

The Dynamics of the Experiences of Generation Z Students in Undertaking Freelance Work Amidst Academic Demands: A Phenomenological Study

Pinky Nurbaiti Zahra^{1*}, Andriyastuti Suratman²

Universitas Islam Indonesia

Corresponding Author: Pinky Nurbaiti Zahra pinkynurbaitizahra@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Generation Z, Freelance, Gig Economy, Academic Demands, Phenomenology

Received : 25, June

Revised : 22, July

Accepted: 20, August

©2026 Zahra, Suratman: This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Atribusi 4.0 Internasional](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the dynamics of Generation Z students' experiences in pursuing freelance work amidst academic demands. The study used a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method through semi-structured interviews with seven students selected using purposive sampling. The results showed that students chose freelance work because of its flexibility, additional income, and opportunities to develop skills and experience. However, they also face time conflicts, academic pressure, and income uncertainty. To overcome these, students implemented strategies such as time management, prioritization, communication with clients, and managing physical and mental conditions. This study concluded that freelance work not only provides economic benefits but also supports the development of students' competencies and career readiness.

INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology has driven the emergence of the gig economy, a project-based work system supported by digital platforms that offers flexibility in terms of time and location (Wood et al., 2019). One form of employment developing within this system is freelancing, which allows individuals to earn income while developing professional experience without being tied to a permanent employment relationship (Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2018). For Generation Z students, freelance work is an attractive alternative because it offers the flexibility to balance academic and work activities, while also supporting skills development and career readiness (Ashford et al., 2018).

Several studies have shown that students choose freelance work because of the flexibility it offers, the opportunity to earn additional income, and the opportunity to develop professional competencies (Wood et al., 2019; Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2018). However, despite these benefits, students also face challenges such as conflict between academic and work demands, psychological stress, and income uncertainty (Sinaga & Rachmawati, 2021). Therefore, students are required to possess time management skills, self-regulation, and adaptation strategies to balance both roles (Aeon et al., 2021).

Based on these conditions, this study aims to understand the dynamics of Generation Z students' experiences in pursuing freelance work amidst academic demands, including their motivations for choosing freelance work, experiences with dual roles, the impact on academic and personal life, and the adaptation strategies they employ. This research is expected to provide insight into how students interpret freelance work as part of developing competency, independence, and career readiness in the gig economy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Generation Z

Joking Generation Z is a group of individuals born between 1997 and 2012 and grew up in the era of digital technology, thus possessing advanced skills in utilizing the internet and technology in their daily lives (Dimock, 2019). This generation is known for being adaptable, creative, independent, and embracing flexibility and self-development (Berkup, 2014 & Francis & Hoefel, 2018). These characteristics influence their preference for flexible, technology-based work, such as freelancing, as it provides the opportunity to gain professional experience while maintaining academic pursuits (Priporas et al., 2017 & Dorina Nicoleta, 2021).

Freelancing In the Gig Economy

The gig economy is a project-based work system supported by digital platforms and offers flexibility in terms of work hours and location (Wood et al., 2019). One form of this is freelance work, which is independent work without a permanent employment relationship, which is increasingly growing with the advancement of digital platforms (Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2018). While providing opportunities to earn income and gain work experience, this system also presents

challenges in the form of income uncertainty, competition, and minimal social protection (Ashford et al., 2018& Keith et al., 2019).

Dual Roles for Students

Dual roles for students are situations where students simultaneously carry out academic responsibilities while working. According to (Kahn et al., 1964), carrying out multiple roles simultaneously has the potential to create role conflict if the demands are incompatible. (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), explain that this conflict can involve time, pressure, or behavioral issues. For working students, the ability to manage the boundaries between work and study is a crucial factor in maintaining well-being and maintaining academic performance (Sinaga & Rachmawati, 2021 & Creed et al., 2023).

