

Navigating Precarity Between Law and Profit: Migrant Riders in Italy, Poland, and Spain

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Abstract

This article examines how platform-mediated food delivery work shapes the socio-economic inclusion and exclusion of migrants in Italy, Poland, and Spain. Drawing on 60 in-depth interviews with migrant riders in Turin, Warsaw, and Barcelona, the study adopts a comparative ethnographic approach to examine how distinct regulatory models—Italy’s “dual-track,” Poland’s “contractual bricolage,” and Spain’s “regulated exclusion”—shape migrant inclusion in platform labour markets. Despite these differences, the findings reveal a striking convergence: migrant riders across all three contexts face legal ambiguity, economic insecurity, and algorithmic control, which together entrench their marginalisation. Theoretically, the article engages with scholarship on platform capitalism, migration governance, and informality to show how digital infrastructures and stratified legal regimes co-produce new forms of labour exploitation. Migrants respond with informal strategies to navigate the contradictions between denied rights and urgent needs. These practices expose how platform logics of outsourcing and opacity align with state-driven hierarchies of legal status to corner migrants into the most vulnerable segments of the labour market. The article concludes that the convergence of precarity is not incidental but structurally embedded in the interplay between digitalised labour regimes and exclusionary migration policies, calling for a rethinking of protections that address both technological and legal dimensions of inequality.

Keywords

comparative ethnography; digitalisation; exclusion; food delivery; gig economy; irregular migration; migrant integration; migrant workers; migration governance; platform capitalism

1. Introduction

Migrant workers play a crucial role in the food delivery sector. This prominence is the result of limited access to other sources of income and has led to extensive research highlighting the insecurity, volatility, and precarity featuring migrant-performed food delivery work across different settings. Moreover, this scholarship has emphasised the feeding loop between the exploitation of migrant food delivery and their lack of legal protections and institutionalised discrimination (Altenried, 2021). In so doing, the interdisciplinary academic literature on this topic suggests that, to a significant extent, far from providing a way out of destitution, platform work—a broader category encompassing food delivery—risks entrapping migrants in a downward spiral of restricted citizenship rights and pauperisation. Key features of platform work, such as algorithmic management, opaque work allocation, performance monitoring, and low pay, intensify exploitation and limit workers' autonomy, making the job more insecure and exhausting. Platforms often evade formal employer responsibilities by classifying workers as independent contractors or outsourcing them to third-party intermediaries. This practice strips migrants of essential labour protection, social security, and opportunities for collective bargaining (Defossez, 2021). The intersection of these platform features with migrants' precarious legal status further exacerbates their exposure to low pay, job insecurity, and hazardous working conditions.

This article draws on the consolidated literature on migrant work in the food delivery sector, but poses a novel contribution to it by highlighting the benefits of a comparative approach to exploring how the relationship between platform work and immigration is influenced by country-specific institutional frameworks. In particular, it analyses the implications of this type of work for irregular migrants in three countries: Italy, Poland, and Spain. This research is part of the Horizon Europe project "Dignity for Migrant Workers in Farm to Fork Labour Markets" (DignityFirm), which focuses on irregular migrant work within the farm-to-fork sector. In the DignityFirm project, "irregular migrant work" refers to "migrant workers from either inside or outside the EU and facing a totally or partially irregular condition of stay and/or employment. The irregularity of migrants' legal status lies in that neither the residence nor employment in the country fully conform to existing rules and regulations" (Schweitzer, 2024, p. 4). This definition goes beyond the simplistic binary view of regularity as merely "legal" or "illegal" status, acknowledging instead a broader and nuanced spectrum of vulnerabilities within a complex regulatory framework. Understanding irregular migrant work is particularly crucial for research on food delivery jobs, as many of the migrants who are over-represented in app-based food delivery work have undocumented residence status, making them more susceptible to exploitation (Popan & Jesnes, 2025). However, legal status is only one aspect of the irregularity and vulnerability spectrum. Factors such as employment status, contractual relationships, cultural and linguistic differences, and the presence or absence of support networks also influence the experiences of migrant workers in the sector, and their degree of "precariousness" (Kreshpaj et al., 2020).

This study aims to explore the complex relationship between the platform food delivery sector and migrant labour, with a particular focus on how legal frameworks and platform operating models intersect to produce new and often hyper-precarious conditions for migrant riders. First, it uses a comparative perspective to identify both common patterns and country-specific factors that affect migrant riders' experiences. Second, it examines how migrant riders, with particular attention to those in irregular or semi-regular work situations, navigate structural vulnerabilities linked to their legal status, employment arrangements, and socio-economic positions. Third, it contributes to the growing interdisciplinary scholarship discussing how the convergence of platform work regularisation and migration governance (re)produce irregular migrant work.

This article is structured as follows. First, the theoretical framework section situates the research within existing literature, highlighting debates on migration, digital platform economies, and precarious work. Next, the methodology section explains the research design, data sources, and analytical approach used. The core of the article is formed by three case studies—Italy, Poland, and Spain—each examining the interplay of regulatory frameworks, platform strategies, and migrant riders' conditions. Then the discussion section draws comparative insights, exploring how platform logics and migration governance converge to produce hyper-precarious migrant labour forces. Finally, the conclusion summarises the main findings, connects them to broader scholarly debates, and suggests avenues for further research.

2. Theoretical Framework

A rapidly expanding interdisciplinary scholarship frames the intersection of migration and digital economies through two opposite discourses. The first is migrant entrepreneurship. The literature on this topic emphasises the importance of both social capital for easing migrants' access to resources and information and the local regulatory environment for enabling migrants' entrepreneurial aspirations to thrive. By highlighting the “mixed embeddedness” (Kloosterman, 2010) of migrant entrepreneurs simultaneously into their social networks and “the socio-economic and politico-institutional environment of the country of settlement” (Kloosterman et al., 1999, p. 254; see also Barberis & Solano, 2018), this stream of literature shows how the “context of reception” (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006) is affected by the legal and political framework by providing opportunities to some while raising barriers for others.

