economy promises flexible employment opportunities and freedom of choice, its exponential growth takes time to measure. Gaining accurate and reliable measurements of the gig economy's size and contribution to economic growth is a challenge faced by the majority of countries around the world (Collins et al., 2019; Donovan et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2017; Jeon et al., 2019; Koustas, 2020). Although numerous studies in developed countries have attempted to measure the gig economy in their respective countries, the actual size of the gig economy remains unknown due to the wide variety of characteristics and scope based on different definitions adopted by each country (Freudenstein & Duane, 2020; OECD, 2019). In addition, the data collected from the national or private surveys may be unreliable and quickly become obsolete due to the nature of gig activities, in which the exit and entry of gig workers are rapidly changing (Donovan et al., 2016; Oei & Ring, 2020). Although the existing large-scale labour force survey (LFS) data from the National Statistics Office may provide some insight, they still need to capture the gig workers' participation in the gig economy.

In the United States (U.S.), the Contingent Worker Survey (CWS), funded by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, provides the most



comprehensive estimate of the contingent and temporary workforce<sup>1</sup> (BLS). In 2005, the CWS reported that between 1.8% and 4.1% of employed individuals were engaged in contingent work (Donovan et al., 2016). However, since 2005, the CWS has yet to be collected. In 2017, the BLS began collecting data on alternative employment arrangements to identify workers engaged in employment through mobile apps and websites. As a result, approximately one per cent of the U.S. labour force, consisting of approximately 1.6 million individuals, is engaged in alternative employment arrangements involving mobile apps and websites. (BLS, 2018). Apart from the CWS survey, the administrative tax data depicted a significant growth in self-employment among individuals providing services as gig workers or digital freelancers (Jackson et al., 2017). The share of the gig workforce has grown by 1.9 per cent between 2000 to 2016 (Collins et al., 2019) and become 11.8 per cent of the U.S. total workforce (Koustas, 2020). In contrast, the household survey provided scant evidence of the increase in self-employment that the gig economy should suggest (Abraham et al., 2018).

The gig economy is also growing in the United Kingdom (U.K.). There are three categories of employment in the U.K.: 1) employee, 2) independent contractor or self-employed, and 3) incorporated business (owner-manager of an individual service company). Using data from the LFS, forty per cent of employment growth since 2008 can be attributed to increases in self-employment and businesses with a sole owner-manager. Nonetheless, an intriguing finding from the LFS was that individuals engaged in gig work to supplement their income or as their primary source of income (Adams et al., 2018). It was argued that the current LFS must be designed to account for many aspects of the gig economy. It was suggested that independent contractors be distinguished from company owners and managers (Adam et al., 2017). Alternatively, the Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) conducted a study to provide a more accurate depiction of the gig economy in the United Kingdom. It was

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The contingent workforce consists of contingent workers (i.e., those who did not expect their jobs to last more than a year or reported as temporary) and workers in alternative employment, i.e., independent contractors, on-call workers, temporary help agency workers and workers employed by contract firms. BLS, "Contingent and Alternative Employment Arrangements, February 2005," 27 July 2005 at

[https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/conemp\\_07272005.pdf](https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/conemp_07272005.pdf).



estimated that 4.4 per cent of the population in the U.K. participated in the gig economy. In the meantime, courier services were the most prevalent gig economy activity, with Uber being the most utilised digital platform (Lepanjuuri et al., 2018).

Australia is one of the countries where the gig economy is growing significantly. According to a report, the revenue from the collaborative economy (i.e. gig and sharing economy) in New South Wales (NSW) grew by 68 per cent between 2015 and 2016 (Black, 2020). A recent report commissioned by the Actuaries Institute revealed, through big data analytics, that there were 250,000 gig workers in 2019, with the e-hailing and food delivery sectors dominating the workforce. While in Canada, automation has caused many residents to lose jobs and transition to gig work. According to a study based on data from Statistics Canada, the percentage of gig workers in Canada increased from 5.5 per cent in 2005 to 8.2 per cent in 2016 (Jeon et al., 2019).