Academic Demands

Academic demands encompass various student obligations, such as completing assignments, exams, and achieving academic results. Academic pressure is generally influenced by a high workload, performance expectations, and time constraints (Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015), and can impact student stress and psychological well-being (Pascoe et al., 2020). Therefore, time management skills, self-regulation, and prioritization are crucial for students working freelance to balance academic and work demands (Richardson, 2012 & Aeon et al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researcher used a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach to comprehensively and in-depth explore the realities experienced by the research subjects. As a framework, phenomenology prioritizes subjective narratives and individual personal experiences as the center of analysis. Through this lens, the study aims to uncover how Generation Z students construct meaning and respond to the phenomenon of flexible work, which has now become part of their lifestyle and professional demands (Safitri et al., 2024). This research was conducted online through the Google Meet platform as a medium for interviews with participants. This method was chosen because the research participants came from various regions in Indonesia. Besides being more practical, the use of online interviews also supports time and cost efficiency in the data collection process. Thus, researchers can reach participants from various regions without being constrained by distance, time, or limited mobility. In this study, seven informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique with specific criteria: active students belonging to Generation Z (born 1997-2012) and have real experience as active freelancers on digital platforms. This study applies thematic analysis techniques to identify and deeply analyze meaningful patterns emerging from the informants' narratives. The purpose of this thematic analysis is to understand how the reality of flexible work life influences the professional development path and academic commitment of Generation Z students.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Dynamics of Generation Z Students' Experiences in Freelancing Alongside Academic Activities

The dynamics of Generation Z students' experiences in freelancing are not only related to their ability to complete work but also encompass various adjustment processes to academic and professional demands. Students demonstrated skills in time management, utilizing digital platforms for client acquisition, building professional communication, overcoming various technical obstacles, and maintaining work quality in line with client expectations. These findings indicate that freelancing requires students to develop various competencies, both technical and interpersonal, so they can maintain their work without neglecting their academic responsibilities.

Students' Motivations for Choosing Freelancing as a Form of Flexible Work in the Digital Era, as Well as Their Experiences in Managing Time and Building Professional Interactions with Clients

Generation Z students' decisions to choose freelance work are influenced by various interrelated factors. In addition to financial needs, students also use freelance work as a means to develop interests, build professional experience, and improve competencies relevant to the needs of the workplace. The development of digital platforms and the side hustle trend have also opened up broader opportunities for students to obtain flexible work. Furthermore, students recognize that although freelance work offers high flexibility, office work is still seen as having advantages in terms of income stability and work well-being. These findings indicate that students' decisions to choose freelance work are not solely based on economic considerations, but are also influenced by developments in digital technology, their social environment, and their orientation toward self-development and career.

The Impact of Flexible Work on Students' Work-Life Balance, Academic Performance, Mental Health, and Skills Development

Flexible work has a multidimensional impact on the lives of Generation Z students. On the one hand, freelance work contributes to improving professional skills, broadening work experience, and supporting students' financial well-being. On the other hand, this activity also presents various challenges, such as divided focus between academics and work, reduced social interaction, psychological stress due to high responsibilities, and income uncertainty. These findings indicate that the impact of freelance work is influenced not only by the characteristics of the work itself, but also by students' ability to manage the various demands arising from their dual roles as students and freelancers.

Generation Z Students' Efforts to Cope with and Manage the Impacts of Freelance Work

Generation Z students developed various adaptation strategies to address the impacts of juggling freelance work alongside academic activities. These strategies include time management through prioritization, resolving conflicts between work and study through effective communication with clients,

maintaining mental health through strengthening self-motivation, wisely managing income, and developing career plans that combine full-time employment with freelance work. These findings indicate that students are not only able to face the various challenges that arise but also develop adaptability skills that support the continued balance of academic and professional activities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on interviews with eight informants, this study shows that Generation Z students engaged in freelance work experience dynamics in balancing their roles as students and workers. These dynamics are reflected in their ability to manage their time, utilize digital platforms to acquire clients, build professional communication, and maintain work quality amidst academic demands. All informants prioritized academic activities, while freelance work was completed in their free time. Furthermore, digital platforms played a crucial role in opening up job opportunities, building portfolios, and expanding professional networks, while good communication with clients was a crucial factor in maintaining work quality. These findings align with (Kelly et al., 2022), who emphasized the importance of time management for students; (Zaini et al., 2025) on the role of digital technology in the gig economy; and (Gussek & Wiesche, 2023), who explained that freelance success is influenced by the ability to build communication, reputation, and client trust.