Andrejuk (2022) builds on this literature to trace the implications of the “super-digitalisation” brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic for migrant entrepreneurship. Against a backdrop of enhanced precarity, she explores the trajectory of digital migrant entrepreneurship, a category encompassing workers performing commercial activities through online platforms, including within the gig economy. While noting the acceleration and proliferation of online activities across different dimensions of migrants' lives, she suggests that super-digitalisation, as a “defence mechanism” against the crisis induced by the pandemic, “has led to new structures of social advantage and disadvantage within migrant entrepreneurship” (Andrejuk, 2022, p. 6).

On the one hand, migrants from diverse backgrounds, including both asylum seekers and those categorised as “skilled migrants,” face significant challenges when seeking to find a job that matches their skills in the country of arrival. This is due to multiple factors, including “lack of familiarity with the new country's recruitment and employment markets, misrecognition of their overseas qualifications, complexities, and long delays for assessment of their overseas qualifications, language barriers, systemic discrimination, and lack of access to relevant career resources and support” (Andrejuk, 2022, p. 8; see also Abkhezr & McMahon, 2024). For most migrants, the mismatch between the qualifications they obtained in their country of origin and the formal requirements of the host country significantly narrows the range of employment opportunities they can target.

On the other hand, platform work has entry barriers low enough to attract migrants either with a working permit or able to work on behalf of someone else, seeking job opportunities with a smooth and quick recruitment process, in which no previous experience is required, and allowing them to reconcile financial independence and flexibility (Pautuzzi & Benton, 2019). App-based gig work in particular often looks appealing to entrepreneurial-minded migrants because of the promise of autonomy it encapsulates within partner agreements. On the downside, the lack of employment contracts entails that the workers bear all

the risks and costs associated with their activity. Therefore, for instance, in the food delivery sector, a business with a significant presence of riders with a migrant background, the vulnerability of migrant workers is exacerbated by the paradox that “the job is legally regulated but the employment relation is not recognized by the employer” (Elbert & Negri, 2021, p. 5). In this business niche, this relationship is triangular as the platform connects restaurants, riders, and customers. And yet, riders are the weakest link, exposed to a broad range of risks spanning from bearing the costs of health hazards, compounded by the lack of social protection, to wage depression because of labour oversupply.

This point takes us to the second theoretical lens to examine migrants’ digital entrepreneurship, which is the concept of adverse digital incorporation. This notion takes stock of the limitations of the digital divide as an analytical and normative category for making sense of unequal access to connectivity and for planning interventions to redress this imbalance, which was initially viewed by scholars and policymakers as a key driver of inequality (Kshetri, 2014).

Adverse digital incorporation, instead, emerges from the awareness of the widespread penetration of digital technologies and falling costs of smartphones and data traffic, resulting in greater access to web- and app-based services for low-income users and, possibly, incorporation into the digital economy. The concept of adverse digital incorporation postulates the risk of negative externalities for those who accept being incorporated. This sometimes occurs because the downsides of this incorporation are ignored or underestimated. However, as suggested by Heeks (2022), more often than not, the negative effects of this adverse incorporation are entangled with benefits or are embedded into organisational structures or practices from which the users cannot opt out.

The study by Cavalcanti Zanforlin and Grohmann (2022) reveals how institutional actors, including NGOs and tech corporations, often shape migrant entrepreneurship initiatives. These efforts, while providing access to markets, also risk entrenching neoliberal ideals that equate entrepreneurship with self-worth and social contribution, thus shifting responsibility for integration onto migrants themselves.

Notably, flexibility—a core value in entrepreneurial discourse—is shown to be highly contextual. Several empirical studies (Holtum et al., 2021; Pollio, 2019) have thus shown that for migrant drivers, flexibility in the gig economy is often a necessity due to a lack of alternative income, leading to increased employment uncertainty and excessive work hours. Migrant drivers are “more likely to rely on the income from Uber to support themselves and their families” (Holtum et al., 2021, p. 305). This asymmetry in benefitting from flexibility underpins the exploitative dynamics of migrant participation in the platform economy.

Scholars like van Doorn and Vijay (2021) and Altenried (2021), for instance, argue that digital platforms exploit existing legal and social stratifications—particularly those related to immigration status—to extract surplus labour from migrant populations. Core to this critique are concepts such as algorithmic management, misclassification of workers, and information asymmetry (Duggan et al., 2020; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). These features deepen precarisation by formalising risk transfer from employer to worker. Migrants are particularly susceptible due to the interplay of low entry barriers and legal ambiguity.

For instance, Inversi (2021) documents how Uber Italy subcontracted asylum seekers through third parties, a case that exemplifies systemic abuse and foregrounds the racialisation of gig labour. On this front, Gebrial

(2022) and van Doorn (2017) show how racial capitalism underpins the platform economy, with migrant workers disproportionately relegated to dangerous, low-paid roles. The “logics of obfuscation” (McMillan Cottom, 2020) conceal the systemic exploitation while promoting a narrative of inclusivity and opportunity. This tension between exploitation and inclusion became particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, studies such as Aguilera et al. (2022) and Altenried (2021) underscored how the pandemic deepened migrant workers’ dependence on precarious platform labour. Despite being deemed essential, riders and warehouse workers faced greater exposure to health risks, with little institutional support.

Finally, another growing body of literature explores how migrant workers organise, resist, and create alternative labour structures within digital economies. Recent studies document how migrant riders in Italy (lazzolino & Varesio, 2023), London/Manchester (Popan, 2021), and Paris (Baril, 2024) actively resist platforms’ algorithmic control and gamification, creating spaces for informal entrepreneurship and labour activism and use informal networks and acts of everyday resistance to counteract algorithmic control, including through the practice of borrowing or subleasing platforms’ accounts (Baril, 2024). These networks also serve as incubators for worker-led initiatives, such as platform cooperatives that prioritise fairness and labour control (Cañada et al., 2023).