The expansion of the gig economy in many countries is a direct result of the proliferation of digital platform businesses. According to a report by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the number of digital labour platforms increased rapidly between 2007 and 2021, from fifty to seven hundred and seventy-seven platforms based on data from 98 countries. Moreover, nearly half of the workforce in many developing nations is self-employed. In contrast, in developed nations, gig work is frequently performed as a supplement to the primary source of income (ILO, 2020). According to Oxford University's Online Labour Index (OLI), gig workers increased by 37.50% from August 2016 to November 2017. Five countries, including the U.S., the U.K., Australia, Canada, and India, dominated this growth (Kässi & Lehdonvirta, 2018). Surprisingly, one-third of global digital freelancers were from India, despite its status as a developing nation with a high unemployment rate in 2021 (Stephany et al., 2021). It represents more opportunities for independent contractors to make a living without being constrained by geographical boundaries.

Own-account workers and part-time employees are categorised as gig workers in Malaysia by the Department of Statistics of Malaysia (DOSM) (DOSM, 2020). In 2018, DOSM estimated that there were 559,000 Malaysian gig workers or 18.4 per cent out of the 3,043,300 own-account workers and part-time employees from the existing labour force survey. This estimate was based on these workers' job status and occupation (Nurfarahin et al., 2020). However, the existing





national survey was intended to measure something other than the precise nature of gig work. A survey reported that about 25 per cent of respondents were in self-employment or freelancing jobs, while 38 per cent had their businesses (Zurich, 2020). Although private surveys are more inclusive, they require significant time and funding (Donovan et al., 2016; Nurfarahin et al., 2020). This paper will contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing a comprehensive overview of the current state of the Malaysian gig economy.

### **3.0 Methodology**

This paper employed a descriptive method to explain the current state of the gig economy in Malaysia by analysing some sets of secondary data from the relevant agencies tasked with fostering the digital economy in Malaysia. The available data were utilised to determine the classification of gig activities, the growth of digital platforms and gig workers. The data for this paper was obtained from the Malaysian Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC) database, focussing on the e-Rezeki and GLOW programs that span over six consecutive years, from 2016 to 2021. These two databases were chosen because eRezeki and GLOW programs aimed at increasing job and income opportunities for Malaysians in the gig economy. Moreover, the two databases comprise the number of gig workers and digital platforms registered with MDEC. However, the data on demographic information about gig workers was unavailable as MDEC did not reveal it due to personal data protection. It is also noted that the two databases may not accurately represent the Malaysian labour force or gig economy job market since not all gig workers register with MDEC. Nevertheless, they are the most reliable and comprehensive databases that provide information on digital platforms and gig workers in Malaysia's economy.

### **4.0 Findings and Discussions**

#### **4.1 Gig Economy in Malaysia**

The Malaysian government has delegated responsibility for advancing the country's digital economy to the Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC). The National Sharing Economy Framework was created in 2016 through a partnership between MDEC and the Economic Planning Unit (EPU), the Central Bank of Malaysia (BNM), the Performance Management and Delivery Unit (PEMANDU)



of Malaysia, and a consultancy firm. Its goal was to clarify the definition and scope of the sharing economy, its key strategies and building blocks, and provide an implementation roadmap from the perspective of Malaysia. The sharing or gig economy is defined as a socio-ecosystem powered by digital platforms that allow the sharing resources between people, governments and businesses, increasing resource utilisation or encouraging access over ownership of resources and assets. This definition applies to Malaysia (MDEC, 2022). The four archetypes with some key examples are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2 : Malaysian Sharing Economy Model

