



Flexible Yet Fragile: Work–Life Balance of Final-Year Students Engaged in Gig Work in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

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The rapid expansion of the gig economy has reshaped student employment patterns, particularly among final-year university students who must navigate competing academic and work demands. This study aims to explore how final-year students engaged in gig work experience and negotiate work–life balance within the context of higher education. Employing a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach, this study involved four final-year students participating in task-based or on-demand gig work. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed thematically to capture participants' lived experiences. The findings indicate that work–life balance is perceived not as a stable or fixed state, but as a dynamic and situational process shaped by fluctuating academic workloads, job flexibility, and personal resource availability. Participants relied on psychosocial strategies such as time management, self-regulation, and social support to manage their dual roles. However, sustaining this balance often required significant personal sacrifices, including reduced rest and limited social engagement, which contributed to basic psychological need frustration and diminished well-being. These findings imply that higher education institutions need to reconsider student support systems by integrating flexible academic policies, psychosocial support services, and work-integrated learning frameworks to better accommodate the realities of student engagement in gig work.

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary labor market is undergoing profound structural transformations marked by the gradual erosion of long-term, stable employment and the rapid expansion of flexible, task-based work arrangements. This shift represents not merely a change in employment patterns, but a broader socio-economic reconfiguration that affects how individuals organize their lives, manage time, and sustain well-being. Global economic restructuring,

technological advancement, and platformization have accelerated the growth of non-standard employment, particularly in developing economies where labor precarity has become increasingly normalized (Bieber & Moggia, 2021). World Bank data (2024) indicate that informal and non-standard employment characterized by temporary contracts, freelance arrangements, and task-based work now surpasses formal employment in many countries. While such flexibility offers short-term income opportunities, it simultaneously raises concerns regarding sustainability, psychological well-being, and social stability. These conditions highlight the urgency of understanding how individuals adapt to flexible labor regimes, making research on work–life balance increasingly relevant not only for workers themselves but also for educational institutions, policymakers, and society at large.

One of the most pressing challenges emerging from the rise of flexible employment is the growing difficulty individuals face in maintaining balance between work and other life domains. As traditional employment boundaries dissolve, workers are increasingly required to self-manage time, income stability, and role expectations without institutional protection. Gig workers, in particular, are commonly classified as independent contractors, excluding them from formal labor rights, social security, and standardized working hours (Kumar et al., 2020). This structural condition intensifies role conflict, as individuals must continuously negotiate competing demands with limited resources. Dodanwala and Santoso (2021) describe role conflict as inter-role tension arising when the pressures of one role interfere with the fulfillment of another. Beyond economic insecurity, gig work is associated with emotional strain, blurred temporal boundaries, and uncertainty regarding professional identity (Caza et al., 2021). These challenges extend beyond individual workers, as persistent work–life imbalance has broader implications for mental health, productivity, and social cohesion, underscoring the need for systematic investigation.

Within this broader labor transformation, university students particularly those in their final academic year have become an increasingly visible group engaging in gig work. The flexibility inherent in task-based employment allows students to align work activities with academic schedules, making gig work an attractive option amid rising educational costs and economic pressures (Du et al., 2018). Technological platforms have further facilitated this trend by lowering entry barriers and enabling students to access income-generating opportunities without formal employment requirements (Mimi & Mani et al., 2024). Empirical evidence shows that students engage in gig work not only to meet consumptive needs and support family finances but also to cover academic expenses and gain early work experience (Zaini et al., 2025). However, this flexibility often masks underlying vulnerabilities. Final-year students simultaneously face intensive

academic demands, including thesis completion and graduation requirements, while also preparing for labor market entry (Izza & Lailiyah, 2024; Pravita & Kuswando, 2022). These overlapping responsibilities position final-year student gig workers in a particularly fragile and complex situation.

