
Well-Being and Stress: Comparison Between Full-Time Employees and Freelance Graphic Designer in Malaysia

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*Journal of
Entrepreneurship and Business*
E-ISSN: 2289-8298

Vol. 14, Issue 1, pp. 13-24. Mar. 2026

Faculty of Entrepreneurship and
Business, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan
Locked Bag 36, 16100 Pengkalan Chepa
Kota Bharu, Kelantan, Malaysia
<http://journal.umk.edu.my/index.php/jeb>

Date Received: 14 Jul 2025

Date Accepted: 30 Mar 2026

DOI: 10.17687/jeb.v14i1.1672



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Abstract – The rapid rise of the gig economy has contributed to freelancing becoming a popular employment choice, especially in creative professions such as graphic design. While freelancing is often assumed to enhance well-being and reduce stress compared to full-time employment, empirical evidence remains limited. This study investigates differences in well-being and stress levels between full-time and freelance graphic designers in Malaysia. Using a quantitative cross-sectional design, data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via social media platforms, targeting respondents in Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru. A total of 200 responses were obtained (104 freelancers and 96 full-time employees). Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and the Mann-Whitney U test due to non-normal distribution. Results indicated no statistically significant differences in well-being and stress levels between the two groups. These findings challenge prevailing assumptions about employment type and mental health outcomes, offering new insights for policymakers and stakeholders in the creative and gig economy sectors.

Keywords: “Full-Time Employees”, “Freelancers”, “Well-being”, “Stress”, “Gig Economy”.

1. Introduction

In today’s employment landscape, the “gig economy” has gained prominence due to digital platforms (Chandna, 2022). As digital technology advances and global consumer markets expand, contemporary graphic designers find abundant opportunities to showcase their skills (Heller & Fernandes, 2004) as either full-time employees or freelancers. Freelancers, a significant part of the gig economy, engage in short-term projects, often paid hourly or per job. Meanwhile, full-time employees adhere to regular work hours set by their contracts (Connecteam, 2023). In Malaysia, full-time employees work eight hours daily (45 hours

weekly), while freelancers operate remotely, without company-provided space or equipment. Freelancers receive hourly pay and lack benefits like health insurance or pensions (O'Donnell, 2020).

Graphic designers play a vital role in producing digital content across diverse sectors (Norcross, 2022). Their work spans from brand visuals to web interfaces, combining artistic creativity with technological tools (BrainStation, 2023). The demand for graphic design talent has grown rapidly in Malaysia, where the profession was listed among the top ten most in-demand roles according to the Critical Occupation List (Zukri, 2020). As companies increasingly outsource creative services, many designers are shifting to freelance models, facilitated by mobile technology and remote work capabilities (Norcross, 2022).

While considerable research has explored employee well-being and stress more broadly, findings specific to graphic designers particularly comparing freelancers and full-time staff remain scarce. Previous studies affirm that well-being significantly affects workplace behaviour, health, and productivity (Srivastav, 2021; Huang et al., 2016). However, Malaysia's Well-Being Index recorded a decline of 2.1% in 2020, reflecting growing public health concerns (Malaysia Well-Being Index, 2020). Mental health surveys further report that younger adults, particularly those aged 16 to 24, have experienced heightened stress or anxiety in recent years (Rakuten Insight, 2022). Similarly, longitudinal studies have linked job stress to long-term mental health challenges (Tyssen et al., 2000).

Despite rising attention to employment-related stress, there is a lack of empirical data on how different employment types affect well-being among graphic designers a group operating at the intersection of creative demand and digital transformation. This study seeks to address that gap by first, identifying the mean levels of well-being and stress between full-time and freelance graphic designers in Malaysia; second, determining whether there are statistically significant differences in well-being between the two employment types; and third, examining whether there are significant differences in stress levels between full-time employees and freelancers.

2. Literature Review

A literature review discusses published information in a particular subject area, and sometimes information in a particular subject area within a certain time period (Ramdhani et al., 2014). It helps the researcher to synthesize information and draw conclusions about a particular topic, whereby it can guide the researcher to plan out the study clearly (Rahman, 2023). As for this study, this chapter focuses on the general overview of types of employment, well-being and stress. Past studies is also be discussed in this chapter.

