

‘This isn’t forever for me’: Perceived employability and migrant gig work in Norway and Sweden

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Abstract

Information asymmetry regarding local job prospects, imperfect portability of qualifications and a lack of host country language skills combine to reduce migrants’ perceptions of their own employability. As a result, platform mediated gig work has become a common labour market entry point for new migrants. However, there is a near-universal expectation among workers is that gig work will be undertaken short-term, rather than as the first step of a longer gig-career. While research has explored the individual and structural factors, there has been limited attention as to how the specific occupational context in which a worker is embedded can also shape workers’ perceived employability. In this article, I therefore present the results of 37 semi-structured interviews with migrant Foodora couriers across Norway and Sweden, exploring how the specific occupational context of gig work intersects with migrants’ perceived employability. This article identifies, firstly, that obtaining employment in gig work was not perceived to be a reflection of workers’ own local employability. Secondly, workers’ short-term temporal orientations shape how participants are able to cope with the physical, emotional and identity demands of gig work. Thirdly, workers have to re-frame their perceived employability in the face of what is perceived to be widespread discrimination in the local labour market context. Lastly, the specific occupational context of gig work was considered to be either of no value to future local employers, or a negative signal as to a worker’s skills and labour market integration.

Keywords

Gig economy, migration, perceived employability, Norway, Sweden

Introduction

Although transnational migration is often motivated by a desire for greater social and economic opportunities, many migrant workers experience a sharp decline in their employability on arrival

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in a host-country. Information asymmetry regarding local job prospects, imperfect portability of qualifications and a lack of host country language skills combine to reduce migrants' access to relevant work (Moroşanu, 2016). Structural factors such as discrimination and adversarial labour market policies are also important determinants in limiting migrants' employability, resulting in wide-scale underemployment and occupational downgrading even for highly-skilled migrants (Berntson et al., 2006).

As opposed to more objective measurements of employability, perceived employability refers to an individual's subjective evaluation about how likely it is to find new employment or maintain their current employment (De Cuyper and De Witte, 2010). Operating at the confluence of both perception and reality, an individual's view of their own employability has an influence on their behaviour in the labour market (Forrier et al., 2018). Indeed, as Kirves et al. (2014) comment, 'it is the perception of reality – rather than reality itself – that affects behaviour, feelings, and thoughts' (437).

To date, research has explored the individual and structural factors which may impact workers' perceptions of their own employability (Drange et al., 2018; Vanhercke et al., 2014). Contract type, for instance, can operate as an important situational factor, with research by Berntson et al. (2006) arguing that workers in the secondary labour market view themselves as generally less employable. As Forrier et al. (2018) explain, secondary labour market jobs can 'leave scars in terms of future employability' (518), acting as a negative signal to future employers (Fugate et al., 2021). However, employability research has so far largely overlooked how the specific occupational context in which a worker is embedded, distinct from labour market position, can shape workers' perceptions of their own employability. Since many migrant workers sort into distinct occupational groupings on arrival in a host-country, such as in low-wage hospitality work, it is thus pertinent to examine how migration status, occupational position, and perceived employability intersect in ways as yet unaddressed in research.

Due to lower entry requirements, flexibility in working hours, rapid recruitment procedures, and the promise of steady income, platform-mediated gig work has become one such common labour market entry point for new migrants (Barratt et al., 2020; Webster and Zhang, 2020). United conceptually by a reliance on app-based digital intermediaries, platform-mediated gig work often refers to localised tasks accessible on-demand, such as food-delivery, care work, or ride-hailing (Gandini, 2019; Newlands, 2020; Van Doorn, 2017; Woodcock and Graham, 2019). While on-demand gig work comes with its own precarities and risks (Montgomery and Baglioni, 2020), research has shown that many migrant workers prefer to undertake gig work rather than other forms of low-wage employment, such as in retail or fast food service (Oppegaard, 2020; Gregory, 2020). Undertaking low-wage employment, such as in the gig economy, is often a temporary choice, an active expression of labour market agency which provides migrants with the immediate financial resources necessary for social reproduction (Dickey et al., 2018). "*Indeed, dominant representations of gig work are so far also micro-temporal, with a near-universal expectation among workers that gig work will be undertaken short-term, rather than as the first step of a longer gig-career (Myhill et al., 2021)*".

In order to advance understandings of migrant gig workers' sense of their own employability, I therefore draw on 37 semi-structured interviews with migrant couriers working for the food-delivery platform Foodora across Norway and Sweden. To date, international migration into Norway and Sweden has been fuelled by ideals of Nordic exceptionalism and egalitarianism (Jensen and Loftsdóttir, 2012). As universalistic welfare states, both countries are distinguished by high job quality and worker protections (Svalund et al., 2018). However, although increasingly diverse, Nordic countries have high levels of ethnic segregation and large native-migrant employment differentials (Nordvik et al., 2019). Due to labour market discrimination, language barriers, and limited local networks, many migrants in the Nordics currently face un- or underemployment

(Friberg and Midtbøen, 2018; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2019; Östh et al., 2018). While a marginal phenomenon, gig work in the Nordics remains contextually non-standard through the use of part-time employment contracts. Due to national policies, Foodora couriers in Norway are marginal part-time employees, while couriers in Sweden are employed on renewable short-term contracts. As such, this specific sub-set of gig workers are entitled to basic labour rights; some of these rights are by default while others have been achieved through collective bargaining agreements that have been signed in both Norway and Sweden (Anxo, 2021; Ilsøe et al., 2020).