Previous studies on gig work and work–life balance have predominantly focused on adult workers within the general labor force. Research consistently demonstrates that gig workers are highly susceptible to work–life imbalance due to income volatility, extended working hours, and the absence of social protection (Sari, 2024; Saikrishna, 2025; Nolas & Fonseca, 2025). These studies emphasize how economic pressure often compels gig workers to prioritize work over rest, health, and social relationships, resulting in psychological exhaustion and diminished well-being. Additionally, Wan et al. (2022) highlight that flexible work arrangements tend to blur role boundaries, intensifying work–life conflict when individuals struggle to separate work from personal domains. While this literature provides valuable insights into the structural vulnerabilities of gig workers, it largely treats gig workers as a homogeneous category, overlooking the differentiated experiences of specific subgroups such as students who simultaneously occupy academic roles.

Research examining working students has primarily focused on conventional part-time employment or internships, with limited attention to gig work as a distinct labor arrangement. Studies addressing student work–life balance often emphasize academic performance, time management, and stress, without sufficiently accounting for the unique characteristics of gig work, such as task unpredictability, income instability, and the absence of formal work boundaries (Rashmi & Kataria, 2021; Arifah, 2023). Moreover, existing research rarely differentiates final-year students from the broader student population, despite evidence that this group experiences heightened academic pressure and emotional vulnerability due to thesis demands and career uncertainty (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2021). Consequently, there remains a significant research gap concerning how final-year students engaged in gig work subjectively experience and negotiate work–life balance. Addressing this gap is essential, as these students navigate compounded role demands that differ fundamentally from those faced by both traditional students and non-student gig workers.

The novelty of the present study lies in its focus on final-year university students as a distinct subgroup within the gig economy, examined through a qualitative and phenomenological lens. Rather than conceptualizing work–life balance as a static outcome or measurable variable, this study approaches it as a dynamic, adaptive process shaped by fluctuating demands and limited personal resources. By employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research captures students' lived experiences, meaning-making processes, and

emotional negotiations as they attempt to reconcile academic and work responsibilities. This perspective advances existing scholarship by moving beyond structural descriptions of gig work toward a more contextualized understanding of how individuals subjectively experience flexibility, vulnerability, and balance. In doing so, the study contributes a nuanced account that integrates psychological, academic, and labor dimensions, offering insights that are often absent from quantitatively driven research on gig work and student employment.

Based on these considerations, the central research problem of this study concerns how final-year university students engaged in gig work experience and maintain work–life balance amid competing academic and occupational demands. This study argues that for student gig workers, work–life balance is not a stable condition but an ongoing process of adaptation shaped by role conflict, resource constraints, and psychosocial coping strategies. By exploring students' subjective experiences, this research seeks to illuminate how flexibility simultaneously functions as both an enabling and constraining force. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically by enriching discussions on work–life balance within non-standard employment contexts and practically by informing higher education institutions about the support structures needed to accommodate students' evolving work realities. Ultimately, this study positions final-year student gig workers as a critical yet underexplored group whose experiences reflect broader tensions within contemporary labor and educational systems.

RESEACH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of final-year university students engaged in gig work. Phenomenology was selected because it is particularly suited to uncovering the essential meanings individuals attribute to their experiences of a shared phenomenon. According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), phenomenological research seeks to produce thick and rich descriptions by capturing participants' subjective interpretations, emotions, and reflections on everyday experiences. Given that work–life balance among student gig workers is a complex, deeply personal, and context-dependent phenomenon, a phenomenological design enables an in-depth understanding of how students perceive, interpret, and negotiate the simultaneous demands of academic responsibilities and gig work. Rather than measuring predefined variables or testing causal relationships, this approach allows the researcher to focus on meaning-making processes and experiential dynamics, making it appropriate for addressing the research objectives of this study.

The study was conducted in a higher education context involving final-year university students who were actively engaged in gig work while completing their academic requirements. The selection of this context was based on the increasing prevalence of student participation in gig-based employment and the heightened academic pressure experienced during the final year of study. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, a technique that involves selecting individuals who meet specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Etikan et al., 2016). Four participants were selected based on the following criteria: (1) being final-year university students, (2) actively engaged in on-demand or task-based gig work, and (3) not holding long-term employment contracts with a single employer. The participants' gig work included administration support, graphic design, English tutoring, and event organizing, all of which were characterized by temporary, project-based, or flexible work arrangements. This sampling strategy ensured that participants possessed direct and meaningful experience of the phenomenon under investigation.