2.1. Well-Being

Well-being is commonly defined as a multidimensional construct that encompasses positive emotional experiences, life satisfaction, and functioning effectively (Huppert, 2009). Pawin (2014) adds a societal lens by framing well-being as the ability of individuals to meet their needs, act autonomously, and pursue meaningful goals. The World Health Organization

(2023) further emphasizes structural influences by defining well-being as a positive state influenced by social, economic, and environmental conditions.

This study adopts Huppert's (2009) definition for its emphasis on both emotional and functional aspects key elements applicable to freelance and full-time contexts. Freelancers often rely on autonomy and continuous learning, while full-time employees may derive satisfaction from organizational growth and structured development pathways.

Three leading models frame the academic understanding of well-being, includes of **The PERMA+ Model (Seligman)** identifies Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment as core components. It has been applied in health intervention contexts and shows potential for understanding employment-related differences in well-being (Chisale et al., 2022). Second, **Ryff's Psychological Well-being Model** identifies six key dimensions self-acceptance, autonomy, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, and positive relationships (Dierendonck, 2008). Third, **Diener's Subjective Well-being (SWB)** model focuses on individuals' cognitive judgments and emotional evaluations of their lives.

These models offer varying but complementary lenses to assess psychological health. Importantly, their application to the Malaysian context, particularly in creative sectors, remains underexplored. Malaysian freelancers often experience fluctuating income and social isolation but may report higher satisfaction from autonomy and self-expression (Lim & Soon, 2022). Full-time designers, on the other hand, benefit from steady pay and organizational identity but may lack flexibility for creative exploration.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan deepens the perspective by emphasizing three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Freelancers often satisfy autonomy and competence but may lack relatedness due to limited peer interaction. Full-timers may benefit from structured environments and social support but risk reduced autonomy. SDT's relevance lies in explaining how different employment types affect the fulfillment of psychological needs, which subsequently shapes well-being.

Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi) is especially pertinent to graphic designers who experience deep engagement or "flow" while immersed in creative work. Freelancers, who often choose their projects, may more frequently experience flow. However, full-timers with clearly defined tasks and institutional backing may find consistent opportunities for flow through collaboration or iterative design processes. In Asian work cultures, where job stability and social integration are highly valued, full-time employment may offer stronger psychological safety, enhancing the quality of flow experiences

2.2. Stress

Stress is a dynamic psychological and physiological response to external pressures that exceed an individual's perceived coping resources (Lazarus, 1984). Selye (1976) framed stress in terms of general adaptation alarm, resistance, and exhaustion while Breznitz & Goldberger (1993) described it as the result of external threats to homeostasis. This study

adopts Lazarus' (1984) definition, emphasizing appraisal and coping key factors for workers managing workload, uncertainty, or institutional constraints. Freelancers may face income unpredictability and isolation, while full-timers contend with workload demands and organizational expectations.

Relevant stress theories includes of, **Selye's General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS)** which is a biological model describing the body's reaction in three stages. Second, **Cox's Transactional Model** that adds cognitive appraisal (primary and secondary) as central to individual stress experiences. Third, **Lazarus' Cognitive Appraisal Theory** that identifies appraisal and coping as the central components of stress, applicable across contexts (Gao, 2023).

Additionally, **Karasek's Job Demand-Control Model** highlights that stress is exacerbated in environments with high demands and low control. Freelancers, despite dealing with variable workloads, often enjoy greater control over task selection and time management. Conversely, full-time designers may have defined job scopes but limited influence over timelines and creative direction. In Malaysia and other Asian societies where power distance is higher, full-timers might experience heightened stress due to top-down management structures.

Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll) explains how stress results from perceived or actual loss of valued resources such as time, energy, or finances. Freelancers, who often juggle multiple clients and manage inconsistent income, may face chronic resource depletion. Full-time designers, while enjoying resource stability, may find emotional exhaustion from organizational politics or workload pressure.

