

Understanding Part-Time Work Participation Among Low-Income Households: Urban and Rural Malaysia Perspectives

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Abstract

This study examines the factors influencing part-time employment among low-income households in Malaysia, focusing on urban and rural differences. Using a sample of 1,536 respondents from low-income households, the research examines the impact of economic perceptions, education, health status, and social belonging on the decision to take part-time jobs. A Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) analysis is employed to identify significant relationships between these variables and part-time employment. The findings reveal that positive perceptions of economic conditions and health increase part-time job participation, while better education and strong social ties reduce it. The study also highlights the moderating effect of urban-rural differences on these relationships, with rural areas facing greater challenges in education and healthcare access. This research provides insights into policy interventions needed to support low-income households, particularly in rural areas.

Keywords: Low-income household; Part-time employment; PLS-SEM analysis; Rural-urban differences

1.0 Introduction

Malaysia, like other developing nations, continues to face significant socioeconomic challenges, particularly among low-income households in both urban and rural settings. While urban poverty has generally declined, income inequality remains a critical issue, reflected in a Gini coefficient of 0.46, indicating persistent economic disparity (World Bank, 2022). Approximately 5% of the population remains affected by poverty, with rural areas, especially in East Malaysia, experiencing the most severe economic difficulties (Mayan & Nor, 2020). The B40 group, representing the bottom 40% of income earners with a monthly income below RM4,850, faces escalating costs of living, especially in urban areas (Rashid, Ngah & Misnan, 2019)). As a coping mechanism, many low-income households turn to part-time employment or side jobs, though this often does not suffice to lift them out of economic vulnerability (Mustapa, Mamun & Ibrahim, 2018).

The involvement of low-income households in part-time employment in Malaysia is closely linked to economic pressures, access to education, and health considerations. For instance, research from UNICEF reports that 8 out of 10 low-income households struggle to meet basic necessities due to increasing living expenses, which drives many to pursue part-time

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employment. These financial challenges are further exacerbated by increasing education expenses, which compel families to seek additional income (UNICEF, 2024).

According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia, as of July 2024, the overall labour force participation rate (LFPR) in Malaysia was approximately 70.4%, with part-time employment being a significant component of this statistics (DOSM, 2024). The involvement of low-income households in part-time jobs shows clear geographic distinctions between rural and urban Malaysia. For example, the types of part-time jobs available differ significantly, with rural areas being more reliant on lower-skilled sectors such as agriculture, while urban regions offer more diverse employment opportunities (Rashid et al., 2019). Urban areas see a higher participation in the gig economy, with jobs such as food delivery and courier services providing essential income streams for low-income households (Harun, Mohamad Ali, & Mohd Ali Khan, 2020).

The 12th Malaysia Plan aims to address these disparities by promoting job creation and improving income levels, with a focus on narrowing income gap between rural states like Sabah and Sarawak and urban centres by 2025 (Human Resources Online, 2021). Despite the efforts, significant research gaps remain regarding the determinants of part-time employment, particularly in understanding how factors such as the economy, education, health, and social perceptions influence decisions to engage in part-time work. The differing impacts of rural and urban environments on these employment choices have also not been thoroughly investigated. More in-depth analysis, including multigroup analysis, is needed to gain a clearer understanding of these dynamics.

The objectives of this study are to examine the determinants of part-time job involvement among low-income households in both urban and rural Malaysia. The research seeks to explore how various perceptions—specifically of economics, education, health, and social belonging—impact individuals' decisions to take up part-time jobs. The study hypothesizes that a positive perception of economics and health will increase the likelihood of part-time job involvement, while a positive perception of education and social belonging will reduce it. Additionally, the research will investigate the moderating effect of rural and urban differences on these relationships. These findings underscore the significance of government efforts to alleviate poverty and improve the well-being of low-income households in both rural and urban contexts (Puteh et al., 2019).

2.0 Literature Review

The theory of necessities provides a useful framework for understanding the employment decisions of individuals in low-income households, particularly in relation to part-time work. This theory suggests that individuals prioritize actions based on the fulfilment of their most immediate and fundamental needs (Mahdzan et al., 2019). In the context of low-income households, financial pressure often drives the pursuit of additional income sources, including part-time employment as a means of securing essential resources such as food, shelter, education, and healthcare (Yusof et al., 2015).