Types	Description	Gig activities	Digital platform
Assets Access Sharing (Sharing economy)	Temporary access to owned physical assets	e-Hailing and food delivery services, accommodation and transport sharing	GrabCar, FoodPanda, Airbnb, SOCAR
Intangible Assets Sharing (Gig economy)	Collaborate or exchange time, skills or talents	1. Digital marketer 2. Content Creator	Upwork, Fiverr, Workana
Good Sharing (e-commerce)	Used or pre-owned goods (both durables and perishables) passed on, exchanged or sold	1. Buy 2. Sell 3. Donation	Shopee, Lazada, Barterit
Money Sharing (Investment funding)	Enable sharing of funds for investment for entrepreneurs, artists, projects	1. Investment funds 2. P2P lending	Indigogo, PitchIn

Source: National Framework and Strategic Roadmap on Sharing Economy (MDEC, 2017)

Since 2015, MDEC has been running two flagship programmes, e-Rezeki and Global Online Workforce (GLOW), to increase the employment options for gig workers and empower local talent as independent contractors. Various local and international platform providers registered with MDEC offer Malaysians opportunities to perform work based on their particular knowledge and skills under these programmes. Blue-collar workers, individuals from B40 households, unemployed people, pensioners, and individuals with disabilities are the main targets of the eRezeki programme. On the



other hand, the GLOW programme focuses more on youth, women, retrenched workers, underemployed workers, unemployed graduates, and youths to empower local talent in Malaysia and utilise their knowledge, skills, and abilities to become global online freelancers.

Based on the illustration (see Fig. 2), the gig tasks are divided into digital microtasks, digital work, and platforms for digitally enabled work. Data entry and image labelling are two examples of digital microtasks that are more repetitive. Digital work, such as coding, app development, or graphic design, is complex work completed on a computer. Digitally enabled work is only sometimes completed on a computer but is made possible by digital tools, such as app-based delivery services, ride-hailing services, or plumbing services. While digitally enabled work is completed and compensated locally, digital micro tasks and digital work originate from global and local sources (MDEC, 2022).



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Figure 2 : Tasks or Works According to Different Profiles, Qualifications and Skill Sets (Source: MDEC (2022))

#### 4.2 Gig Economy Classification

Figure 3 depicts the classification of the gig economy into physical gig work and digital gig work. Physical gig work includes delivery and logistics services, part-time crew, rides and transportation, domestic helpers, and food delivery. In contrast, digital gig work consists of online gig activities, including content creation and review, creative, digital, and professional work (Heeks, 2017b; Schmidt, 2017).



Compared to digital gig work, which comprised only 20 per cent, physical gig work comprised approximately 80 per cent. As of 2016, only 22 digital platforms were registered as platform partners, but by 2021, the number has increased to 150 digital platforms. From 2016 to 2021, digital platforms increased by 170.67 per cent, with domestic platforms outnumbering those owned by foreign digital platforms. Three critical sectors of the physical gig work were private transportation (such as GRAB, LalaMove, and MyCar), food delivery (such as FoodPanda and DeliveeEat), and task-based services (for example GoGet, Bungkusit, Bateriku.com, Kaodim). In addition, digital and professional work was the primary sector of digital gig work. Popular digital platforms include Workana, Collateam, and Scikey. Forty-one per cent of all local platforms on the market were owned and operated by Bumiputera technopreneurs.