Tan et al. (2020) found that creative professionals in Southeast Asia reported high levels of occupational stress due to client-driven timelines and ambiguous feedback. Warr and Inceoglu (2018) also observed that freelancers felt overburdened by client expectations without institutional support. These findings affirm that employment structure directly interacts with stress appraisal and coping strategies.

2.3. Types of Employment

Employment structures have diversified due to globalization and technological disruption. Junankar (2016) defines employment as productive activity performed for compensation. Today, it spans permanent roles, gig work, and flexible arrangements. Freelancers once dubbed "boundaryless workers" (Tams & Arthur, 2010) offer services without long-term commitment.

This study focuses on full-time and freelance employment. The distinction lies in autonomy, benefits, scheduling, and stability. Theoretical insight is provided by **Holland's RIASEC Model**, which aligns career satisfaction with personality environment fit. For instance, artistic and investigative types may gravitate toward freelance roles that offer creativity and independence.

Person-Environment Fit Theory (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005) and **Schneider's ASA Framework** (Attraction Selection Attrition) further explain how alignment or misalignment between personality and job characteristics affects psychological outcomes. Designers in misaligned roles such as artistic individuals in rigid, rules-based organizations are likely to experience dissatisfaction and stress. Malaysian graphic designers, particularly freelancers, often choose their work environments, supporting higher person environment congruence.

Studies also show that cultural context moderates employment preferences. In collectivist societies like Malaysia, full-time employment may be preferred for its perceived stability and integration with social norms (Hofstede Insights, 2022). However, the rise of digital nomadism and platform-based freelancing has shifted these values among younger generations seeking flexibility and autonomy.

2.4. Employment Type and Stress: Prior Findings

Beier et al. (2019) studied individuals with multiple sclerosis and found that employment status influenced stress levels, particularly concerning productivity and financial stability. Kim & Cho (2020) identified job autonomy and job demand as primary stressors among regular employees, while irregular employees reported stress from job insecurity.

Shen & Slater (2021) reviewed occupational stress among academics and found socio-demographic factors (including employment status) influenced coping strategies and mental health. Tan et al. (2020) reported that deadline-driven environments in creative professions exacerbate stress, especially among freelancers without access to peer support or structured workflows.

A recent study by Anwar et al. (2023) in Kuala Lumpur revealed that gig workers in the creative economy experienced 'anticipatory anxiety' related to uncertain workflows and delayed payments. In contrast, full-time workers experienced 'routine fatigue' due to repetitive design tasks and limited upward mobility. These stress profiles reflect how employment type shapes the source not just the severity of stress.

2.5. Summary of Conceptual Insights

The reviewed literature suggests that well-being and stress are multifaceted experiences influenced not only by employment status but also by structural, psychological, and contextual factors. The design profession offers a unique lens through which to examine these relationships, as it involves a balance between creativity, deadlines, autonomy, and client relationships. Theoretical models such as PERMA+, SDT, COR, and Job Demand-Control enrich our understanding of how employment type intersects with individual psychological resources in a Malaysian and broader Asian context.

Based on these theoretical and empirical foundations, the following hypotheses guide this study:

H_1 : There is a significant difference in well-being between full-time employees and freelancers.

H_2 : There is a significant difference in stress between full-time employees and freelancers

3. Methodology of Study

3.1. Research Approach and Study Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional, and explanatory research design to explore the relationship between employment type and psychological outcomes specifically well-being and stress among graphic designers in Malaysia. The non-experimental approach enabled a snapshot of group differences without manipulating variables, making it suitable for comparing naturally occurring categories (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Babbie, 2020).

3.2. Population and Sample Size

The study targeted full-time and freelance graphic designers across Malaysia. Due to the absence of a national database for this profession, a non-probability snowball sampling technique was used (Naderifar et al., 2017). Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru were selected as data collection hubs due to high concentrations of graphic designers approximately 40,000 and 13,000 respectively, based on LinkedIn estimates. G*Power was used to determine an appropriate sample size of 176 for statistical adequacy (Faul et al., 2009). The final sample consisted of 200 valid responses (104 freelancers and 96 full-time employees).