The article is structured as follows. To commence, I position this research in relation to employability, gig work and migration research, followed by establishing the specific research context in terms of the local specificities of the Norwegian and Swedish labour markets. This is followed by a discussion of the methodology and data sample. I then present the results of the qualitative empirical study. In terms of the key findings, I firstly discuss how obtaining employment in food-delivery work was not internally perceived to be a reflection of workers' own wider employability in the local labour market. Secondly, I discuss how workers' predominantly short-term temporal orientations frame how participants engage not only in handling the physical demands of the work, but also the emotional and identity demands. Thirdly, I discuss how workers have to re-frame their perceived employability in the face of what is perceived to be widespread discrimination in the local labour market context. Lastly, I explore how the specific occupational context of gig work was considered to be either of no value to future local employers, or a negative signal as to a worker's skills and labour market integration. I conclude by delineating the outcomes and setting out avenues for further research.

Literature Review

Perceived employability and the gig economy

As proposed by Hardgrove et al. (2015), workers develop 'career possible selves' which allow individuals to explore representations of the self in the future both in terms of those hoped for and those to be avoided. One important aspect of an individual's career imagination is their perception of their own employability both in the present and in the future, though it must be emphasised that the notion that all workers aim to construct a 'career' is not unproblematic (Farrugia, 2020: 1).

Research into the antecedents of perceived employability often focuses on human capital theory, looking at issues of education, qualifications, experience, and skills (Kusterer and Bernhard-Oettel, 2020). Responding to the need for a holistic understanding, Peeters et al. (2019) usefully put forward an integrated concept of 'employability capital'. However, such a framing situates full accountability for employability and career success on the individual. A more balanced perspective acknowledges that employability, and thus perceived employability, is constrained by structural conditions of the local labour market, such as local labour market policies (Berglund and Wallinder, 2015; Wilson and Hadler, 2017).

As discussed above, a secondary labour market position expressed through non-standard and precarious working conditions can negatively impact perceived employability. Such a factor can also act as a negative signal to future employers (Fugate et al., 2021). Yet, although occupations have a strong explanatory power, situated at the intersection of skills and status hierarchies in addition to the local relations of production (Avent-Holt et al., 2020), research to date has not looked at the specific impact of occupational situation on perceived employability. Occupations are considered to be key in determining individuals' positions within different forms of social stratification, as well as shaping a sense of self-esteem (Kalleberg and Mouw, 2018).

Part of the impact of occupational context is connected to notions of occupational stigma, which is both socially communicated and dynamic. Research into occupational stigma has shown that it

tends to be persistent and transferable to new occupational members (Phung et al., 2021). Uber drivers, for instance, also attempted to distance themselves from the ‘social taint’ of taxi drivers (Phung et al., 2021). Stigma research has also shown that occupational status and reputation can be critical to an individual’s self-identity and self-presentation (Cardone et al., 2021). Low-wage work, historically, has been the target of occupational stigma, though this identity has shifted as Covid-19 has pushed these workers into ‘essential’ or ‘hero’ status.

Low-wage work, as found in the gig economy, provides job opportunities to those usually excluded from the labour market, such as migrant workers (Hoang et al., 2020). However, the rise of the gig economy can be understood as capitalising on the destabilised employment prospects of hundreds of thousands of workers worldwide, many of whom are un- or underemployed (Huang et al., 2020; MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, 2019). A key question thus remains whether temporarily undertaking low-wage, low-security and stigmatised jobs, such as gig work, can act as a stepping stone to higher-wage work or functions as a career dead-end (Van Doorn, 2020). Moreover, the question remains as to how gig work can shape a workers’ sense of self-esteem, identity and perceptions of their employability. Indeed, fragmented or temporary employment, such as is commonly experienced in the gig economy, can challenge an individual’s work identity by destabilising their prospects of achieving alternative employment (Petriglieri et al., 2019).

Following the entrapment hypothesis, gig work can act as a negative market signal to potential employers regarding a worker’s productivity or employability (Adamson and Roper, 2019; Healy et al., 2017). Research conducted by Adermon and Hensvik (2020), for instance, demonstrated that gig experience, while considered by Swedish recruiters as more valuable than unemployment, was considered less useful than traditional experience for most applicants. In a study conducted by Galfalvi et al. (2020), young people also broadly dismissed the notion of gig work as a career path. Most interviewees preferred traditional forms of work to gig work, due to the perceived uncertainty, low-status and lack of career progression inherent in gig work. Participants in this study contrasted the gig economy with a ‘proper job’ or an ‘actual job’. Goods et al. (2019) also found that workers viewed their gig work experience as having limited value on the job market. The participants in Barratt et al.’s (2020) study on Australian gig workers further showed the division in the Australian labour market between those with full rights to work and those without, pushing those without into gig work due to the low entry barriers. The Australian food delivery workers in Barratt et al.’s (2020) study had only a transient attachment to the Australian labour market and had no long-term commitment to food-delivery work. They focused on finding a ‘better job’ (p. 1654). Moreover, as demonstrated in recent research by Healy et al. (2020), even customers hold little belief that gig work can be a pathway to building a career.

