

Earning While Learning: Exploring Side-Hustle Motivations among Generation Z Students in Lao PDR

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Abstract—Rising living costs and expanding digital platforms have pushed many Generation Z university students in Lao PDR toward supplementary income-generating work, yet little evidence documents which motivations most strongly drive this behavior. This study examines factors influencing side-hustle decisions among Generation Z students at a public university in Vientiane Capital. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey was administered to 204 undergraduate students at the Faculty of Economics and Business Management, National University of Laos, Dongdok Campus, using a self-developed, advisor-validated five-point Likert questionnaire distributed online and on paper between February and April 2026; data were analyzed in SPSS using frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, with weighted-mean interpretation following Miller's criteria. Most respondents were female (62.3%), aged 19-25 years (76.5%), and in their fourth year of study (45.1%); 51.5% were currently working part time, typically 5-6 hours daily (44.1%) in service and sales roles (36.8%), earning 3,000,001-4,000,000 kip monthly (39.2%). All three motivational domains were rated "high": self-development ($M = 3.96$), economic and financial constraints ($M = 3.87$), and social and environmental influence ($M = 3.77$); the most endorsed single item was the need for income to cover personal expenses amid rising living costs ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.88$). These findings extend push-pull motivation frameworks to a transition economy and suggest that universities and employers jointly design flexible, skill-building part-time opportunities, supported by financial-planning and time-management training, to help Gen Z students balance study and work sustainably.

Keywords—Generation Z; Lao PDR; part-time employment; side hustle; student motivation; work-study balance.

I. INTRODUCTION

The transition away from full-time salaried employment as the default path into adulthood is being reshaped globally by Generation Z, commonly defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012 [1]. Raised alongside high-speed internet, smartphones, and social media, this cohort is frequently characterized as digitally fluent, pragmatic, and oriented toward flexible, purpose-driven work rather than a single lifelong career [2], [3]. Worldwide, youth labor markets have absorbed this shift unevenly: the International Labour Organization reports that young people continue to face disproportionate under-employment even as informal and platform-based work expands [4]. In Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) specifically, Generation Z constitutes a rapidly growing share of the working-age population as the country's demographic and economic structure shifts [5].

Vientiane Capital, the country's economic and consumption hub, has faced sustained macroeconomic pressure in recent years, including elevated inflation and depreciation of the Lao kip [6], [7]. These conditions have steadily raised the cost of food, fuel, and daily goods while formal wages and student allowances have remained comparatively fixed [8], turning income constraint into a structural "push factor" that drives

students toward supplementary earning even while still enrolled in university.

At the same time, the expansion of digital platforms and social media—Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram foremost among them—has created new, low-barrier avenues for income generation and functions as a "pull factor" for Gen Z [9]. As digital natives, Lao youth can access online marketplaces, freelance platforms, and content-creation opportunities with relative ease, and the visible success of online entrepreneurs and influencers plausibly shapes their own aspirations [10]. This convergence of push and pull forces has made side-hustle participation an increasingly normal feature of undergraduate life, consistent with the broader growth of the gig economy as a source of both autonomy and precarity for young workers [11], [12].

Despite the visibility of this trend, systematic evidence on what actually drives Lao Gen Z students into side-hustle work remains limited. Existing Lao-language research has examined related but narrower questions—consumption behavior, savings, or social-media adoption among youth—without directly testing whether economic necessity, personal and developmental motives, or social and environmental influences carry the greatest weight in the decision to work while studying. This gap matters practically: universities designing student-support programs, employers building part-time staffing

pipelines, and policymakers shaping youth-labor regulation all require a clearer, evidence-based picture of the relative strength of these motivations within Vientiane's higher-education population.

This study addresses that gap by examining the factors influencing side-hustle decisions among Generation Z students at the Faculty of Economics and Business Management (FEBM), National University of Laos (NUOL). Specifically, it (i) documents the prevailing patterns and types of part-time work among FEBM students, (ii) measures the relative influence of self-development, economic and financial, and social and environmental motivations on the decision to take on side-hustle work, and (iii) translates these findings into practical recommendations for higher-education institutions, employers, and policymakers. In doing so, the study contributes context-specific empirical evidence to the growing global literature on Generation Z work motivation and offers a baseline for future comparative research across Lao PDR's provinces and disciplines.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Push-and-Pull Perspectives on Supplementary Work

The push-pull framework, originally developed in migration and entrepreneurship research, distinguishes between motivations driven by necessity ("push," such as financial hardship) and motivations driven by opportunity ("pull," such as attractive prospects) [13]. Applied to student employment, push factors typically include tuition costs, family financial burden, and the rising cost of living, while pull factors include flexible scheduling, skill development, and social opportunity. Regional evidence supports the salience of push factors: research on Thai university students found that the rising cost of living was a leading driver of part-time work decisions [14], and comparable evidence from Vietnamese university students links part-time employment to both anticipatory labor-market preparation and financial necessity [15]. Studies of Asian university students more broadly identify financial independence and reduced reliance on parental support as core motivators for part-time work [16].