Table 1: Subject Identity

Initial	Age	Gender	Gig Work
RF	21	Woman	Administration Staff
DR	21	Man	Graphic Designer
RK	21	Man	English Tutor
AD	21	Woman	Event Organizer

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility in exploring participants' experiences while maintaining focus on key research themes. This technique enabled participants to freely express their perceptions, emotions, and coping strategies related to balancing academic demands and gig work. Interviews were conducted in a conversational manner to encourage openness and depth of response. To enhance data credibility, source triangulation was employed by cross-checking information obtained from different participants and comparing responses across interview sessions. Triangulation helps strengthen the trustworthiness of qualitative findings by reducing potential bias and increasing consistency across data sources (Mekarisce, 2020). All interviews were transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of participants' narratives.

Data analysis was carried out using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which focuses on exploring how individuals make sense of their lived experiences. IPA involves a double hermeneutic process in which participants attempt to interpret their experiences, while the researcher actively interprets those interpretations (Smith & Nizza, 2022). The analysis followed

several stages: repeated reading of interview transcripts, initial noting to identify significant statements, development of emergent themes, and clustering of themes to capture shared patterns across participants. This analytical process enabled an in-depth examination of the internal dynamics experienced by final-year students as they negotiated work–life balance amid academic and gig work demands. IPA was chosen because it aligns with the phenomenological orientation of the study and allows for a nuanced understanding of the psychological, emotional, and contextual dimensions of students’ experiences.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Each participant occupied a distinctive position as a final-year university student engaged in gig work, reflecting diverse forms of flexibility, job types, and role expectations. The analysis focused on how participants made sense of their lived experiences in balancing academic responsibilities and gig-based employment. Through interpretative engagement with the data, several superordinate themes emerged, representing shared structures of meaning across participants while also capturing contextual variations in how balance was experienced and sustained. The superordinate and emergent themes are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Superordinate and Emergent Themes

Superordinate Theme	Emergent Theme
Psychosocial Resources	Time Management
	Interpersonal Skills
	Dual-Role Motivation
	Professionalism Maintenance
Adaptation Process	Role and Time Negotiation
	Role Boundaries
Stability Maintenance Strategies	Self-Sacrifice
	Shared Sense of Understanding
	Uncertainty within Flexibility
Dual Role Consequences	Psychological and Physical Strain

Psychosocial resources were understood by participants as a combination of psychological capacities, social competencies, and personal strategies that enabled them to sustain their dual roles as students and gig workers. These resources functioned as adaptive mechanisms for managing fluctuating demands, mitigating role conflict, and maintaining functional balance amid

uncertainty.

Time Management

Time management emerged as a central resource, manifested through participants' ability to prioritize tasks situationally and respond adaptively to changing academic and work demands. Although strategies varied, all participants emphasized flexibility as a key principle.

RF and RK perceived time as a negotiable space that could be adjusted according to immediate needs.

"I tend to take a more flexible approach to managing my time. It's more about time ranges, like setting certain hours to complete specific tasks." (RF)

"Time and priority management are my main resources... I have to be smart in organizing my time and finding gaps so things don't collide." (RK)

In contrast, DR and ND emphasized structured planning and mental clarity.

"Time and mental management are equally important... I divide my days carefully." (DR)

"I make a very detailed plan... if I miss something, it feels uncomfortable." (ND)

Interpersonal Skills

Interpersonal skills functioned as essential psychosocial resources for sustaining dual roles. Participants described relational competence as crucial for minimising role strain, maintaining professional credibility, and preserving emotional energy.

RF emphasized peer support as instrumental in meeting time-sensitive project demands.

"I also need support from my friends and networks..." (RF)

DR adopted a relational strategy to build trust and continuity with clients.

"The main goal is to make clients feel comfortable..." (DR)

RK experienced interpersonal interaction as a source of emotional relief compared to academic pressure.