Migration and perceived employability

While there are still few empirical studies which address migration and gig work in conjunction (Barratt et al., 2020; van Doorn, 2017; Webster and Zhang, 2020), gig work is often undertaken by migrants with limited alternative options for finding work. It is thus also valuable to see how the specific occupational context of gig work intersects with gig workers’ migrant identities. While the concept of migration is concerned with crossing geographical borders, in line with recent migration literature, we should not observe migrants as ‘permanent leavers’ who sever ties with their host countries (Joy et al., 2020). Rather, they maintain social, cultural, and economic ties with the originating country. As such, their perceptions of their employability can operate on a local as well as a transnational basis. Indeed, Clibborn (2021) usefully explains that ‘migrants potentially maintain multiple frames of reference that shape their behaviour’ (350), pointing out that some migrants may tolerate underemployment or constrain their career ambitions. Moreover, as ‘migrant’ does not constitute a homogenous group, it is also important to consider

how migrants' own sense of employability are similarly shaped by legal status, ethnicity, gender, and other categories of differentiation.

This study is thus situated in a recent strand of research on migration and perceived employability, which argues that different migrants will have different perceptions of the barriers to job attainment (Ricci et al., 2021). On arrival, migrants must re-examine their own perceived employability in light of migration policies and a new labour market. In particular, migrants ascribed to social categorizations with limited power, such as racial minorities, can be confined by these socially constructed frames (Kusterer and Bernhard-Oettel, 2020). Ethnic discrimination in the labour market, for instance, can impact an individual's perception of their own perceived employability (Croucher et al., 2018).

With contemporary migration flows, an increasing percentage are on a temporary basis and, although recent research argues that many migrant workers undertake low-wage employment as a temporary choice (Dickey et al., 2018), a parallel discourse has emphasised that migrant underemployment is a result of labour market discrimination (Rafferty, 2020). Human capital accumulated in the home country or elsewhere has limited value upon migration, moderated by the economic and cultural similarity between source and destination country. Moreover, since native contacts are important to access job information about local opportunities (Lobo and Mellander, 2020), segregation into ethnic enclaves also results in labour market penalties, limiting social mobility and restricting labour market access.

The research context: Gig work in Norway and Sweden

Characterised by extensive social welfare, strong labour unions and high labour costs (Gauffin, 2020), the 'Nordic model' is characterised by a centralised collective bargaining system that regulates working conditions and wages. As such, platform-mediated gig work remains a marginal phenomenon within Norway and Sweden (Jesnes, 2019), with most platform workers in the Nordics being young, foreign-born men. Jesnes and Oppegaard (2020) have argued that labour supply constraints may limit further growth potential of the platform economy in the Nordics. Nevertheless, platform economy companies might still exploit 'cracks' in the Nordic labour market model by operating in industries with low union density or where it is difficult to negotiate collective agreements (Jesnes, 2019). Indeed, Svalund et al. (2018) argue that platform companies in Sweden and Norway use contextually atypical forms of employment to obtain the desired flexibility. One such on-demand food-delivery platform, Foodora, acts as the specific research context for this study, which operates on what Jesnes (2019) has termed a hybrid employment form. These 'hybrid' model companies offer atypical working arrangements but nevertheless guarantee workers the right to organise and negotiate collective agreements. In the remainder of this article I will be approaching the research context holistically, though drawing out points of specific Norwegian and Swedish particularities where relevant. However, for contextualisation, below I briefly outline the distinct labour market contexts for gig work in Norway and Sweden.

Norway

As part of the EU/EEA area from 1994, Norway has a small but growing migrant population, particularly from Western and Eastern Europe (Friberg and Midtbøen, 2018). However, Norway remains a country with a high level of residential segregation (Toft and Ljunggren, 2016) and wealth disparity (Fochesato and Bowles, 2015). With high thresholds for labour market access, migrants into Norway face many difficulties in accessing skilled work (Jordhus-Lier et al., 2019), and there continue to be few jobs for workers with limited Norwegian (Ilsøe et al., 2020). "As Oppegaard (2020) explains, taxi driving for Uber Black was one of the 'few employment

opportunities for newly arrived immigrants' (111)". There are also persistent employment and wage differentials between natives and immigrants in Norway, where migrants' wages and employment rate are considerably lower than those of natives (Brekke and Mastekaasa, 2008).

Foodora has operated in Norway since 2015 and is the biggest company in the Norwegian food delivery market, their only competition being 2019-entrant Wolt. Foodora couriers in Norway are hired as employees on marginal part-time contracts guaranteeing them 10 h per week, though most work many more hours (Ilsøe and Jesnes, 2020). In Norway, marginal part-time employees, such as those working for Foodora, can also expand the number of hours in their contracts if they have regularly worked more than the hours stated in their contract over the previous 12 months (Norwegian Working Environment Act §14.3.1).