Recent research on part-time job involvement has highlighted significant disparities between rural and urban low-income households, particularly in Malaysia. Urban households demonstrate higher labour market participation rates, influenced heavily by access to better education and job opportunities (Nor & Said, 2014). In contrast, rural households face numerous challenges, including lower income levels, higher unemployment rates, and limited access to essential services such as education and healthcare. Geographic isolation and transportation inadequacies further exacerbate these issues, widening the employment gap between rural and urban regions (Edirin, 2018). Understanding these rural-urban differences is essential to fully grasp the determinants of part-time job involvement.

Comparative studies have further underlined these disparities in Southeast Asia, where rural areas face structural barriers that limit employment opportunities, particularly in part-time employment opportunities (Hasmayuli et al., 2022). Inflation and rising costs of living have increased part-time job participation, particularly among low-income households. Urban areas, in particular, have seen technological advancements such as online platforms creating new opportunities for part-time employment (Mohamad, 2016). However, rural workers continue to face barriers, including limited transportation and job availability, contributing to the rural-urban divide in part-time job involvement.

The determinants of part-time job involvement have been found to include factors such as economic perceptions, education levels, health status, and social belonging (Hasmayuli et al., 2022). For instance, a study of part-time workers in Southeast Sulawesi found that 79% of these workers came from rural areas, compared to 21% from urban areas. The study utilized binary logistic regression to analyse these differences, underscoring the importance of conducting geographic analysis to understand employment patterns in different socioeconomic contexts. A multigroup analysis approach could thus be particularly useful in understanding employment decisions in such diverse settings.

Research has demonstrated that economic perceptions play a critical role in employment decisions, particularly among low-income households. In Malaysia, for example, 67% of individuals from the B40 income group (households earning less than RM 4,360 per month) reported engaging in part-time work due to financial concerns such as inflation and inadequate financial security (Mahdzan et al., 2019). Similarly, studies in other Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia and Thailand have shown that low-income households often resort to part-time work as a means of offsetting rising living costs, with 45% of respondents in Indonesia citing this as a necessary measure to meet daily needs (Amin et al., 2020).

The perception of education also plays a significant role in part-time employment decisions. In Malaysia, research has found that 48% of low-income individuals with lower educational qualifications are more likely to take on part-time work due to limited full-time job opportunities (Sabri et al., 2022). Similar trends have been observed across Southeast Asia, where a lack of adequate educational qualifications has driven many low-income workers towards part-time positions, with 54% of part-time workers in Indonesia and the Philippines reporting educational barriers as a key factor (Hasmayuli et al., 2020).

Health perceptions also significantly influence part-time employment choices. Studies have revealed that 46% of low-income individuals in Malaysia earning less than RM 2,537 per month and reporting poor health or chronic conditions tend to engage in part-time work due to the flexibility it offers in managing health-related challenges (Puteh et al., 2019). In Terengganu, 40% of respondents with chronic health issues preferred part-time employment as it allowed them to balance work and health needs (Amin et al., 2018). These findings emphasize that health perceptions are a key determinant of part-time job involvement in low-income households.

Finally, social belonging and community support have been shown to influence employment decisions in low-income households. In Malaysia, 37% of individuals from the B40 group who reported strong social ties within their communities were more likely to seek part-time employment (Amin et al., 2018). This is often attributed to the role of social networks in accessing informal job opportunities and providing a safety net for individuals. In Southeast Asia, 42% of part-time workers from low-income households in Indonesia and the Philippines reported relying on social networks to secure part-time jobs, particularly in informal sectors (Hasmayuli et al., 2020).

Recent studies have also examined the moderating role of geographic location in the relationship between economic perceptions, education, health, and social belonging on part-time job involvement. For example, a study by Woo and Kim (2020) found that rural-urban differences significantly influenced job location decisions for college graduates, with rural areas being more attractive due to lower living costs. Similarly, Chen et al. (2017) reported that 70.87% of urban residents in China reported good health compared to 62.87% of rural residents, further illustrating the impact of geographic location on employment and health outcomes. Thus, the hypotheses to be examined in this study are:

1. The perception of economic satisfaction positively influences the decision to take up part-time jobs.
2. The perception of education satisfaction negatively influences the decision to take up part-time jobs.
3. The perception of health satisfaction positively influences the decision to take up part-time jobs.
4. The perception of social satisfaction negatively influences the decision to take up part-time jobs.
5. Rural and urban differences significantly moderate the influence of economic, education, health, and social satisfaction perceptions on the decision to take up part-time jobs.