B. Human Capital, Self-Efficacy, and Career-Development Motives

Beyond financial necessity, students are motivated by the desire to build human capital before entering the labor market. Bandura's self-efficacy theory holds that individuals seek experiences that build confidence in their own competence [17], while Super's life-span, life-space theory frames early work experience as a normal part of career exploration and identity formation [18]. Ajzen's theory of planned behavior further suggests that the decision to engage in side-hustle work is shaped by attitudes toward the behavior, perceived social norms, and perceived behavioral control—students who view part-time work as valuable, socially acceptable, and manageable alongside their studies are more likely to pursue it [19]. These strands converge on the expectation that skill-building and self-discovery motives exert a strong, independent pull on student employment decisions, distinct from pure

income need, consistent with Maslow's positioning of self-actualization and esteem needs alongside more basic physiological and safety needs [20].

C. Social Influence and the Generation Z Work Identity

Social environment—family approval, peer example, and workplace culture—also shapes youth employment decisions. Evidence from Thai youth samples shows that family members, relatives, and friends often play a direct role in recommending and encouraging part-time work [21]. Indonesian research further shows that social media exposure shapes Generation Z's work expectations and job-application intentions [22], while Lao-context studies of Gen Z consumption behavior likewise emphasize the role of peer reference groups and online communities in shaping this cohort's economic choices [23]. Collectively, this literature frames Generation Z's work identity as socially embedded rather than purely individualistic, even as the generation is popularly characterized as independence-seeking [2], [3].

D. Household Budget Constraints and the Regional Gig Economy

From a microeconomic standpoint, the classic theory of consumer choice under a binding budget constraint predicts that when fixed income fails to keep pace with rising prices, individuals seek to relax that constraint through additional income sources [24]. This logic is amplified in Lao PDR's current macroeconomic environment of high inflation and currency depreciation. At the same time, the growth of flexible, technology-enabled work—the gig economy—has lowered the practical barriers to generating supplementary income, offering students an accessible middle ground between full-time employment and no employment at all [25]. Taken together, these perspectives motivate a tripartite conceptual framework in which self-development, economic and financial, and social and environmental factors act as parallel, potentially overlapping determinants of the decision to pursue side-hustle work among Gen Z students—the framework tested empirically in this study.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design and Participants

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. The target population comprised Generation Z youth (born 1997-2012, approximately 14-29 years old at the time of data collection) residing in Vientiane Capital, with primary focus on undergraduate students of the Faculty of Economics and Business Management, National University of Laos, Dongdok Campus. A non-probability convenience sample of 204 students with current or prior part-time work experience was recruited between February and April 2026.

B. Instrument

Data were collected using a structured, self-developed questionnaire reviewed by the research advisor for content clarity and relevance prior to fielding. The instrument comprised four parts: (1)-(2) respondent screening and demographic information (gender, age, year of study, major,

current part-time work status, job type, working hours, and monthly income); (3) seventeen motivation items measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = lowest/strongly disagree to 5 = highest/strongly agree) spanning three theoretically derived domains—self-development, economic and financial constraints, and social and environmental influence; and (4) an open-ended item inviting suggestions. Mean scores were interpreted using Miller's weighted-mean criteria [26], under which scores of 4.21-5.00 indicate the highest level of agreement, 3.41-4.20 a high level, 2.61-3.40 a moderate or uncertain level, 1.81-2.60 a low level, and 1.00-1.80 the lowest level of agreement.

C. Data Collection Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed through two complementary channels: an online form (Google Forms) to maximize reach among digitally active Gen Z respondents, and a paper-based version administered in person at the university campus and nearby youth gathering points to capture respondents less active online. All returned instruments were screened for completeness; incomplete responses were replaced through additional data collection until 204 valid, complete responses were obtained.

D. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), 2019 version for Windows. Descriptive statistics—frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation—summarized respondent demographics, part-time work patterns, and the three motivational domains. No inferential or predictive modeling (e.g., regression) was conducted; the analysis is descriptive in scope, consistent with the study's exploratory objectives.