Due to a variety of contractual forms used by the company, payment rates for couriers vary considerably. New riders can earn roughly 125 Norwegian Kroner per hour (13 Euros), a sum lower than comparable salaries in the hospitality sector in Oslo where, due to sectoral agreements, workers can expect to earn roughly 175 Norwegian Kroner per hour (18 Euros). Since the signing of the 2019 collective bargaining agreement, concluded after a five-week national strike (Ilsøe et al., 2020), later re-negotiated in November 2020, Foodora couriers in Norway have also been entitled to an increased base-rate, payment increases for tenure and winter work, and equipment reimbursement on a per-delivery basis (*Tariffavtale for distribusjon og budtjenester 1 Foodora 2019-2020*). The agreement also included workers in an early retirement pension scheme. However, Foodora in Norway combines a labour force of marginal employees and self-employed freelancers, who are not covered by collective bargaining agreements in Norway due to competition law.

Sweden

In contrast to Norway, Sweden claims comparatively high levels of migration (Lobo and Mellander, 2020) and has long been viewed as a generous state extending citizenship, welfare and labour rights to migrants. A considerable body of research has therefore been conducted on migrant labour market access in Sweden (Vogiazides and Mondani, 2020). Swedish labour policies are increasingly focused on 'managed migration' (Schierup and Ålund, 2011), namely an approach referring to the active management of the economic integration of migrants, rendering them more self-sufficient. Despite this approach, Gauffin (2020) argues that Sweden has become a 'segregated labour market in Europe and has witnessed the formation of a racialised underclass' (283). Moreover, Sweden has the highest gap in employment rates between local and foreign-born workers in the EU (Arbetsförmedlingen, 2018) and foreign-born workers are over represented in unskilled work in the Swedish labour market (Arbetsmarknadsekonomiska Rådet, 2018).

Foodora entered the Swedish market in 2015 and, as of 2020, operates in 28 Swedish cities. Although facing much greater competition from Uber Eats and Wolt, Foodora retains market dominance in Sweden. Foodora couriers in Sweden are employed on renewable short-term contracts, because of which the company has faced considerable criticism by the Swedish Work Environment Authority and labour unions (Gigwatch, 2019). The results of a study conducted by Geissinger et al. (2020) also illustrate how varied Swedish stakeholder groups view Foodora's method of organising work as illegitimate given that it has social justice concerns.

Payment rates vary based on when couriers work, and whether they are paid per-delivery or per hour. However, new riders can expect to earn around 110 Swedish Kronor per hour (11 Euros), which is lower than the average of 130 Swedish Kronor (13 Euros) paid to bike deliverers in Sweden. The Swedish Federation of Transport and Foodora signed a collective agreement, entered into force in 1st of April 2021 (Anxo, 2021). The agreement stipulated the minimum wage, with extra wages during certain times of day, other provisions regarding compensation for

bicycle maintenance and work clothes, access to pensions and insurances and also recommendations for setting up guidelines for improving the couriers' working environments.

Methods

In this study, I draw on 37 semi-structured interviews with migrant Foodora couriers across Norway and Sweden, where all interviewees were bike couriers rather than car or moped drivers. This is a subset from a larger study including native couriers, dispatchers, and junior managers. The interviews ranged between 30 min to 3 h in length, with the average length of roughly 1 h. Reflecting the general gender balance in on-demand food delivery work, the gender ratio of the sample was heavily skewed male (34M; 3F). The sample also reflected the migrant population of workers, with a high number of European, South American and West African migrants. The sample also included a small number of refugees from the Middle East. All three women in the sample were European. Similarly reflective of the overall age-range, participants' ages ranged from late-teens to mid-40s, with 11 of the riders currently students or having recently finished their studies and were attempting to stay in the country post-graduation. In terms of tenure, the sample included riders who had worked for Foodora for more than 4 years, and some who had worked there for only a couple of weeks. However, in almost all of the cases, Foodora represented their first experience of paid work in Norway or Sweden.

Data collection occurred in two-waves. The first wave was conducted in late spring 2019, and the second wave was conducted during winter 2019/2020. Riders were approached predominantly via social media to generate first contact, followed by snowball sampling to access more varied participant demographics. Participants were informed that their participation would be voluntary, that the research was not conducted with any affiliation with Foodora or other third parties, and that their data would be fully anonymised. Participants were compensated for their time with a stipend equivalent to 1.5× their average hourly wage. To maintain anonymity, all participants have been given pseudonyms and no identifiable information is presented. I performed a mixture of face-to-face (19) and Skype interviews (13), prioritising face-to-face whenever possible. A small number of interviews (5) were conducted voice-only via WhatsApp.

The interviews were semi-structured and, drawing on interpretative phenomenology, I structured the interview protocol to uncover workers' own lived experience (Frechette et al., 2020). Respondents were asked about their personal backgrounds, work histories and aspirations, the labour process and social interactions in and around the workplace. With the express permission of the participants, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently hand-transcribed by the author. They were subjected to line-by-line open coding in QSR International's NVivo 11 software and all interviews were analysed abductively. Clear themes emerged through repeated immersion in the data and comparing findings with the theoretical literature. The data were further subjected to micro-level analysis. These themes included notions of constrained aspirations, stigmatisation and societal exclusion. However, such 'negative' themes were also balanced by the emergence of the themes of pride in couriers' self-sufficiency and their ability to provide for themselves and their families, as well as an emphasis on the tough physical demands of the work reinforcing a sense of rugged masculinity.