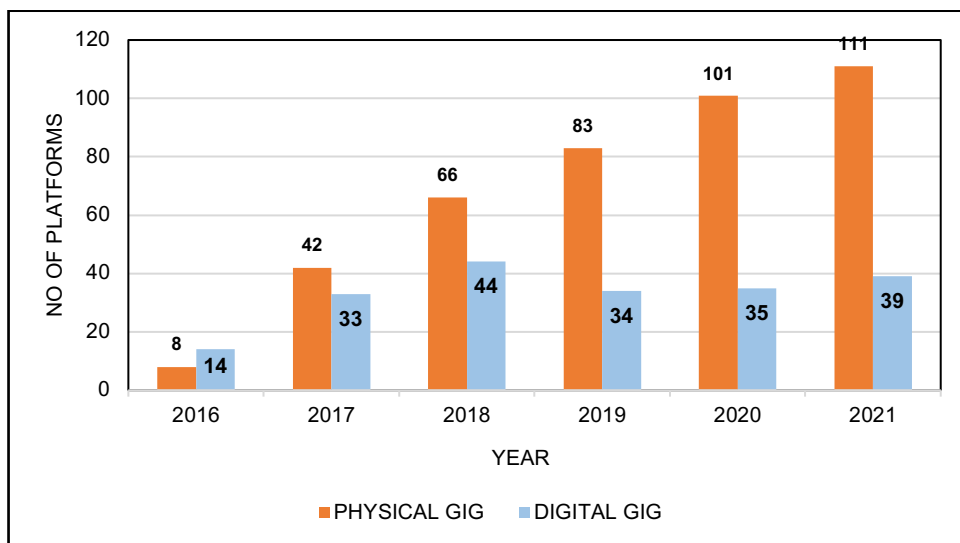


Figure 3 : Physical and Digital Gig Activities

The gig activities could also be categorised according to the skill sets required to complete the task. Figure 4 demonstrates that digitally enabled tasks are more prevalent than digital work and microtasks. Approximately seventy-five per cent of digital platforms registered with MDEC offered digitally-enabled tasks that could be offline or on-site works, primarily physical, that were distributed online and could require specific skills. At the same time, 15 per cent of digital platforms offer digital works that are domain-specific and professional, requiring professional skills and credentials to perform. Only 10 per cent of



digital microtasks were available in the gig economy, where individuals can perform simple online tasks that require no specialised skills and can be completed in minutes. This demonstrates a significant increase due to technological development, individual smartphone usage (Kemp, 2022) and the evolvement of digital platforms globally (Vallas & Schor, 2020).

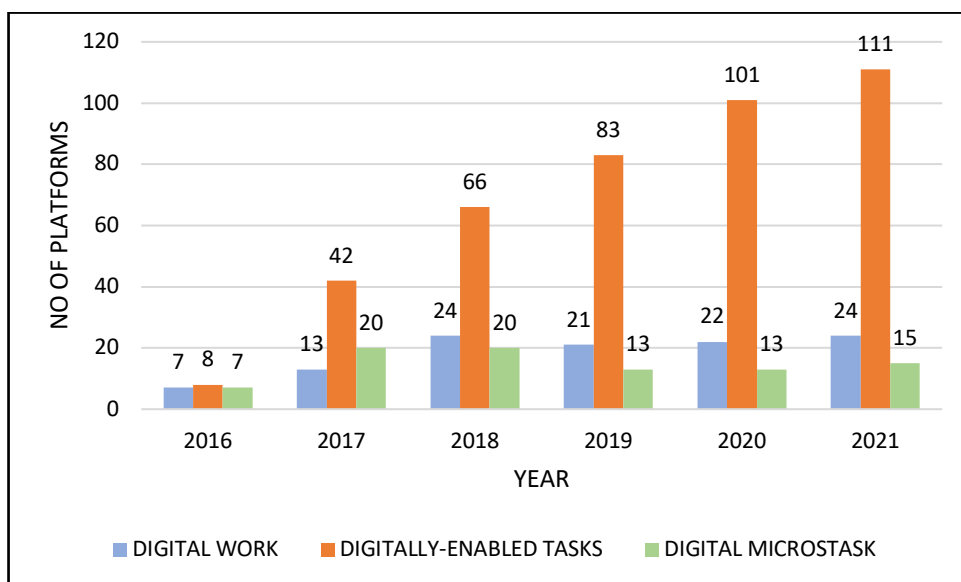


Figure 4 : Gig Activities According to Different Skill Sets

### 4.3 Growth of Gig Workers

Figure 5 demonstrates a 35-fold increase in active gig workers since 2016. Active gig workers are individuals actively involved in gig employment and have earned an income within the past year. In 2016, there were only 29,200 active gig workers; by 2021, that number has risen to 1,033,940 active gig workers. This total number resulted from participants registered for the eRezeki and GLOW programmes, of which 80 per cent are in the physical gig economy and 20 per cent are in the digital gig economy. Gig workers are also referred to as independent contractors, freelancers, and digital freelancers.