Furthermore, students also face various challenges, such as clashing academic schedules with project deadlines, technical constraints, changing client needs, and the uncertainty of freelance work. Nevertheless, the informants were able to adapt through prioritization, skill development, and intensive communication with clients, thus maintaining the quality of their work. These findings support research by (Gussek et al., 2023), who stated that freelance workers are required to have adaptability and independent problem-solving skills, and by (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2023), who emphasized that professionalism, reputation, and client trust are important factors in the sustainability of freelancers' careers. Overall, the research findings indicate that freelance work not only provides economic benefits but also supports the development of competencies, professionalism, and career readiness among Generation Z students.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that the dynamics of Generation Z students' experiences in pursuing freelance work amidst academic demands are influenced by their ability to juggle their dual roles as students and workers. Students choose freelance work because it offers flexibility in time, the opportunity to earn additional income, and the opportunity to develop professional experience and skills, supported by the development of digital platforms. Despite facing various challenges, such as time conflicts, academic pressure, physical and mental exhaustion, and income uncertainty, students are able to implement adaptation strategies such as setting priorities, scheduling, communicating effectively with clients, and managing their physical and mental conditions. The research findings indicate that freelance work not only provides

economic benefits but also contributes to the development of competence, independence, professionalism, and career readiness. Therefore, self-management, time management, and adaptation skills are important factors in maintaining a balance between academic and work demands so that students can carry out both roles sustainably.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the research findings, it is recommended that future research expand the scope of participants, use a more diverse approach, and examine other factors such as social support, self-regulation, psychological well-being, and the characteristics of gig economy platforms to enrich our understanding of students working as freelancers. For Generation Z students, it is important to continuously improve their time management skills, prioritize, maintain professional communication with clients, and maintain physical and mental health to maintain a balance between academic and work demands. Meanwhile, universities are expected to provide support through academic counseling services, time management training, skills development, and collaboration with industry or gig economy platforms so that students can gain professional experience without neglecting academic responsibilities.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

For future advanced research, a longitudinal mixed-methods study is recommended to examine how freelance work participation influences Generation Z students' academic achievement, psychological well-being, career readiness, and long-term employability across different stages of higher education. Future studies should integrate quantitative measurements of self-regulation, resilience, digital literacy, financial stress, and social support with qualitative exploration of students' lived experiences in various freelance sectors within the gig economy. Comparative investigations across universities, academic disciplines, and socio-economic backgrounds would provide a more comprehensive understanding of contextual differences in balancing academic and work responsibilities. In addition, advanced analytical approaches such as structural equation modeling or multilevel analysis could be employed to identify the direct and indirect relationships among platform characteristics, time management strategies, mental health, and academic outcomes, thereby generating stronger empirical evidence for the development of institutional policies and support systems for student freelancers.

REFERENCES

- Aeon, B., Faber, A., & Panaccio, A. (2021). Does time management work? A meta-analysis. *PLoS ONE*, 16(1 January). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0245066>
- Ashford, S. J., Caza, B. B., & Reid, E. M. (2018). From surviving to thriving in the gig economy: A research agenda for individuals in the new world of work. In *Research in Organizational Behavior* (Vol. 38, pp. 23–41). JAI Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2018.11.001>