3. Methods

3.1 Procedure

The data collection process for this study took place in the states of Kedah and Penang. Existing literature consistently categorizes Kedah as a rural state due to its dominant agricultural economy and lower urbanization rates, while Penang is regarded as an urbanized state, known for its industrialization and higher socio-economic development indicators (Hutchinson, 2017;

Rashid et al., 2023). The focus of the data collection was on gathering information from low-income households listed in the e-Kasih database. The selection of this particular database was driven by its comprehensive coverage of economically disadvantaged households, ensuring a representative sample for the study. A total of 1,536 respondents were recruited for the survey, all of whom agreed to participate voluntarily after being briefed about the study's purpose. Data collection was executed using structured questionnaires, which were distributed in person. Given the diverse literacy levels of the respondents, assistance was provided where necessary to ensure accurate and complete responses.

For the data analysis, the structural model was assessed to evaluate the hypothesized relationships between the study variables. The Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) technique was employed for the analysis, chosen for its robustness in handling complex relationships and its ability to provide reliable results even with relatively small sample sizes. The analysis was conducted using SmartPLS version 4, a widely recognized tool in the field of structural equation modeling.

3.2 Participants

The participants of this study were selected based on their inclusion in the e-Kasih database, which focuses on low-income households. The study involved 1,536 respondents, with a majority being male (80%, $n=1,223$) and the remaining 20% being female ($n=313$). In terms of education, 11% ($n=175$) of respondents have no formal education, 21% ($n=316$) of the respondents had completed only primary school, 62% ($n=958$) had completed secondary school, and 5% ($n=70$) had attained post-secondary and tertiary education. Interestingly, 28% ($n=428$) of the participants reported engaging in part-time jobs, highlighting the prevalence of supplementary income sources among this demographic. The geographic distribution of the sample was also diverse, with 23% ($n=353$) of respondents residing in Penang and the remaining 77% ($n=1,183$) living in other areas of Kedah and Perlis. This spread across different states provided a balanced perspective on the economic coping strategies employed by households in various regions.

4.0 Results and Discussion

The bootstrapping results presented in Table 1 show that most relationships between the independent variables (perception of economic conditions, perception of education, perception of health, and perception of social belonging) and the dependent variable (part time job involvement) are statistically significant. The path coefficient for the relationship between Perception of economics and part-time job involvement is positive ($\beta = 0.054$), with a t-value of 1.700, indicating a significant positive association between the perception of economics and part-time job involvement. This finding suggests that individuals' perceptions of economic conditions positively influence the likelihood of engaging in part-time jobs.

In contrast, the relationship between Perception of education and part-time job involvement shows a negative association ($\beta = -0.074$), with a t-value of 1.679, implying that the perception of education has a significant negative impact on part-time job participation. Despite the

negative effect, this result indicates that the perception of education discourages individuals from taking on part-time jobs.

Similarly, the relationship between Perception of health satisfaction and part-time job involvement demonstrates a significant positive association ($\beta = 0.077$), with a t-value of 2.745. This suggests that the perception of health plays a strong role in encouraging participation in part-time jobs. In contrast, the relationship between perception of social and part-time job involvement shows a much weaker association ($\beta = 0.028$), with a t-value of 0.951, indicating that the perception of social belonging does not significantly influence part-time job involvement.

A Multi-Group Analysis (MGA) was conducted to explore regional differences in the impact of perception of economics, perception of education, perception of health, and perception of social on part-time job participation between Penang and Kedah. The results indicate significant differences between the two regions, as evidenced by p-values of 0.000 across all examined paths.

For the relationship between the perception of economics and part-time job involvement, the difference in terms of path coefficient between Penang and Kedah is 0.045. In terms of perception of education and part-time job involvement, the path coefficient difference between Penang and Kedah is -0.083. For the relationship between perception of health and part-time job involvement, the path coefficient difference between the two regions is -0.125. Lastly, the relationship between the perception of social and part-time job involvement shows a path coefficient difference of 0.189 between Penang and Kedah.