IV. RESULTS

A. Respondent Profile

Table I summarizes respondent demographics. Most respondents were female (127, 62.3%) compared with male (77, 37.7%). The majority were aged 19-25 years (156, 76.5%), followed by under 18 years (20, 9.8%) and 26 years or older (28, 13.7%). By year of study, fourth-year students formed the largest group (92, 45.1%), followed by third-year (41, 20.1%), second-year (26, 12.7%), first-year (24, 11.8%), and graduated students (21, 10.3%). Business management majors were most represented (87, 42.6%), followed by marketing (70, 34.3%), other majors (27, 13.2%), and finance and banking (20, 9.8%).

B. Part-Time Work Patterns

As shown in Table II, 105 respondents (51.5%) were currently engaged in part-time work, while 99 (48.5%) had worked previously but had since stopped. The most common daily time commitment was 5-6 hours (90, 44.1%), followed by 3-4 hours (60, 29.4%), 1-2 hours (32, 15.7%), and more than 6 hours (22, 10.8%). Monthly income from part-time work was most frequently 3,000,001-4,000,000 kip (80, 39.2%), followed by under 3,000,000 kip (62, 30.4%), 4,000,001-5,000,000 kip (37, 18.1%), and above 5,000,000 kip (25, 12.3%). By job type, service and general sales roles—such as waitstaff, baristas, and

convenience-store clerks—were most common (75, 36.8%), followed by short-term contract and event work (40, 19.6%), online selling or personal business (37, 18.1%), freelance and digital work (20, 9.8%), professional or specialized-skill roles (17, 8.3%), and other work (15, 7.4%).

TABLE I. RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE (N = 204)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	127	62.3
	Male	77	37.7
Age	Under 18 years	20	9.8
	19-25 years	156	76.5
	26 years and above	28	13.7
Year of study	1st year	24	11.8
	2nd year	26	12.7
	3rd year	41	20.1
	4th year	92	45.1
	Graduated	21	10.3
Major	Business management	87	42.6
	Marketing	70	34.3
	Finance and banking	20	9.8
	Other	27	13.2

TABLE II. PART-TIME WORK PATTERNS (N = 204)

Variable	Category	n	%
Current PT status	Currently working	105	51.5
	Formerly worked, stopped	99	48.5
Hours worked/day	1-2 hours	32	15.7
	3-4 hours	60	29.4
	5-6 hours	90	44.1
	More than 6 hours	22	10.8
Income/month (kip)	Below 3,000,000	62	30.4
	3,000,001-4,000,000	80	39.2
	4,000,001-5,000,000	37	18.1
	Above 5,000,000	25	12.3
Job type	Service and general sales	75	36.8
	Professional / specialized skill	17	8.3
	Short-term contract / events	40	19.6
	Freelance and digital	20	9.8
	Online selling / own business	37	18.1
	Other	15	7.4

C. Motivational Factors

Table III presents the mean, standard deviation, and interpreted level for each of the three motivational domains. All three domains were rated "high" under Miller's criteria [26]. Self-development recorded the highest domain mean ($M = 3.96$), followed by economic and financial constraints ($M = 3.87$) and social and environmental influence ($M = 3.77$). Within the self-development domain, the item "to discover one's own identity, interests, and aptitude for work" scored highest ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.83$), followed by general skill development in communication, teamwork, and problem-solving ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.80$). Within the economic domain, the highest-scoring item across the entire instrument was the need for income to cover personal expenses amid the rising cost of living ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.88$), followed closely by the need to ease the family's financial burden ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 0.87$). Within the social and environmental domain, workplace safety scored highest ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.87$), while family support or approval for out-of-school work scored lowest of all seventeen items ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.02$).

TABLE III. MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATION OF MOTIVATIONAL DOMAINS (N = 204)

Domain	M	SD range	Level
Self-development	3.96	0.80-0.89	High
Economic and financial constraints	3.87	0.87-1.10	High
Social and environmental influence	3.77	0.87-1.02	High

V. DISCUSSION

The finding that self-development recorded the highest domain-level mean indicates that, in aggregate, FEBM students at NUOL frame side-hustle work less as a last resort and more as an active investment in employability—consistent with self-efficacy theory [17] and career-development theory [18], and with the theory of planned behavior's emphasis on favorable attitudes as a precursor to intentional behavior [19]. At the same time, the single most strongly endorsed item across all seventeen indicators was economic—the need for income to meet personal expenses amid rising living costs—echoing the macroeconomic backdrop of inflation and kip depreciation documented for Vientiane Capital [6]–[8] and mirroring push-factor evidence from neighboring Thailand and Vietnam [14], [15]. Read together, these results suggest that economic necessity is the sharpest individual trigger for any one student's decision to work, while a broader, more evenly distributed set of developmental motives sustains participation once that decision is made.