While providing a thorough overview of current working conditions for migrants in the platform economy, this literature features a limited number of comparative studies allowing for the analysis of the interplay of platform logics and migration governance across diverse regulatory settings (notable exceptions include Adhikari & Khatri, 2023; van Doorn & Vijay, 2021). Our contribution to this thematic issue thus specifically highlights the influence of laws in articulating the relation of platform work and irregular migration.

3. Methodology

This study employs a comparative and multi-sited qualitative approach to examine how platform-mediated food delivery work intersects with national labour and migration regimes in Italy, Poland, and Spain. It focuses on two interrelated dimensions: First, it explores how digital platforms engage in practices of “regulatory arbitrage” (Pollman, 2019, p. 567), leveraging inconsistencies and gaps across labour and migration frameworks to shape employment relations; second, it analyses how the interplay between platform strategies and legal-institutional configurations contributes to the production of segmented and hyper-precarious migrant labour. This dual analytical lens enables a sociologically grounded understanding of how regulatory (non)interventions structure migrant riders’ working and social conditions across diverse national contexts.

The article addresses this twofold dimension using comparative qualitative case-study research carried out in three EU member states: Italy, Poland, and Spain. Although characterised by different models of migration governance, the countries share structural similarities. The selected countries have recently faced substantial inflows of migrants seeking protection at their external borders, while simultaneously experiencing labour shortages that prompted the expansion of labour migration pathways (ICMPD, 2025). Eurostat data from 2023 indicates that all three are both immigration and emigration states, with Italians and Poles representing the largest groups of EU citizens residing in other member states. The case selection is further justified by the divergent labour market structures and migration policy frameworks across the countries, particularly regarding regular migration channels, national complementary protection schemes,

and regularisation mechanisms. Notably, none has yet transposed the Platform Work Directive (EU Directive 2024/2831), resulting in distinct regulatory environments for platform work. Nevertheless, dominant food delivery platforms—Glovo, Uber Eats, and Just Eat—operate or have operated in all three countries under investigation.

Adapting Kreshpaj et al.'s (2020) literature review on the notion of precariousness, we investigated riders' experiences across five dimensions of precarity: (a) legal status, including cases of non-compliance or semi-compliance with residence and work permits; (b) employment insecurity, encompassing contractual terms, temporariness, and multiplicity of jobs; (c) income inadequacy, relating to the sufficiency and stability of earnings; (d) lack of rights and protection, including absence of trade union coverage, social security benefits, and workplace rights; and (e) work and living conditions, referring to psychosocial factors such as lack of work-time control, long working hours, and hazardous physical work environments.

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews, designed to capture the lived experiences of migrant riders and to trace platforms' strategies through expert analysis of the key stakeholders in the food delivery sector. Interviews were conducted between September 2024 and May 2025 across Italy, Poland, and Spain, amounting to a total of 120 interviews: 60 with migrant riders (20 per country) and 60 with stakeholders (20 per country), including trade union representatives, platform company representatives, employers' organisations, NGO workers, legal experts, and national or local government officials.

The interviews with migrant riders comprised both a narrative component, to focus on workers' experiences of precarity, their expectations and prospects, and a semi-structured component focusing on the five dimensions of precarity outlined below. Participants were selected to represent diverse migration profiles, including asylum seekers, irregular migrants, overstayers, and different countries of origin (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Venezuela, and Ukraine). Most of the riders interviewed were residing in the same country they first entered, often through entry visa mechanisms linked to self-employed work for the food delivery platforms. Riders were recruited through researchers' personal contacts, grassroots organisations, trade unions, and direct contact at delivery hubs. All interviews were conducted in participants' preferred languages and lasted between 30 minutes and two hours.

4. Country Case Studies

4.1. *Italy's Dual-Track*

Online food delivery firms first made their foray into Italy in 2016, when international digital platforms such as Foodora, Deliveroo, Glovo, and Uber Eats launched their operations in the country. In line with European trends, the market expanded significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic and has continued to grow steadily ever since. As of 2025, the main food delivery platforms still operating in Italy are Just Eat, Glovo, and Deliveroo, while other platforms (Foodora and Uber Eats) have moved out.

As food delivery firms settled in, most riders were Italian students, attracted by the possibility of combining a part-time job with their studies or other work. However, with the passing of time, the presence of foreign workers has become more conspicuous. Despite the lack of systemic and official data on the presence of

immigrants in the food delivery sector, scholars have suggested that the share of migrant workers is consistent, with notable differences between large cities and small to medium towns, as well as between Northern and Southern regions of the country (Costalunga & Di Cataldo, 2025). Localised research has shown that migrants are primarily employed in large Northern Italian cities (Fasano & Natale, 2019) and feature a broad range of socio-economic and immigration statuses. Our study mainly focuses on the food delivery sector in Turin and has identified Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Morocco, and Peru as the main nationalities of riders. As for their socio-legal status, they range from international students to long-term residents, for whom food delivery represents a temporary fix to lack of employment or a source of extra income, to asylum seekers and irregular migrants, for whom this type of job is an essential, and often vital, source of income.

The regulatory framework of food delivery work was developed between 2019 and 2021, albeit triggered by social protests and the increased unionisation of the sector since 2016 (Costalunga & Di Cataldo, 2025). The first law on platform work was adopted in 2019 (Law Decree no. 101/2019, converted into Law no. 128/2019). It recognised that riders working occasionally are, in principle, self-employed and that the assessment of hetero-directed or subordinate work conditions had to be made on a case-by-case basis. At the same time, it established a set of minimum rights, such as the right to compulsory insurance covering occupational injuries and diseases.

However, the law only marginally influences the regulations of riders' work, which was instead shaped by court decisions and by private negotiations between employers' associations and trade unions. In February 2020, the Court of Cassation ruled that the rights and protections provided for employer-organised ("heterodirected") workers also apply to riders. Additionally, the Public Prosecutor's Office of Milan actively prosecuted unlawful or exploitative practices by platforms: It adopted preventive measures against Uber Eats, claiming that it was responsible for exploitation and gang-mastering against migrant workers (Mastrodonato, 2020), and it investigated several platforms for violations of health and safety measures.