After a period of reflection and immersion in the data, I connected the data to top-level concepts. As a final stage, I performed what Erlandson et al. (1993) have referred to as a 'member check', where I discussed anonymised research findings with six of the interviewees. To ensure continued anonymity, I conducted these member checks individually, four face-to-face and two by Skype. In discussing the topic of their perceived employability, most of the participants dwelled on the divide between European and non-Europeans as to their employability in the local job markets. The discussions coalesced around the notion that gig work needed to be seen as a 'proper job',

even if undertaken only temporarily. Also emerging from these follow-up discussions was a sense of the perceived degradation of the value of the work in the local job market as compared to when they had first started, with particular frustration levied against the recent phenomenon of couriers using e-scooters rather than bicycles or mopeds for delivery – a change which lowers the perceived skill level of the work even further.

Throughout the process, I continually and reflexively examined my own researcher–participant relationship (Alvesson and Sköldborg, 2000). Part of this reflexivity was in carefully framing how I discussed with participants their own employment and migration aspirations, ensuring to avoid commenting on the feasibility or value of such aspirations. Moreover, as a non-native researcher, I was able to empathise with the participants’ externality with regard to Scandinavian workplaces. However, aware of my relative privilege as an employed academic with institutional support, I focused on respecting participants’ time through approaching them only outside of their working hours and offering complete flexibility as to interview timings.

Findings

This examination of migrant gig workers’ perceived employability within and through gig work illustrates four key factors. Firstly, obtaining employment in food-delivery work was not internally perceived to be a reflection of workers’ own wider employability in the local labour market, since the work was considered to be low-skilled and undesirable by the local population. Secondly, workers’ predominantly short-term temporal orientations with regard to food-delivery work, wherein most participants expected to transition out of gig work into ‘real jobs’ as soon as possible, is a key factor in framing how participants engage not only in handling the physical demands of the work, but also the emotional and identity demands. Thirdly, workers engaged with an ongoing and widespread perception that structural discrimination constrained their local employability. Lastly, the specific occupational context of gig work was considered to be either of no value to future local employers, or a negative signal as to a worker’s skills and labour market integration.

‘We just pick up the work that they don’t want to do’

Reflecting the widespread occupational sorting of migrants into gig work, for most participants on-demand food delivery was the only paid employment they had been able to obtain on arrival in Norway and Sweden. As such, few participants expressed any sense of pride in being hired by Foodora and did not perceive gaining such employment as a reflection of their wider employability in the local labour market. Lukasz, who moved to Norway as a qualified electrician but after several years remained unable to find suitable work as an electrician without Norwegian language skills, emphasised the comparative ease of obtaining employment at Foodora.

Getting a job like Foodora, is, it’s not the hardest thing to do. It was one of the easiest jobs to find and to get (Lukasz, Eastern Europe, Norway)

Foodora was considered by participants to be ‘easy’ based on two key factors. Firstly, the work was easy to find. The centralised recruitment platform meant that applications were straightforward, accessible online and available in English. Reputation effects, visible advertising and information shared among migrant communities also increased their awareness of Foodora as a job opportunity. Secondly, the work had a high perceived likelihood of acceptance. Due to labour turnover and the short-term orientation of many riders, most had the expectation that Foodora had a supply–demand imbalance where they were usually looking for new workers. However, the participants interviewed demonstrate a clear survivor bias in that they had all successfully been recruited for Foodora.

Anecdotal accounts of other riders, a selective recruitment process and the author's personal experience of failing to get hired all suggest that accessing gig work might be *easier* than other jobs, but is in no way guaranteed.

However, the repeated expression that getting a job at Foodora is 'easy' elided that in both Norway and Sweden a valid work permit and tax number was a fundamental pre-requisite. Applicants had to already have a National Personal ID number, as well as a local address, telephone number and bank account. Ivan, for instance, detailed how he had to frequently dispel notions that getting a job with Foodora would be sufficient proof to the Migration Agency to get a work permit.

This kind of job, Foodora, is one of those milder versions to integrate into society here.... But Foodora was not a bridge between like, immigrants and life here in Sweden, in that they would get the personal number... You come to Foodora only when you have the bank account, when you have the personal security number. After that Foodora is the second step to your life here (Ivan, Eastern Europe, Sweden)

An additional factor, contributing to the 'ease' by which food-delivery work can be obtained, is that it was viewed as undesirable work for the local population. Although there were large numbers of native riders in the Foodora fleet in Norway and Sweden, migrants make up the largest proportion of workers. The attractiveness of the work, to locals, was also strongly cyclical based on the season. Cycling around cities was viewed as a form of enjoyable exercise during the summer months. However, during the harsh Swedish and Norwegian winters, where the work feels more like drudgery than enjoyment, many participants expressed a sentiment echoed by Dmitry: '*Swedish people would not do it, but to be honest, a lot of immigrants, people who are newcomers, we will do it*'. (Dmitry, Eastern Europe, Sweden). The drudgery of the work during winter resulted in participants feeling more like they were, '*just picking up the trash. It's like, we just pick up the work that they don't want to do*' (Max, Southeast Asia, Norway).

On the other hand, while the work was considered unpleasant, working for Foodora was still considered by some as a better alternative to more precarious and physically demanding work. This reinforces Oppgaard's (2020) research into Uber Black drivers in Oslo, where he identified that migrants often turn to gig work in Scandinavia to avoid worse conditions. This was particularly the case among the Sweden-based participants who acknowledged that working for Foodora had better working conditions compared to other on-demand food-delivery companies operating locally such as Uber Eats.