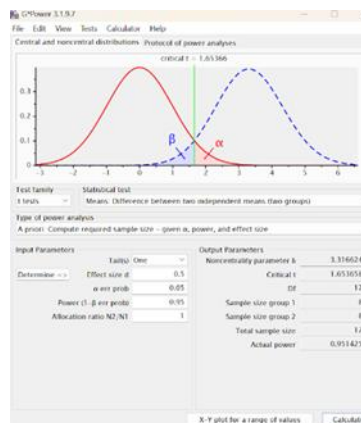


Figure 1: Calculating The Total Sample Size Using G*Power Calculator

3.3. Constructs Measurement

A structured questionnaire was used for data collection, consisting of three sections, that consisted of **Section A: Demographic data** (e.g., gender, age, education level, employment type), **Section B: A 6-item well-being scale** adapted from Smith (2017), and **Section C: A 6-item perceived stress scale** adapted from Cohen et al. (1994).

All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” Content validity was ensured by adapting established scales, while reliability was verified using Cronbach’s alpha.

3.4. Data Collection and Pilot Study

Primary data were collected using Google Forms distributed through professional networks and online communities. Secondary data, including background statistics and theoretical context, were gathered from scholarly and industry sources (Ajayi, 2023). A pilot study was conducted with 30 participants to test instrument clarity and functionality (Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). Minor wording adjustments were made based on feedback.

3.5. Data Preparation and Analysis

Data cleaning involved reviewing responses for missing values and inconsistencies (Tableau, 2024). Cronbach’s alpha confirmed acceptable internal consistency (>0.70) for both scales (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

Table 1: Internal Consistent of Cronbach’s Alpha

Cronbach’s alpha	Internal consistency
$\alpha \geq 0.9$	Very Good
$0.7 \leq \alpha < 0.9$	Good
$0.6 \leq \alpha < 0.7$	Acceptable
$0.5 \leq \alpha < 0.6$	Poor
$\alpha > 0.5$	Unacceptable
$\alpha \geq 0.9$	Very Good

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic data and responses. The Shapiro Wilk and Kolmogorov Smirnov tests indicated non-normal distributions (Mishra et al., 2019).

Consequently, the Mann-Whitney U test was used for inferential analysis to compare differences in well-being and stress across employment types (Gibbons & Chakraborti, 2011).

Table 2: Readiness Level According to Mean Interpretation (Wiersma, 2000).

Score Range	Interpretation
1.00–2.33	Weak
2.34–3.67	Moderate
3.68–5.00	High

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Descriptive Findings

Out of 200 respondents, 104 were freelancers and 96 were full-time graphic designers. The age range was predominantly between 25 to 35 years. The average mean scores for well-being were 3.46 (freelancers) and 3.52 (full-time employees), while stress scores averaged 3.21 and 3.18, respectively. Based on Wiersma’s interpretation, these fall within the “moderate” range.

4.2. Inferential Findings

Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted due to non-normal distribution of data. The analysis revealed no statistically significant difference in well-being ($U = 4750$, $p > .05$) or stress levels ($U = 4880$, $p > .05$) between the two employment groups. These findings suggest that employment type may not significantly influence the well-being and stress experiences of graphic designers in this context.

5. Discussions

While prior studies have indicated differences in psychological outcomes across employment types (Karabchuk & Soboleva, 2020; Aboobaker et al., 2021), our findings do not support this for Malaysian graphic designers. One possible reason is the nature of the creative industry, where both freelancers and full-time designers face similar task demands such as deadlines, revisions, and client feedback cycles (Tan et al., 2020).

The lack of significance may also reflect a cultural or contextual moderation. In Malaysia, both freelancers and full-time workers operate in digitally connected environments, often collaborating remotely, which could minimize structural differences (Lim & Soon, 2022). Additionally, the rise of hybrid employment models may blur the boundaries between “gig” and “permanent” work, leading to comparable work-life experiences.