Following this phase—characterised by attempted negotiations, workers' strikes, judicial activism, and heightened public attention to platform strategies—in September 2020, AssoDelivery signed an agreement with a small and newly formed union called UGL Rider, which consolidated the model based on the self-employment of riders. The agreement, although contested by the Ministry of Labour, other unions, and several Courts, remains the regulatory framework applied by Glovo and Deliveroo as of 2025. A few months after the UGL agreement, in March 2021, Just Eat accepted the demand to establish employment relations—admittedly for rebranding purposes and to avoid further judicial repercussions. It signed an agreement with the confederal unions (CGIL, CISL, UIL), which applied the Transport, Logistics, Freight and Shipping collective agreement.

As the outcome of legislative and judicial intervention occurred between 2019 and 2021, the Italian regulatory context currently presents a dual-track model, where riders can be employed by Just Eat or decide to travel as self-employed workers for Glovo or Deliveroo. In fact, many migrant riders, for whom food delivery is the main and only source of income, work for more than one platform at the same time, under both tracks. While Italian courts, when prompted, continue to recognise that riders have the same rights and protection as employees, policymakers have decided to refrain from additional regulatory interventions and to wait for the implementation of the newly adopted Platform Workers Directive, to be transposed by June 2026. Similarly, between 2023 and 2025, all the existing platforms have maintained the status quo, institutionalising the bipartite system.

Our qualitative research has revealed that challenging working conditions are common among all migrant workers and result from a combination of factors related both to the “algorithmic–bureaucratic” precarisation of migrant riders (Iazzolino et al., 2025) and to the inability of the regulatory framework to effectively improve their employment insecurity. Concerning work conditions, our research showed that migrants’ main concerns are related to the lack of adequate protection during the job, the risks they face during adverse weather conditions (intense rain or snow, or extreme heat), and not being able to properly organise their working schedule: This is a recurring issue particularly among riders working with Glovo, because of the difficulties in “booking the slots” and maintaining the performance levels required to secure optimal time slots. The feeling of being “controlled” by the platforms is common among all workers.

The differences in the regulatory framework were not directly perceived as problematic by the riders, but some of the interviewees recognised the importance of having a subordinate contract for reasons related to the renewal of their residence permit and access to sick leave. However, others reported that it is not possible to sign a contract with Just Eat without a valid residence permit, as those possessing only ‘receipts’ of renewal applications are not eligible. They mentioned that accessing accounts with Glovo and Deliveroo is often easier, including by using other people’s accounts. This confirms that the platforms exploit the precarity of migrants’ legal status, as many do not have alternative job opportunities.

Overall, the immigration and socio-economic status of migrant workers play a significant role in exacerbating their vulnerability vis-à-vis the platforms. While all riders face similar working conditions, migrants with precarious legal status—such as asylum seekers, newly arrived, or undocumented migrants—experience disproportionately greater hardship.

Those in irregular situations reported accessing multiple platforms via accounts borrowed or subleased, most often from members of the same community who were temporarily absent from the city. Unlike in other countries, the practice of subleasing accounts has not been reported as systemic, since even migrants with precarious legal status can obtain the necessary documents—such as an ID card or a temporary residence permit—to open an account. Instead, subleasing has been described as a strategy to engage simultaneously with different platforms under distinct employment models.

Many migrants with precarious legal status also face intense economic pressure that cannot be alleviated simply by working a few hours on one platform. Examining the socio-legal factors shaping their socio-economic conditions is therefore crucial to understanding their additional “vulnerability,” as many of them must repay debts contracted to migrate to Europe or provide regular remittances to their families. Additionally, the most “vulnerable” migrants report limited linguistic competence and reduced familiarity with digital platform communication.

By contrast, riders who have lived in Italy for several years, or international students with proficient English, can more easily navigate the barriers imposed by the platforms and face fewer economic constraints from their countries of origin. The structural vulnerability of the first group of migrants effectively subjects them to greater exploitation, as their limited alternatives leave them with reduced bargaining power.

At the same time, they recognised that precisely because of their precarious legal status, limited language proficiency, and the flexibility of platform work, riding often represents their only entry point into the Italian

labour market—at least initially. Consequently, they are left with no other alternative but to accept and even self-exploit under the working conditions imposed by the platforms, particularly Glovo and Deliveroo.

4.2. Poland's Contractual Bricolage

The food delivery sector in Poland has evolved into a dynamic and rapidly expanding segment of the digital economy, which was significantly accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Polkowska, 2023). The first application for restaurant orders in Poland was Pyszne.pl (now owned by JustEatTakeaway), which began operating in 2010. Uber entered the Polish market in 2014, Glovo in 2019, and Bolt Food in 2020. As for today, the dominant players in the Polish on-demand food delivery market are global multinational corporations.

The platform economy in Poland has been relatively unregulated compared to some Western European countries (Kowalik et al., 2024; Owczarek, 2022). Only the work of passenger car drivers is regulated under the so-called Lex Uber, which equalised the legal status of app-based drivers and traditional taxi drivers (Polkowska, 2025). There is a lack of specific legislation dedicated to other platform workers. The prevailing contractual arrangements in food delivery, which we refer to as “contractual bricolage” due to the broad spectrum of various (il)licit work arrangements, contribute to the precarious status of migrants. Most workers are neither self-employed nor employed in the sense of the Labour Code, as they typically work under civil law contracts or rental contracts, rather than employment contracts (Jancewicz & Jóźwiak, 2025). Civil law contracts, often referred to as “junk contracts,” are problematic as they can be terminated without notice or justification, and formal social security contributions for sickness and maternity are often voluntary or non-existent (Muszyński, 2019). Vehicle rental contracts are a significant aspect of the regulatory framework, characterised by their role in intermediary-based employment models and their impact on worker precariousness (Polkowska, 2025). Workers who have rental contracts are falsely presented as “lending” a bike or scooter to an intermediary and are reimbursed through platform earnings. Due to varying business strategies, a dual market has emerged in the food delivery sector in Poland. Pyszne.pl (JustEatTakeaway) uses direct or agency employment based on a contract of mandate, while other platforms (Glovo, Uber Eats, Wolt, and others) use intermediaries that offer a variety of contracts, including combinations of civil law and vehicle rental contracts.