Rather than drawing on standard markers of human capital to frame employability, such as an individuals' qualifications or prior work experience, accessing work at Foodora therefore drew instead on the individual's physical and economic capital. The minimum employability requirements were owning a bike (ideally one of good quality), the stamina to ride it fast through city streets in bad weather and the basic right to work.

'This isn't forever for me'

With the exception of five Western European couriers, who had leveraged personal connections to achieve junior managerial status in Foodora, all participants emphasised the transient nature of their gig work. Anton, an ambitious courier with professional qualifications prior to moving to Norway, described his orientation as follows: '*This isn't forever for me. I have my own goals and purpose in life that doesn't involve Foodora in any way, shape, or form*'. (Anton, Western Europe, Norway). Anton, here, was engaged in what Shigihara (2018) refers to 'forever talk', a form of identity work, where individuals discursively construct self-concepts around intended future trajectories. These goals, however, remained fluid and unspecific when probed further. For Anton, as with many couriers, there was a desire for something *other*, something beyond Foodora, even if they couldn't

identify what that was yet. While Foodora fulfilled his immediate needs, Anton was convinced that he could leverage his professional qualifications to eventually transition out of gig work and into more skilled, more secure work.

This short-term orientation to gig work is a common notion among the migrant participants. While easy to obtain, it was also viewed as easy to abandon in favour of other work if it came available. Part of this short-termism was that for most couriers it was experienced as a form of underemployment. For some, especially migrant student workers, such underemployment was considered a rite of passage that would be resolved after graduating; local qualifications would render them more employable in local job markets. Student migrants have also regularly been understood as accepting a precarity narrative, viewing low-wage work as temporary, biographically irrelevant, and a transitional stage to adulthood (Mrozowicki and Trappmann, 2020).

This type of short-term orientation to gig work manifested as an expression of individual agency among migrant workers, enabling them to frame the work relationship as profitably extractive. Musa, a career-focused medical professional currently in Sweden, began to work for Foodora as a stop-gap measure while he attempted to gain recognition of his nursing diplomas.

This isn't what I want to continue doing. My academic background and my career experience is in not any way related to this. Because of that, I see this as something I am doing just for the time being. I can get the money, take care of my bills, I can also be more active in the society. I am not really bothered by the working environment. That is because, it is only a part time thing. It is not something that I really want to be attached. (Musa, West Africa, Sweden)

Indeed, Musa can take what he needs in terms of immediate financial outcomes, while rejecting a shift in his occupational identification and employability framing. Musa viewed himself as a temporarily unemployed nurse, not a gig worker. Abraham, a former office manager in his native country, offered a similar account whereby not only were his career aspirations entirely separate from Foodora, he also refused to outwardly identify himself as a gig worker during his job search.

It's just, it's just about the money. Because it's not got anything to do with the career aspirations. I feel more attached to the organisations which don't pay me, honestly. You know, Not-for-Profits, this kind of stuff. So I feel I put in more effort there. I represent myself more with that organisation more than with Foodora, honestly. And when you look at my LinkedIn page, you realise I put that up as where I currently work and not Foodora. Well it makes me feel good that I'm doing something better with my life than riding a bicycle up and down. You know, how else can I move straight from being a manager in an office to riding in the snow? (Abraham, West Africa, Sweden)

However, Abraham's case was also instructive in so far as he has limited imagined pathways to his career aspirations. This transience, this short-term orientation is thus a key factor in framing how participants engage not only in handling the physical demands of the work, but also the emotional and identity demands. By often refusing to identify with gig work, even though for many participants this provided their only source of income, participants like Abraham were often left in a difficult position of not wanting to be a 'gig worker' but having few alternative frameworks to shape their occupational identification.

'Don't romanticise this'

Mirroring how couriers get 'up to the door' while delivering food, though rarely ever inside, participants felt 'left outside' by natives when it came to accessing local job opportunities. One strand of discussion which emerged repeatedly was the structural discrimination which was perceived to be

constraining their employability. Indeed, a pervasive notion of migrant discrimination was expressed by many participants, with a prominent intersectionality with racial and ethnic markers of otherness.

Don't romanticise this... Norway is not what you think outside. There is poverty, people are struggling. There is a lot of racism underneath. I've never had no one tell me, you monkey face. That's not going to happen. But if you apply for a job. If you go and tell people I'm called Ahmad, Mohammad, whatever. They never call you. (Felipe, South America, Norway)

Whether such name-based discrimination was occurring in reality is unclear. However, empirical research into migrant recruitment strongly supports this perception that foreign names perpetuate labour market marginality in both Norway and Sweden. Midtbøen (2015), for instance, found that in Norway, an applicant with a Norwegian name was 1.34 times more likely to receive an invitation for a job interview compared with an applicant with a Pakistani name. Adermon and Hensvik (2020) similarly found that an Arabic-sounding name greatly reduced the callback rate of CVs in a Swedish correspondence study, compared to Swedish names. Regardless, the pervasive sense of name-based discrimination in recruitment had a strong impact in curtailing workers' expectations when applying and framing their own sense of local employability.