Interestingly, despite no significant differences, mean values suggest a slightly higher well-being level among full-time employees. This may be due to perceived job stability, access to organizational resources, and social support structures within traditional employment settings (Van De Voorde et al., 2012). Conversely, freelancers may have greater autonomy but also face economic uncertainty.

This study reinforces the need to consider variables beyond employment type such as personality, coping strategies, and project control as mediators or moderators of well-being and stress (Warr & Inceoglu, 2018). It also highlights the importance of person-environment fit, as emphasized by Holland’s theory.

Moreover, the lack of significant difference in well-being aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that well-being stems from the fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Both full-time and freelance designers may achieve these needs through different mechanisms. Freelancers may fulfill autonomy through project choice and scheduling flexibility, while full-time employees may benefit from competence-building through structured feedback and relatedness through team collaboration (Chong et al., 2021).

Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) also applies to both groups, as designers typically experience flow when engaged in complex but meaningful creative tasks. This shared engagement could buffer the potential differences in stress or well-being caused by employment type alone. Indeed, 74% of respondents in a recent ASEAN design industry

survey reported that task meaningfulness outweighed organizational setting in job satisfaction (ASEAN Creative Economy Report, 2022).

The small effect sizes observed in stress levels support Karasek's Demand-Control Model (Karasek, 1979), which identifies high demand and low control as predictors of stress. Freelancers, although more autonomous, may experience elevated workload unpredictability, whereas full-timers may contend with bureaucratic constraints. Despite these contrasts, stress is normalized in creative work due to constant innovation and client-driven timelines (Tan et al., 2020).

Moreover, the Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989) suggests that resource depletion such as time, energy, and financial stability impacts stress outcomes. Freelancers may face instability in project inflow and late payments, while full-timers may face emotional exhaustion due to limited creative autonomy. This aligns with regional studies indicating that 58% of Malaysian freelancers cite income uncertainty as a primary stressor, compared to 62% of full-timers who report stress from routine-based job monotony (MDEC, 2023).

From a policy perspective, the Malaysian gig economy grew by 23% between 2020 and 2023 (World Bank, 2023), yet legal protections and social security for freelancers remain minimal. Findings from this study suggest that psychosocial interventions should be universal and not employment-type specific. Policymakers should consider expanding the coverage of PERKESO and EPF schemes to gig workers and offering subsidized mental health support tailored for creative freelancers.

For organizations, efforts to redesign full-time roles with more flexibility and creative control could improve psychological outcomes. Concurrently, industry platforms and networks for freelancers could play a vital role in reducing isolation and promoting peer learning critical for professional sustainability. Clients engaging freelancers should also be encouraged to adopt ethical practices, including fair compensation, timely payments, and realistic timelines.

5.1 Practical Implication

For policymakers and creative industry employers, the results point to the importance of developing support systems for all graphic designers, regardless of employment status. Mental health resources, client management training, and project time estimation tools could help mitigate shared stressors.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

To conclude, this study is to establish a comparison between two variables. This research seeks to achieve the objectives that had been stated to provide valuable insights of how the type of employment influence well-being and stress. Hopefully, this research can achieve its objectives that had been stated. Also, to assess the well-being and stress among graphic designers and other professions in Malaysia who works as full-time employees and

freelancers. In doing so, it is aimed that this study can enhance the quality of life of the employment in terms of their health, especially in the creative industries besides from graphic designer profession, and to foster a greater satisfaction and condition of the workforce.

7. Limitations of the Study

This study is not without limitations. The use of snowball sampling limits generalizability. Future studies should use stratified or purposive sampling to capture diverse employment sectors. Moreover, a cross-sectional design cannot determine causality. A longitudinal approach would help assess stress and well-being over time.

8. Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should also explore mediating variables like income stability, self-efficacy, and job autonomy. Additionally, a qualitative follow-up with interviews could yield deeper insights into designers' lived experiences.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

No funding was involved in this research.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Prof Dr. Nor Hazana Binti Abdullah, and my dear lecturer, Dr. Shazaitul Azreen Binti Rodzalan that gave me guidance and support in completing this Final Year Project. I would also to thank all of the respondents that participated for this study.

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