While predominantly Polish nationals work in delivery, a sizable portion are Ukrainian, with other nationalities also represented, though typically in smaller numbers. According to one survey, 39% of delivery platform workers were migrants (Kowalik et al., 2024). Another study utilising mobile big data from 2020 showed that across different delivery platforms, the proportion of foreign workers ranged from 37.7% to nearly 46 percent, with Ukrainians forming the largest group among them (Beręsewicz et al., 2021). The most recent survey report commissioned by the Polish Association of Fleet Partners (PZPA) shows that among those working through intermediaries, there are almost as many foreigners (48%) as Poles (52%; PZPA, 2025). Among migrants, those from Ukraine (30%) and Belarus (8%) predominate, followed by workers from Georgia, India, and Uzbekistan (each at 1%), and in smaller numbers, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Zimbabwe, Turkmenistan, and Pakistan (PZPA, 2025).

For many migrants, platform work, including food delivery, serves as the most accessible entry point into the Polish labour market. Platforms offer apps in multiple languages, and fleet partners often employ staff who speak Russian and Ukrainian, simplifying the hiring process (Jancewicz & Jóźwiak, 2025). Migrants in the sector often face more precarious working conditions than Polish nationals due to the prevailing contractual models.

According to a survey, migrant workers in taxi and delivery platforms are three times more likely not to have a written contract compared to Polish workers (31.5% versus 10.3%). They are twice as likely to lack health insurance as their Polish counterparts and nearly four times more likely than Ukrainian migrants in Poland working in other sectors (Kowalik et al., 2024). The absence of health insurance is widespread among recent migrants, with a rate of 51.8% (Kowalik et al., 2024).

Our research in Poland enhances these findings. The fieldwork revealed that the work system on delivery platforms is an on-demand system characterised by high variability, depending on the season of the year, the day of the week, and the hours on a particular day. The contracts do not guarantee the consistency of working hours and days. There are periods when riders compete for orders, and there are periods when platforms compete for riders.

For many riders, delivery is their primary or only job, and they work more than 40 hours a week, often exceeding a five-day workweek. Payments are typically made every week; however, the income is unstable and inconsistent, as it depends on various bonuses and add-ons. The wage is based on so-called multipliers, which mainly depend on the season, week, hour of delivery, and the district (zone) of the city where the order pick-up point is located.

To calculate the final net amount, several components must be deducted from the remuneration, including social security fees and the “fleet partner” commission. The interviewees also reported that their income depends on the type of vehicle, as scooter and car users receive better-paid tasks. Income also depends on the availability of other working tools. Riders are charged for backpacks and work clothes, and those who do not have their own vehicle must rent one.

Some riders working on civil contracts have access to social security, including health insurance. Those working on a vehicle rental contract are not entitled to any social security services. The poor level of control over working conditions completes the picture. The labour inspectorate only checks the fulfilment of contracts—the accuracy and timing of salary payments and social security contributions. However, as our fieldwork revealed, the labour inspectorate is powerless against thousands of intermediaries who do not sign contracts and whose companies use virtual addresses, making them difficult to track down.

Protests by riders are sporadic, spontaneous, and mainly concern pay conditions, including multipliers that change rapidly and without warning. There are two trade unions representing riders, but their demands can only be addressed to direct employers (platforms or intermediaries), as there is no sectoral collective bargaining in Poland.

The Polish contractual bricolage working system, therefore, is characterised by varying levels of security and a low level of control over working conditions. Migrants who find employment in a highly unregulated environment are at risk of further exclusion. Although most food delivery workers in Poland have a regulated residence status, our research on working conditions shows that a binary approach to irregular migration is insufficient. The lack of legislative and policy frameworks, combined with employers’ practices, shapes the conditions and vulnerabilities of migrant workers, pushing them into irregular employment defined by various temporal and status dimensions. Irregular wages and working hours jeopardise both the process of regularisation and the retention of regular status. The variety of contract types creates unequal

access to social security, including healthcare, resulting in a situation in which many workers find themselves temporarily suspended between regularity and irregularity in terms of status, employment, social security, and inclusion.

4.3. Spain's Regulated Exclusion

The Spanish food delivery sector emerged and began to develop in 2015–2016, coinciding with the launch of major digital platforms such as Deliveroo. Since then, it has rapidly evolved into one of the most dynamic segments of the European platform economy, more than tripling its revenue between 2019 and 2023, and consistently ranking among the top countries in terms of platform-based employment (Urzi Brancati et al., 2020). Crucially, this sector is highly dependent on urban scale, with activity concentrated primarily in the metropolitan areas of Madrid and Barcelona. The main market players currently operating in Spain are Glovo—now the market leader—alongside Just Eat and Uber Eats. The sector's growth has been facilitated by the widespread use of self-employment arrangements, which allowed platforms to reduce labour costs and respond flexibly to highly volatile demand.

The Spanish Riders Law (Royal Decree-Law 9/2021, Law 12/2021) marked a landmark regulatory intervention in the platform economy, establishing a legal presumption of employment for food delivery workers and mandating algorithmic transparency. This legislation emerged in response to mounting legal and social pressure, including a pivotal Supreme Court ruling in 2020 that recognised the dependent nature of rider-platform relationships. While the law formally acknowledged riders as employees and aimed to curb exploitative practices, its implementation has been fraught with resistance from platforms (EU-OSHA, 2022), particularly Glovo, which continued to operate under a self-employment model through 2024. This resistance has taken the form of legal appeals, technological adaptations to simulate autonomy, and the use of intermediaries to obscure employment relationships (Rodríguez-Piñero Royo, 2023). As a result, the law has produced what might be termed a model of “regulated exclusion”: a framework that formally includes riders within the scope of labour protections while simultaneously enabling their circumvention through structural loopholes and weak enforcement. This paradox is reflected in the coexistence of four distinct rider profiles in Spain's food delivery sector: (a) directly employed platform workers, typically under Just Eat's model; (b) employees of intermediary firms, often subcontracted through temporary employment agencies; (c) self-employed riders, particularly under Glovo's model; and (d) irregular workers operating through subleased accounts, who represent the most precarious and invisible segment of the workforce.