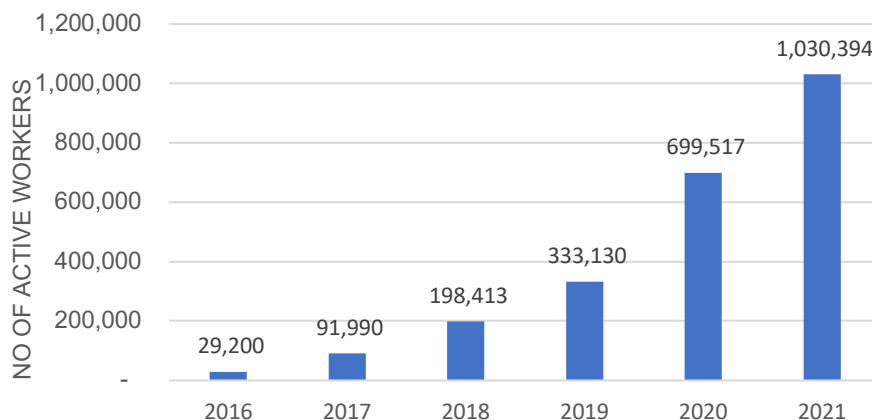


Figure 5 : Active Gig Workers

From 2016 to 2019, the growth expanded steadily due to the government's movement control order (MCO) restricted face-to-face interactions (Tan & Gong, 2021) and the rapid rise in online services provided (OECD, 2021). Thus, the GLOW-PENJANA programme was introduced by MDEC and supported by the government. GLOW-PENJANA aims to assist those impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which causes income and employment loss. The programme enables participants to become successful and competitive digital freelancers who deliver high-quality projects to global clients as their primary source of income.

## 5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper employed descriptive analysis of secondary data to illustrate the current state of the Malaysian gig economy. This paper also focused on the classifications of gig activities and the evolution of gig workers and digital platforms. MDEC, the government agency primarily facilitating Malaysia's digital economy, provided the information. The information was extracted from 2016 to 2021 from the eRezeki and GLOW databases. According to the analysis, the Malaysian gig economy is dominated by physical gig work, where tasks are performed based on the customer's location. Private transportation and food delivery services provided by digital platforms like Grab and FoodPanda were the most popular gig jobs in the physical gig economy. As for digital gig work, digital platforms such as Upwork.com provide venues for digital freelancers to bid on digital and professional projects. The expansion of digital platforms has made them significant





players in the local and global labour markets (Vallas & Schor, 2020). Since 2016, the number of gig workers actively participating in the gig economy has multiplied by 35. Therefore, globalisation has allowed businesses to expand across countries and for individuals to work and travel abroad (Batmunkh et al., 2022).

This paper has two limitations. First, the available data did not include demographic information of the gig workers who participated in the gig economy, as MDEC did not reveal it. Second, the data on the administrative record was also restricted only to registered digital platforms that offer employment mediated via the digital platform. Meaning that there could be a possibility of the under-representativeness of self-employed workers operating informally within the digital platform. Therefore, future research should focus on how to derive estimates based on labour force survey (LFS), household survey, and administrative data integrated at the individual level, such as tax and business data, to compare the information from the sources for the same individual. This integration offers immense potential for comprehending work arrangements' evolving nature. By linking tax data with the LFS, information about a worker's demographic characteristics and monthly income can be obtained. Also information about the income earned by gig workers and digital platforms and their contribution to the Malaysian economy was not explained in this paper which grant another future research.

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