While almost all couriers intended to leave Foodora, few migrant couriers were actively searching for alternative work in terms of sending in applications or attending job interviews. Either they were unable to find worthwhile opportunities, or they had come to develop a fatalism towards the local labour market as a whole. Given the structural limitations on finding alternative work, without gaining additional local qualifications or networks, this fatalism is understandable. This fatalism manifested through an emphasis on chance or luck, it being out of their control whether they were able to find work. Ahmed, for instance, a refugee from the Middle East, spoke at length of the limits of effort and hard work in finding work.

I had a good living, a good life. I came from a rich family. We were forced to move out of my country because of the revolution... When I came here. I was zero, nothing. So all what I'm looking for is a good life here. I hope I will find it. I like this country, I feel like I'm in my country, but if you don't get the chance to live here, you can't continue. (Ahmed, Middle East, Norway).

Rather than adopting the neoliberal narrative that he had to invest in his skills and self-market himself, Ahmed was convinced that his future in the country was up to chance. Having moved to Norway as a refugee, this sense of being subject to external forces is a significant determinant in his experience of work and his perceived employability.

Max, a former successful business owner in his home country, also emphasised what he felt to be the scarcity of alternative job opportunities in Norway. Due to local-language requirements, even for other low-wage work, Max felt exposed to a binary choice of working for Foodora or returning to his former country of residence where his family still resided.

In the first year I got sad. Because going home alone without your family, without your child, without your wife. It's hard. Sometimes in work I want to just stop and cry. Because I was always thinking, why should I do this? Why do this? Why this kind of job? Why this kind of shitty job? I was always saying to myself, this is the only thing that you have. It is the only thing that you have, it is the only thing that you can do for now. (Max, Southeast Asia, Norway)

Despite initial reluctance to work in the gig economy, shaped by his own previous work experiences in higher-skilled managerial work, Max continued to work for Foodora for over a year.

While this perceived temporary unemployment was experienced as profitably extractive for some, for others such as Max, the relative decline in occupational status during migration was experienced as a severe identity threat. As Pedulla (2016) explains, there can be a ‘scarring effect’ of occupational mismatch where workers have a history of having higher credentials.

‘When will you get a normal job?’

The specific occupational context of gig work was considered by participants to be either of no value to future local employers, or a negative signal as to a worker’s skills and labour market integration. Gig work in Scandinavia, as with most food service work, was considered to have low occupational prestige, though several participants attempted to elevate this by framing their work as for a ‘start-up’, or by emphasising the digital aspects. Eduardo, for instance, emphasised how gig work was effectively worthless on his CV.

What good is delivering food for me? For my professional career? Nothing. Maybe customer service, but not even. If you see my CV it’s like other experiences, then Foodora. I cannot just come out first with Foodora because that’s nothing. (Eduardo, South America, Norway)

Some participants also expressed a concern that their friends and family thought they were underemployed and needed to quickly improve their situation. Dmitry, for instance, faced considerable pressure from his middle-class family to find better work as they were concerned that the more time he spent working for Foodora, the harder it would be to find a higher-paying job. Partly this concern focused on Dmitry becoming complacent in his job search, but they were also concerned that gig work would be considered a negative ‘gap’ on his CV.

The first question from my parents when I got this job was, when will you get a normal job? A lot of people do not treat this kind of job as a proper job. It can be temporary or part time job for students but not a job where you can really grow and has, yeah, career and so on. (Dmitry, Eastern Europe, Sweden)

Yet, Dmitry’s experience must be contextualised in the class and cultural background he hailed from. Coming from a family of highly-paid professionals Dmitry had to face different pressures and stigmas than Emil, whose family was grateful for the remittances he sent home and didn’t question the source of that income.

In my country, we have this family set up that we need to support each other. So I need to work to earn some money to support myself, being here and back home. So, I told this to my siblings and my parents and said to them, I am supporting you here. You can’t imagine how hard it is. They need to make best use of what I give them. (Emil, West Africa, Sweden)

Part of the repeated concern was that food delivery work was perceived as low-skilled work, and also not contributive to developing relevant experience in the local labour markets. While local language acquisition is widely considered a prerequisite for employability in Norway and Sweden (Kusterer and Bernhard-Oettel, 2020), often the working conditions of migrants can obstruct language learning and social interaction with natives. Participants expressed that the labour process of food-delivery, in particular, offered limited opportunities for workers to enhance their employability through developing skills or native networks (Gandini, 2019; Myhill et al., 2021; Veen et al., 2020). Customer and restaurant interactions were brief and transactional, and inter-organisational communication was often mediated through email or WhatsApp. As Sam explains:

The system here is very closed. So nobody will go and speak with you. It's basically just about giving over the orders, saying some fast phrase. Sometimes they will reply, sometimes they will not reply. Swedish people don't like talking to strangers (Sam, Western Europe, Sweden)

The spatial aspects of work also meant that workers became very knowledgeable of the city (Newlands, 2020), with many couriers noting that they felt a sense of belonging. Pavel, for instance, commented '*I probably know Oslo better than my hometown, honestly. I feel more connected to the city*' (Pavel, Eastern Europe, Norway). However, this geographic knowledge was not viewed by participants as a marketable skill, especially since there was a perceived external perception that they were entirely reliant on GPS directions. It is important to highlight that the participants did not express a sense of disappointment in lacking skill-development opportunities. In line with the short-term orientation of many workers, gig work was viewed as a source of income rather than human capital development. Gig workers expected to rely on their pre-existing human capital to access work, or to develop additional qualifications and skills in the future separate from gig work.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper makes three key contributions to ongoing research into perceived employability, focusing specifically on how the structural inequalities faced by migrants intersect with the precarities and working conditions of platform-mediated gig work in Norway and Sweden.