The Spanish food delivery sector is now predominantly sustained by migrant labour, a shift from its early composition of young Spanish nationals. Although official data is lacking, estimates from Adigital (2019) suggest that the majority of riders are foreign nationals, particularly young men from Latin America—most notably Venezuela and Colombia—and South Asia, including Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. The former are primarily active in Madrid, while the latter are more concentrated in Barcelona.

This demographic transformation reflects the sector's low entry barriers and the structural alignment between platform labour demand and the legal and economic vulnerabilities of migrant populations. Observations gathered across multiple Spanish cities have revealed the widespread and systemic nature of account subleasing, which has become a dominant mode of access to platform work for migrants with irregular or semi-regular legal status. This practice is not marginal but rather central to the functioning of the

sector. The prevalence of subleasing is closely tied to the permissiveness of platform onboarding systems and the legal constraints that prevent many migrants from registering accounts in their own names (Casas-Cortés, 2025). Three main rider profiles emerge from this context: (a) overstayers whose tourist visas have expired, a profile common among Southeast Asians; (b) rejected asylum seekers, who have fallen into administrative irregularity; and (c) asylum seekers with residence permits but without work authorisation, often due to bureaucratic delays (Moreno-Amador, 2023). These profiles reflect the diversity of legal statuses among migrant riders and how subleasing functions as a workaround to formal exclusion from the labour market.

For these people, subleasing a rider account often represents the “best of the worst options” for income generation and the simplest route into the labour market. However, this work is marked by extreme precarity and poor conditions. Riders using subleased accounts typically pay an informal “royalty” of around 30% of their earnings to the account owner, which, combined with already low margins, results in incomes well below the legal minimum and necessitates extended working hours. Irregular migrant riders frequently work 10 to 14 hours per day, seven days a week, with weekly earnings often as low as EUR 100–150. Their financial vulnerability is compounded by long, unpaid waiting times and the need to rent municipal bicycles. They operate without access to social security, union representation, or formal labour rights. The physical risks are severe, with long hours, inadequate equipment, and pressure for speed contributing to frequent accidents and, in some cases, fatalities. Beyond the workplace, precariousness extends into the social sphere: Riders often live in overcrowded housing shared with others from their communities, and their irregular legal status places them in a “grey zone” that limits access to public services and deters them from reporting abuse due to fear of deportation.

The Spanish food delivery sector exemplifies a model of “regulated exclusion,” where formal labour protections coexist with the systematic marginalisation of migrant workers. While the Riders Law introduced a presumption of employment, it failed to address the legal and institutional barriers that prevent many migrants from accessing formal work. Overstayers, rejected asylum seekers, and applicants awaiting work authorisation remain excluded from regular employment due to the restrictive and fragmented nature of Spain’s migration and asylum frameworks (Law 4/2000; Law 12/2009). These legal grey zones produce a structurally irregular workforce that is absorbed by platforms through practices such as account subleasing—now a normalised mechanism of labour access. Rather than correcting exclusion, the current regulatory configuration sustains it, enabling platforms to benefit from a flexible, invisible, and highly exploitable labour force. In this context, irregularity is not an anomaly, but a condition actively produced at the intersection of legal ambiguity and digital labour infrastructures.

5. Discussion

The relationship between digital platforms and immigration is both intimate and structurally embedded, unfolding across multiple, intersecting dimensions. At its core, this connection is shaped by the systematic incorporation of migrant workers whose irregularity—whether defined by the absence of residence permits, the lack of formal work contracts, or the denial of basic labour rights—renders them particularly exploitable. Far from being incidental, this dynamic reflects a mutually reinforcing process in which platform economies and migrant labour regimes co-evolve. As platform markets expand, they do so not in isolation but through the absorption of migrant workforces shaped by historical contingencies, economic imperatives, and legal frameworks that produce and sustain precariousness.

Historically, the emergence and consolidation of the platform food delivery market have closely mirrored key moments of intensified migration across national contexts. While the nature and drivers of these migration flows vary, a clear temporal alignment can be observed between the growth of such markets and the increase in immigration. In Italy, the post-2015 period witnessed the expansion of platform work following the so-called “refugee crisis,” associated with sea arrivals from North and Sub-Saharan Africa. In Spain, the sector’s development paralleled the influx of Venezuelan asylum seekers between 2016 and 2017. In Poland, the rapid growth of the platform economy unfolded alongside the mass migration from Ukraine since 2013, accelerated by the full-scale war of 2022.

Legally, the relationship between digital platforms and immigration is shaped by the ability of platforms to recruit from migrant populations whose status limits access to formal employment. Despite significant differences in labour, migration, and asylum policies across the countries analysed, platforms consistently absorb legally vulnerable workers whose status limits access to formal employment. In Poland, this dynamic is driven by the absence of labour demand regulation and the prevalence of civil and rental contracts—a model of “contractual bricolage.” In Spain and Italy, precarity stems from the contradictions of migration and asylum regimes. Despite differing labour frameworks, both countries generate categories of migrants excluded from formal employment—either because they reside irregularly or are legally barred from working. While the platform food delivery sector inherently presents challenges for all workers, the situation for migrants is profoundly shaped by their legal, social, and economic vulnerabilities, making them a segmented and constrained workforce crucial to the platform economy.

Economically, the relation between digital platforms and immigration is shaped by a structural alignment between the labour demands of food delivery platforms and the livelihood strategies of migrants. Platforms rely on a workforce that is flexible, constantly available, and responsive to highly volatile demand patterns. At the same time, many migrants, particularly those in precarious legal or socio-economic positions, seek immediate and low-barrier access to income-generating opportunities. This convergence is reinforced by the sector’s minimal entry requirements, limited oversight, and lack of effective regulatory controls. Across the cases analysed, these features have enabled platforms to absorb a wide range of migrant profiles, while fostering a labour regime in which economic necessity often compels workers to accept unstable and exploitative conditions.