"Teaching feels lighter because it allows me to communicate and connect comfortably with others." (RK)

Meanwhile, ND framed interpersonal competence as a strategic resource developed through prolonged engagement in gig work.

"I've learned to quickly adapt to others' standards and build more connections." (ND)

Dual-Role Motivation

Dual-role motivation reflected both instrumental and intrinsic reasons for sustaining engagement in gig work alongside academic responsibilities. For most participants, gig work functioned as a medium for self-actualization, skill development, and identity formation.

RF, RK, and ND emphasized personal growth and network expansion.

“Beyond financial gains, I’ve been able to build connections...” (RF)

“It allows me to be more flexible... and expand my professional network.” (RK)

“I’ve become better at understanding situations and adjusting.” (ND)

DR’s motivation centered on creative continuity and professional identity.

“It allows me to keep producing creative work and build a strong portfolio.” (DR)

Adaptation Process

The adaptation process captures how participants repositioned themselves within the fluid and uncertain conditions of gig work to sustain their dual roles.

Professionalism Maintenance

Professionalism was perceived as a flexible, reflective practice shaped by capacity awareness and relational judgment. Participants actively set limits to prevent role overload.

RF and DR maintained professionalism by declining tasks beyond their capacity.

“I just decline work that comes in outside my scheduled hours.” (RF)

“I have to prioritize my coursework.” (DR)

RK negotiated professionalism through relational boundary-setting.

“I made a new rule to reestablish boundaries.” (RK)

ND framed professionalism as the ability to recognize fatigue and restore emotional regulation.

“When I’m tired, I write things down to clear my head.” (ND)

Role and Time Negotiation

Participants continuously negotiated role expectations in response to diverse client demands and academic pressures. Rather than insisting on ideal conditions, they adapted by lowering personal expectations and cultivating tolerance.

ND and DR emphasized internal adjustment and acceptance of risk.

“If it’s last-minute... I take responsibility.” (ND)

“That’s the risk we take.” (DR)

RF operated within a more supportive work environment.

“They’re totally fine with it.” (RF)

RK adopted a proactive negotiation strategy.

“I set expectations early.” (RK)

Stability Maintenance Strategies

Participants perceived balance not as optimal performance, but as the ability to remain physically and emotionally functional amid competing

demands.

Role Boundaries

Role boundaries functioned as mechanisms of self-regulation that moderated role intensity.

“I try not to be too ambitious.” (RK)

“I set ‘Do Not Disturb’ mode after 9 p.m.” (RF)

“I assess whether I can realistically handle extra work.” (ND)

“I delegate tasks beyond my expertise.” (DR)

Self-Sacrifice

Self-sacrifice emerged as a recurring consequence of maintaining balance, primarily involving reduced rest and limited social engagement.

“It usually affects my rest time.” (RF)

“I rarely have time to hang out.” (DR)

“Rest is what I sacrifice the most.” (RK)

“I use my allowed absences to keep commitments.” (ND)

Shared Sense of Understanding

A shared sense of understanding functioned as emotional reinforcement, rooted in mutual recognition of similar struggles.

“We often share advice.” (RF)

“We complain and vent together.” (RK)

“They don’t just support me—they understand me.” (ND)

DR expressed solidarity outwardly toward clients.

“We’re growing together.” (DR)

Dual Role Consequence

Uncertainty within Flexibility

Flexibility simultaneously functioned as autonomy and instability, producing unpredictable workloads and income.

“I don’t know which one to start with.” (RF)

“Clients just disappear.” (DR)

“There’s no clear payment information.” (RK)

“It affects my rest and academic workload.” (ND)

Psychological and Physical Strain

Participants experienced cumulative psychological and physical strain as a consequence of sustained role tension.