The comparatively lower ranking of social and environmental factors, and in particular the low score for family support or approval ($M = 3.63$), contrasts with evidence from Thai samples in which family and peers were reported as directly recommending part-time work [21]. This may reflect a generational shift in Lao households, where Gen Z students increasingly self-initiate work decisions rather than relying on family endorsement, consistent with Generation Z's broader profile as independence-seeking and self-directed [2], [3]. That workplace safety was nonetheless the highest-rated item within this domain signals that, once a work decision is made, physical and financial security at the job site remains a practical concern, particularly for the many respondents working evening shifts in service roles.

A further noteworthy pattern concerns the type of work chosen: despite Generation Z's reputation as digital natives drawn to online entrepreneurship and content creation [9], [10], the plurality of respondents (36.8%) worked in traditional service and sales roles rather than freelance or digital work (9.8%) or online selling (18.1%). This suggests that, in Vientiane's current labor market, accessible service-sector vacancies—rather than digital platforms—remain the dominant entry point into side-hustle work for students, even though digital and gig-based options are conceptually attractive [11], [12]. This nuance qualifies the pull-factor narrative common in the global Gen Z literature and points to a market-access gap that platform developers and policymakers in Lao PDR could address.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study examined the factors influencing side-hustle decisions among 204 Generation Z students at the Faculty of Economics and Business Management, National University of Laos. Respondents were predominantly female, aged 19-25, in their fourth year of study, and studying business management; just over half were currently engaged in part-time work, typically 5-6 hours per day in service and sales roles earning 3-4 million kip monthly. All three hypothesized motivational domains—self-development, economic and financial constraints, and social and environmental influence—were rated "high," with self-development recording the highest domain mean and rising living costs producing the single strongest individual motivator. These results indicate that Lao Gen Z students' side-hustle participation is driven jointly by economic necessity and a genuine developmental orientation toward building employable skills, rather than either factor alone.

A. Limitations

Two limitations qualify these findings. First, restrictions on accessing employee records at private businesses during the data-collection period led the researchers to rely primarily on online distribution, which likely over-represents currently enrolled students relative to working non-student youth; results should therefore be generalized with this sampling profile in mind. Second, data were collected within a specific three-month window (February-April 2026) under particular macroeconomic conditions—elevated inflation, currency depreciation, and an expanding gig economy; the motivations documented here reflect that period and may shift as Lao PDR's economic conditions evolve.

B. Practical Implications and Recommendations

For higher-education institutions, the findings support offering short courses or co-curricular activities that build communication, teamwork, and time-management skills—capacities students explicitly seek to develop through side-hustle work. For employers, particularly in the service and sales sector where most student workers are concentrated, the results support redesigning part-time schedules for flexibility, ensuring workplace safety, and offering fair compensation to attract capable student talent while helping them build transferable skills. For policymakers, the descriptive profile developed here can serve as baseline evidence for shaping youth-labor and short-term employment policy that reflects the realities of a growing student side-hustle workforce.

C. Directions for Future Research

Future studies should extend data collection beyond FEBM/NUOL to other faculties (e.g., health sciences, engineering) and provinces (e.g., Luang Prabang, Champasak, Savannakhet) to test the generalizability of these findings across disciplines and regions. Incorporating outcome variables such as job satisfaction, academic performance, and work-study conflict would clarify the consequences, not just the antecedents, of side-hustle participation. Finally, complementing this quantitative design with qualitative

methods—in-depth interviews or focus groups with student workers and employers—would surface experiential dimensions of side-hustle work that a Likert-based instrument cannot fully capture.

DECLARATIONS

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, S.V. and P.V.; methodology, S.V., P.V., and P.X.; validation, P.X. and S.S.; formal analysis, S.V. and P.V.; investigation, S.V., P.V., and V.C.; data curation, V.C.; writing—original draft preparation, S.V. and P.V.; writing—review and editing, P.X. and S.S.; visualization, V.C.; supervision, P.X.; project administration, S.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval and Informed Consent

The study followed the research ethics guidelines of the Faculty of Economics and Business Management, National University of Laos. Participation was voluntary and anonymous; all respondents were informed of the study's purpose prior to completing the questionnaire, and completion of the survey was taken as informed consent.

Data Availability

The datasets analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors used an AI language model (Claude, Anthropic) to assist with drafting, restructuring, and editorial refinement of this manuscript from the authors' original thesis research and data. The authors reviewed all AI-assisted text and statistics against the source data, take full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the content, and confirm that no fabricated data or citations were introduced.

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