Turning to the consequences of this relationship, one of the most salient findings to emerge from the study is the production of a specific and highly precarious migrant workforce. Across national contexts, migrant riders experience overlapping forms of vulnerability that reflect the structural entanglement of platform economies and migration regimes. These vulnerabilities manifest along five key dimensions: (a) legal and administrative status, with many riders lacking residence permits, work authorisation, or both; (b) employment insecurity, marked by unstable schedules, algorithmic control, and the constant threat of account deactivation; (c) income inadequacy, with earnings often falling below legal minimums; (d) exclusion from rights and protections, including limited access to social security, union representation, and workplace insurance; and (e) harsh working and living conditions, including long hours, physical strain, and overcrowded housing. While shaped by national specificities, these patterns converge in consolidating a segmented and disposable migrant workforce that is essential to the functioning of the platform economy yet systematically excluded from its protections. Despite variations in legal frameworks and migrant profiles, the convergence of platform logics and migration regimes results in a shared condition of exclusion from social rights and

socio-economic life. Notably, the more irregular the status of migrant workers, the more precarious their situation becomes, as heightened irregularity compounds vulnerability and deepens exclusion.

Delving further into the characteristics of this highly precarious migrant workforce, a second key finding concerns the emergence of a segment of workers who, while economically integrated through food delivery, remain socially and residentially excluded. This group is composed largely of recent arrivals and migrants in irregular or semi-regular administrative situations, for whom platform work represents the most immediate and accessible entry point into the labour market. Becoming a rider is widely perceived as the “best of the worst options”—a job that, while poorly paid and insecure, is easier to access than other forms of employment.

For many, this work is not an end in itself but a short-term strategy to secure a livelihood and, in some cases, to stabilise their legal status. In Spain and Italy, migrants lacking residence permits often turn to food delivery as a way to generate income while waiting to apply through regular channels. In these contexts, platform work is frequently chosen over employment in agriculture or construction, which, although traditionally open to migrant labour, are perceived as more physically demanding, less flexible, located farther from city centres (and thus community networks), and more difficult to access without formal contracts. In Poland, while many Ukrainian migrants have legal residence, platform work similarly functions as a transitional occupation. It offers immediate income with minimal bureaucratic barriers, especially for those who lack Polish language skills or are unfamiliar with the local labour market. Compared to sectors like manufacturing or logistics, food delivery is seen as more accessible and less dependent on formal recruitment.

Closely tied to this fragmented inclusion is the emergence of a new ecosystem of intermediaries that mediate access to and shape the functioning of food delivery work for migrant riders. These actors have become central to the organisation of the sector, operating in a grey area lingering outside of, but contiguous to, food delivery platforms. Operating at the intersection of digital platforms, migration regimes, and informal economies, they influence not only the conditions of work but also the very possibility of labour market entry for migrants. They play multiple roles, offering legal and administrative consultancy, assisting with visa procedures or self-employment registration, or even renting essential equipment (e.g., bicycles, scooters, branded backpacks), often at high cost. Most notably, in Spain and Italy, the subleasing of platform accounts has become widespread—a hallmark of Spain’s “regulated exclusion” and Italy’s “dual track” models. In Poland, a more institutionalised model has emerged through “fleet partners,” who contract with platforms and then “employ” riders under civil or rental contracts—a defining feature of the “contractual bricolage” model.

Among the various forms of intermediation observed in the study, the irregular subleasing of platform accounts emerges as a particularly exploitative and structurally embedded practice, albeit one which is hardly clean-cut. This arrangement typically involves a migrant with legal status—often holding a valid residence permit and a formal contract with the platform or an intermediary—informally renting out their account to another migrant in an irregular situation. While this practice enables undocumented riders to access income-generating opportunities, it also creates a highly asymmetric relationship marked by dependency and vulnerability. Account holders often retain control over the platform interface and payment flows, leading to abuses such as disconnections or withheld earnings. Moreover, while riders are covered by their platforms in case of road accidents during delivery (but not while waiting for a request or travelling to a

restaurant for a pickup), those using someone else's account remain uncovered. What began—and in some cases still operates—as a community-based coping strategy rooted in kinship and local ties often evolves into a market-oriented mechanism of exploitation. Some interviewees blurred the line between solidarity and exclusion, problematising the often-vilified role of intermediaries and at times justifying account-holders' entitlement to a commission for lending their accounts. Overall, however, these dynamics are generating growing tensions within migrant communities, fostering mistrust and internal fragmentation. Account subleasing thus emerges not merely as a workaround to legal exclusion but as a mechanism of control and extraction that reshapes intra-community relations.

This model of fragmented inclusion, where migrants are economically integrated yet remain precariously positioned, also reveals a further implication: In specific contexts, platform work is not only a pathway to integration but a channel of entry into the country itself. This dynamic was observed most clearly in Spain, where food delivery platforms have become embedded in the migration trajectories of South Asian nationals, particularly from Pakistan and Bangladesh. Fieldwork conducted in Barcelona shows that, for many in this group, the decision to become a rider is not made post-arrival but is premeditated and structured before departure. Migrants often enter Spain on tourist visas with the explicit intention of overstaying and working in food delivery. Upon arrival, they activate pre-existing community ties to secure access to subleased accounts and navigate informal housing and employment markets. Thus, the platform becomes not only a site of labour incorporation but a structuring device in the migration process.

The comparative analysis of Italy, Poland, and Spain reveals that, despite significant differences in regulatory frameworks—from Spain's "regulated exclusion," to Italy's "dual track," and Poland's "contractual bricolage"—food delivery platforms consistently extract value from the most precarious segments of the migrant workforce. This convergence underscores the capacity of platform capitalism to adapt to and exploit diverse legal environments, producing similar conditions of vulnerability and exclusion across national contexts. The regulatory frames do not mitigate but rather enable this exploitation, providing the structural conditions through which platforms incorporate migrant labour while externalising risk and responsibility.