Table 1: MGA PLS-SEM Result

Hypotheses	H	t-value overall	β	Moderation effect
The perception of economic satisfaction positively influences the decision to take up part-time jobs	H1	1.7	0.054	Yes
The perception of education satisfaction negatively influences the decision to take up part-time jobs	H2	1.679	-0.074	Yes
The perception of health satisfaction positively influences the decision to take up part-time jobs	H3	2.745	0.077	Yes
The perception of social satisfaction negatively influences the decision to take up part-time jobs	H4	0.951	0.028	Yes

4.1 Discussion

The results show that perceptions of economic conditions, education, and health have significant relationships with part-time job involvement among low-income households, similar to previous findings (Gennetian, et al.,2010; Kurniasari, Suhariyadi & Handoyo, 2020; McIntyre, Bartoo & Emery, 2012). From the MGA analysis, significant regional differences were identified between Penang and Kedah, confirming that geographic location moderates the

influence of perceptions on part-time job participation. However, despite these differences, the perception of social does not show a significant impact on part-time job involvement, indicating uniformity in this regard across both regions (Ledhem & Mékidiche, 2021).

In Southeast Asia, particularly in developing nations, studies indicate that economic constraints are a significant factor in driving part-time job involvement. For example, data from Indonesia following the East Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-1998 show that many individuals turned to informal or part-time employment to mitigate the effects of economic shocks on household consumption (Horemans, Marx & Nolan, 2016). In this study, it was found that perception of economic satisfaction showed a significant positive relationship with part-time job involvement (McIntyre, Bartoo & Emery, 2012). One possible explanation is that people with a positive perception on their economic condition might seek part-time jobs to further enhance their financial stability, pursue additional financial goals, or invest in future opportunities. Rather than avoiding part-time work, these individuals may view it as a protective measure in improving their household's financial situation and better their long-term prospects.

Meanwhile, the study reveals a significant negative relationship between the perception of educational satisfaction and part-time job involvement. Several studies have showed that individuals with higher education levels often exhibit a tendency to refrain from accepting part-time employment, primarily due to their belief that their educational qualifications are sufficient to secure a decent job (Gunawan, Creed & Glendon, 2018). However, other studies, such as Hordósy et al (2018), suggest that in some low-income contexts, the need for immediate income can outweigh educational satisfaction, leading to increased part-time job participation despite educational goals. In the Malaysian context, where education is seen as a critical driver of social mobility, the negative relationship found in this study suggests that those with higher educational satisfaction may feel more confident in their ability to secure suitable employment without resorting to part-time jobs. This confidence in employability may lead educated individuals to prioritize full-time positions that align with their qualifications over part-time roles, believing that their qualifications should afford them better opportunities (Näswall and Witte, 2003).

In term of health, the significant positive relationship between perception of health satisfaction and part-time job participation as found in this study is well supported by existing literature. Individuals from low-income households who report higher health satisfaction are often more inclined to engage in additional work, which can be attributed to their perceived capability to manage both health and employment demands (Gennetian, et al.,2010; Katsaiti, Kopinska & Atella, 2022).

The insignificant negative relationship between the perception of social satisfaction and part-time job involvement in this study implies that while social satisfaction is essential for overall well-being, it has limited influence on part-time job participation among low-income households in Kedah & Penang. One of the plausible explanations is that individuals with higher social satisfaction may not feel compelled to take on additional work, as social belonging might reduce the perceived need for supplemental income. Research indicates that in certain Southeast Asian contexts, social capital and community support can serve as substitutes for financial needs, thereby reducing the necessity for part-time employment

(Ledhem and Mékidiche, 2021). This aligns with findings that highlight the importance of social networks in providing emotional and practical support, which can mitigate the pressures to engage in part-time employment (Bharadwaj and Yameen, 2020)

Furthermore, the findings suggest that rural and urban contexts play a critical moderating role in shaping the motivations and constraints for part-time work among low-income households. These findings highlight the importance of considering regional dynamics when addressing part-time job participation in low-income households in Malaysia.

5.0 Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the key factors influencing part-time employment among low-income households in both urban and rural Malaysia. The results reveal that economic perceptions, health status, and access to education play a crucial role in shaping individuals' decisions to take up part-time jobs. Positive perceptions of economic stability and health are shown to increase the likelihood of part-time employment, while higher educational attainment and stronger social networks tend to discourage such participation. The study also highlights significant regional differences, with rural households facing greater challenges related to education and healthcare access, making part-time employment a more prevalent strategy in these areas. Overall, the research offers important insights for policymakers seeking to address income disparities and improve living conditions for low-income households. Specifically, targeted interventions that enhance education and healthcare accessibility, especially in rural regions, are recommended to help alleviate the reliance on part-time jobs as a coping mechanism. These findings emphasize the need for a multifaceted approach to poverty alleviation that addresses both structural barriers and individual perceptions, particularly in the context of rural-urban disparities.

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