Firstly, this research has begun a discussion on how a specific occupational context, namely gig work, can impact the employability logics upon which workers, particularly migrant workers, draw in order to situate themselves in a local labour market. In addition to structural factors and individual factors, it is also pertinent to examine the specific occupational factors which shape workers' perceived employability. Although research has begun to examine contractual status as a determinant of perceived employability, identifying that a secondary labour market position can reduce a workers' perceived employability (Berntson et al., 2006), to date there has been limited further investigation of other occupation-level factors such as occupational stigma and occupational prestige. Whereas most narratives of employability, including more recent neoliberal narratives, have focused on human capital development as the foundation of an individual's value in the labour market, gig work's highly mechanistic labour process emphasises physical capacity and economic investment in equipment. Rather than qualifications, social skills, or work experience, platform-mediated gig work often demands merely a work permit, bike and the ability to ride it. Unlike other forms of work experience, such investments have weak transferability, and the deskilled nature of the work can confront higher-skilled migrant workers with the need to re-evaluate not only their future prospects, but the value of human capital they have already gained (Petriglieri et al., 2019).

Secondly, the findings highlight the salience of a longer-term perspective on gig work, which occurs not in a vacuum but embedded in an individuals' career history, career ambitions and in the mental space of imagined alternative trajectories. Most migrant workers approach gig work as a temporary 'fix', attracted by the immediacy of income, limited bureaucratic barriers and ease of recruitment (Myhill et al., 2021). As Van Doorn (2017) explains, gig economy platforms, such as Foodora, operate on the presumption of worker fungibility and frequent turnover. However, a non-negligible number of migrants remain part of the gig economy far longer than they initially expected. A lack of alternative options, increasing frustration with discriminatory local job markets and the generally unstable economic climate operate as gravitational forces binding migrant workers into gig work long term.

Naturally the question can be raised of whether gig work should operate differently from other low-wage work in terms of shaping a worker's perceived employability. There is no evidence to date to determine whether gig workers are any more or less short term in their orientations than workers in other low-wage industries. However, of importance is that many gig workers themselves have the perception that platform-mediated gig work is somehow different, somehow *distinct* from traditional alternatives such as fast-food preparation or domestic support because of the element of digital intermediation. As such, there may be an expectation that it could provide a better signal to future employers than comparative low-wage work, though perhaps less valuable than traditional employment forms. In the same way that gig work can be considered a middle-ground for migrants between more precarious and less desirable work (Oppegaard, 2020), gig work may be considered a satisfactory middle-ground in terms of occupational reputation: a stepping stone for migrants to obtain a 'proper job' in the host country.

Thirdly, this article provides insights into how ostensibly egalitarian social welfare states, such as Norway and Sweden, can nevertheless perpetuate traditional models of migrant exclusion and downskilling (Friberg and Midtbøen, 2018; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2019; Östh et al., 2018). *"Throughout this study, I was confronted by an underlying awareness among workers that the local situation was comparatively better than that faced by gig workers in other countries"*. The successful negotiation of a collective bargaining agreement was also used by many participants in Norway as an indication of superior rights. Since the research was conducted before the Swedish collective bargaining agreement was finalised, it is not possible to definitively comment on whether the Sweden-based participants would have a similar opinion. *"However, this research has demonstrated that neither formal classification as employees nor the existence of a collective bargaining agreement are sufficient in themselves to ensure contextually appropriate working conditions or ensure that gig work is esteemed externally as valuable work experience (Newlands, 2022)"*. The atypicality of gig work, through the use of marginal short-term contracts, meant that migrant gig workers remained othered vis-à-vis the standard job market.

While anomalous for the wider gig economy, where the majority of workers remain classified as independent contractors (Tassinari and Maccarone, 2020), this research context also demonstrates that the existence of an employment relationship or a collective bargaining agreement does not negate issues of precarity or uncertainty (Petriglieri et al., 2019). Rather, this marginal employment status can be understood as a form of what Van Doorn (2017) refers to as 'selective formalization', where some aspects are formalised while other aspects remain informal.

Of course, these findings are limited by the boundaries of the research design, which explores gig work in the Global North. Similar research in a different geography, with diverse migration structures and conditions, would yield likely different outcomes. Data collection was also finalised just before the spread of Covid-19, the consequences of which have dramatically impacted local economies and employment prospects. As expressed in research by De Camargo and Whiley (2020), some front-line occupations, due to Covid-19, have gained higher prestige value in line with notions of 'hero' status. A follow-up study could therefore examine how future imaginaries of migrant employability have been shaped by this specific critical event, particularly since gig workers have transitioned towards being essential frontline workers. Future research could also investigate the perceived employability of gig workers from an external perspective, particularly hiring managers and recruitment professionals.


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