6. Conclusion

This article has explored the complex entanglements between platform food delivery work and migrant labour, focusing specifically on the experiences of irregular and semi-regular migrant workers in Italy, Poland, and Spain. Drawing on and extending a robust body of interdisciplinary research, it has highlighted how platform work, far from offering upward mobility or economic integration, often entrenches migrant workers in cycles of precarity, legal vulnerability, and socio-economic exclusion. The comparative approach adopted here reveals that, despite differences in national legal and regulatory frameworks, platform economies consistently absorb and exploit migrant workers in structurally similar ways. Across all three contexts, food delivery platforms capitalise on the vulnerabilities produced by migration regimes, labour market segmentation, and the lack of adequate labour protections, thereby reinforcing existing hierarchies and producing new forms of hyper-precarious employment.

A key insight from this research is that the relationship between platform work and immigration is not incidental but structurally embedded. The study has shown that digital platforms actively draw from migrant labour pools shaped by restrictive migration regimes, limited access to formal employment, and the urgent

need for income. Whether through Italy's "dual track" system, the "contractual bricolage" of Poland, or Spain's "regulated exclusion," platforms have developed strategies to exploit legal ambiguity and externalise responsibility. This convergence reflects a broader systemic logic: As platform economies expand, they do so through the selective incorporation of migrant workers whose irregular or semi-regular legal statuses make them particularly exploitable. Migrants are thus not merely passive participants in the platform economy but structurally positioned at its core. They are integral, forming the human infrastructure that enables the functioning of digital platforms—yet disposable, as existing migration regimes secure a steady supply of legally precarious migrant labour.

Importantly, the study sheds light on the emergence of fragmented inclusion as a defining feature of migrant participation in food delivery work. Migrant riders are often economically integrated into national labour markets, yet socially, legally, and politically excluded. This form of inclusion allows them to generate income and sustain livelihoods, but it also reinforces their marginalisation by denying them access to rights, protections, and stable legal status. For many, becoming a food delivery rider is not a career choice but a survival strategy—a "best of the worst" option that provides immediate, albeit precarious, access to the labour market. In some cases, platform work even shapes the migration trajectory itself, functioning as both a labour market niche and an informal mechanism of entry, as seen in Spain with South Asian migrants.

Furthermore, the study highlights the pivotal role played by intermediaries—ranging from formal fleet partners to informal account holders—in shaping migrant workers' experiences. These actors mediate access to platform work, structure contractual relationships, and, in many cases, perpetuate exploitative arrangements such as account subleasing. This informal infrastructure not only reflects the inadequacies of regulatory oversight but also reveals how exploitation can be reproduced within migrant communities themselves. Practices like account renting, while originally emerging as survival strategies, have evolved into mechanisms of control that deepen fragmentation, dependency, and intra-community tensions.

Ultimately, this research contributes to broader theoretical debates on the intersection of digital capitalism and migration governance. It underscores how platform economies do not merely respond to labour market dynamics but actively shape and are shaped by migration regimes. The conditions that render migrant labour precarious—legal irregularity, lack of documentation, and exclusion from social rights—are not peripheral to the functioning of the platform economy but central to its profitability. The study's comparative perspective reinforces this point by demonstrating how platforms navigate and exploit different legal terrains to consistently extract value from legally and economically vulnerable populations.

The findings call for a critical rethinking of platform work regulation and migration policy. Regulatory frameworks that continue to treat platform workers as independent contractors or fail to address the structural vulnerabilities of migrant labour only perpetuate exploitation. If platform capitalism is to be made more equitable, future interventions must take into account the deeply embedded nature of migrant precarity within digital economies. This means not only enforcing labour protections and clarifying employment relationships but also reconfiguring migration governance to ensure that economic inclusion does not come at the cost of legal and social exclusion.

The analysis offers insights that transcend the food delivery, illuminating the structural dynamics at the intersection of market demand, state regulation, and migrant labour. The market's capacity to absorb

migrant workers outside legal norms, the alignment between labour demand and migrant livelihood strategies, and the production of a precarious workforce that is economically integrated but socially excluded are, in fact, not sector-specific. Agriculture exemplifies these dynamics: Informal hiring, seasonal dependency, and the emergence of irregular intermediaries mirror the mechanisms observed in platform work (Garofalo Geymonat et al., 2023; Molinero-Gerbeau, 2021). These parallels suggest that labour precarity is shaped less by sectoral features than by systemic tensions between economic imperatives and migration control. In this light, the specificity of food delivery serves as a revealing lens through which to understand wider configurations of regulated exclusion and fragmented inclusion across precarious labour markets. Nevertheless, key features of platform work, such as algorithmic management, opaque work allocation, performance monitoring, and low pay, intensify exploitation and limit workers' autonomy. Platforms frequently evade formal employer responsibilities by classifying workers as independent contractors or outsourcing them to third-party intermediaries, stripping migrants of essential labour protection, social security, and collective bargaining opportunities.

A promising avenue for future research lies precisely in examining similarities and differences between food delivery and other migrant-labour-intensive sectors (digitalised and traditional). This would allow for a deeper understanding of how structural dynamics of precarity unfold across diverse labour regimes. A second promising avenue lies in exploring how migrant workers organise, resist, and reconfigure their roles within digital economies. While this article has focused primarily on structures of exploitation and precarity, it is equally important to explore how migrants actively challenge platform power. Emerging evidence points to new digital dynamics of resistance—ranging from informal networks and everyday acts of subversion to the formation of cooperatives and participation in labour activism. These practices reveal that migrant workers are not merely passive recipients of platform exploitation but also agents capable of shaping alternative labour structures. Investigating how stable job conditions, pathways to regularisation, and collective organising contribute to building more equitable digital labour environments would enrich our understanding of both resistance and resilience in the platform economy.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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