- Bedewy, D., & Gabriel, A. (2015). Examining perceptions of academic stress and its sources among university students: The Perception of Academic Stress Scale. In *Health Psychology Open* (Vol. 2, Number 2). SAGE Publications Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2055102915596714>
- Berkup. (2014). *The_Freedom_of_Choice_a_snob_or_a_gentle*.
- Creed, P. A., Hood, M., Bialocerkowski, A., Machin, M. A., Brough, P., Kim, S., Winterbotham, S., & Eastgate, L. (2023). Students managing work and study role boundaries: a person-centred approach. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1116031>
- Dimock, M. (2019). *millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/ Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins*. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where>
- Dorina Nicoleta. (2021). *Generation Z in the Workplace through the Lenses of Human Resource Professionals*.
- Francis & Hoefel. (2018). *True Gen: Generation Z and its implications for companies*. McKinsey & Company.
- Greenhaus, J. H., & Beutell, N. J. (1985). Sources of Conflict between Work and Family Roles. In *Source: The Academy of Management Review* (Vol. 10, Number 1).
- Gussek, L., Grabbe, A., & Wiesche, M. (2023). Challenges of IT freelancers on digital labor platforms: A topic model approach. *Electronic Markets*, 33(1). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12525-023-00675-y>
- Gussek, L., & Wiesche, M. (2023). IT Professionals in the Gig Economy: The Success of IT Freelancers on Digital Labor Platforms. *Business and Information Systems Engineering*, 65(5), 555–575. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12599-023-00812-z>
- Kahn, R. L., Wolfe, D. M., Quinn, R. P., Snoek, J. D., & Rosenthal, R. A. (1964). Organizational stress: Studies in role conflict and ambiguity. In *Organizational stress: Studies in role conflict and ambiguity*. John Wiley.
- Keith, M. G., Harms, P., & Tay, L. (2019). Mechanical Turk and the gig economy: exploring differences between gig workers. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 34(4), 286–306. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JMP-06-2018-0228>
- Kelly, A., Cuccolo, K., & Clinton-Lisell, V. (2022). Using Instructor-Implemented Interventions to Improve College-Student Time Management. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 22(3). <https://doi.org/10.14434/josotl.v22i3.32378>
- Pascoe, M. C., Hetrick, S. E., & Parker, A. G. (2020). The impact of stress on students in secondary school and higher education. In *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* (Vol. 25, Number 1, pp. 104–112). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1596823>
- Priporas, C. V., Stylos, N., & Fotiadis, A. K. (2017). Generation Z consumers' expectations of interactions in smart retailing: A future agenda. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 77, 374–381. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.01.058>
- Richardson, A. dan B. (2012). *Psychological Correlates of University Students Academic Performance: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis*.

- Safitri, L. A., Kristiyanto, S., Widyawati, R. F., Studi, P., Pembangunan, E., Ekonomi, F., Bisnis, D., Wijaya, U., & Surabaya, K. (2024). *Perspektif Sistem Alih Daya dalam Lingkup Tenaga Kerja dan Perusahaan di Kota Surabaya* (Vol. 06, Number 1).
- Sinaga, I. Y. P., & Rachmawati, R. (2021). The Effect of Work-based Benefits and Demand on Engagement and Well-being as Mediated by Work-University Facilitation and Conflict Among Working Students in Indonesia. *The South East Asian Journal of Management*, 15(2). <https://doi.org/10.21002/seam.v15i2.12119>
- Sutherland, W., & Jarrahi, M. H. (2018). The Sharing Economy and Digital Platforms: A Review and Research Agenda. In *International Journal of Information Management* (Vol. 43).
- Wood, A. J., Graham, M., Lehdonvirta, V., & Hjorth, I. (2019). Good Gig, Bad Gig: Autonomy and Algorithmic Control in the Global Gig Economy. *Work, Employment and Society*, 33(1), 56–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017018785616>
- Wood, A. J., & Lehdonvirta, V. (2023). Platforms Disrupting Reputation: Precarity and Recognition Struggles in the Remote Gig Economy. *Sociology*, 57(5), 999–1016. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385221126804>
- Zaini, M., Miladiyah, S. J., Salim, A., Stie, M. Z., Bangsa, B., Sumber Anyar, J., Tokol, L., Tlanakan, K., Pamekasan, K., & Timur, J. (2025). Balance: Jurnal Akuntansi dan Manajemen Eksplorasi Faktor Pendorong Mahasiswa untuk Terlibat dalam Aktivitas Ekonomi Berbasis Platform Digital (Gig Economy). In *Balance: Jurnal Akuntansi dan Manajemen* (Vol. 4, Number 1).