“The burnout just gets worse.” (RK)

“I feel lost at work.” (ND)

“I get demotivated.” (RF)

“Health is really important.” (DR)

Overall, the findings indicate that work–life balance among final-year student gig workers is flexible yet fragile, sustained through adaptive strategies

that frequently require personal sacrifice and place long-term well-being at risk.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the four participants did not interpret work–life balance as a stable or ideal condition, but rather as an adaptive and situational process that enabled them to sustain both academic and professional functioning amid ongoing uncertainty. Balance was understood as a continuous effort to prevent role overload and psychological exhaustion through flexible adjustments, boundary regulation, and strategic use of personal and social resources.

Psychosocial resources were perceived as a combination of internal and external assets that allowed participants to cope with the dual pressures of academic and gig work demands. This perspective aligns with Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, which posits that individuals strive to acquire, protect, and maintain valued resources to preserve psychological well-being (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Within this framework, personal competencies such as time management and self-regulation function as convertible resources that support goal clarity and directional control under uncertain conditions (Smith et al., 2025).

The Adaptation Process reflects participants' capacity to mobilize personal resources in response to dual-role challenges. Consistent with the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Theory, participants relied on personal resources such as self-efficacy, resilience, and realistic self-appraisal to meet competing demands (Bakker & de Vries, 2021). These strategies were evident in boundary negotiation, prioritization of core responsibilities, and recovery behaviors when personal capacity declined. Such adaptive practices demonstrate that professionalism in gig work is maintained through self-awareness and relational accountability, echoing findings that gig workers tend to adopt approach-oriented coping strategies that promote lower stress and better well-being (Hafeez et al., 2021).

Beyond individual coping, a Shared Sense of Understanding among fellow student gig workers emerged as a critical emotional resource. Participants described mutual recognition of shared struggles as a source of solidarity and psychological relief. This finding resonates with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which emphasizes relatedness as a fundamental psychological need that enhances intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement across life domains (Wang et al., 2019).

Within the Stability Maintenance Strategies theme, participants emphasized the importance of maintaining clear personal boundaries, such as limiting work-related communication or declining additional tasks when capacity was constrained. These practices align with Border Theory, which

argues that individuals actively construct psychological and temporal boundaries to reduce role conflict and maintain functional stability (Mcneil & Cullington, 2025). This finding supports prior research showing that excessive flexibility without boundary regulation increases role conflict and psychological strain, whereas stronger segmentation contributes to greater well-being (Tsen et al., 2021).

Despite these strategies, maintaining dual-role functioning often required self-sacrifice, particularly in the form of reduced rest, social interaction, and emotional recovery. From an SDT perspective, such sacrifices reflect unmet needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are essential for psychological health (Ryan & Deci, 2020). When these needs remain chronically unfulfilled, individuals experience motivational depletion and diminished resilience (Houfort et al., 2022). Consequently, the flexibility of gig work became a double-edged sword offering autonomy while simultaneously intensifying workload and limiting recovery an observation consistent with prior studies highlighting the ambivalent nature of flexibility in gig employment (Luo & Tharumarajah, 2021).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that work–life balance among student gig workers is not a fixed or idealized condition but a continuous adaptive process shaped by fluctuating academic and work demands. The central insight of this research lies in understanding balance as an outcome of adaptive capacity, in which student gig workers actively conserve and mobilize psychosocial resources such as time management, self-regulation, and boundary-setting to sustain both academic performance and professional engagement. By integrating perspectives from Conservation of Resources theory, Job Demands Resources theory, and Self-Determination Theory, this study contributes to the academic discourse on educational management and labor studies by highlighting how flexible employment intersects with student well-being. The findings extend existing literature by offering a nuanced, experience-based understanding of how gig work flexibility simultaneously enables autonomy and generates vulnerability when personal resources are constrained.

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. The small number of participants and the phenomenological design limit the generalizability of the findings beyond similar contexts of final-year student gig workers. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the data restricts insight into long-term adaptation and resource recovery processes. Future research is therefore encouraged to employ longitudinal or mixed-method designs to examine how psychological resources are replenished over time and how

adaptive strategies evolve across different stages of academic life. Further studies may also explore the role of institutional support systems, educational policies, and peer networks in fostering sustainable work–life balance and psychological well-being among student gig workers.

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