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Sociological Types of Precarity Among Gig Workers: Lived Experiences of Food Delivery Workers in Riga

Iveta Ķešāne † **and Maija Spurina** †

Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies, Latvian Academy of Culture, Latvia

† These authors contributed equally to this work.

Correspondence: Iveta Ķešāne (iveta.kesane@lka.edu.lv)

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the lived experiences of precariousness in gig work, a growing sector of the modern labor market, through the case of Latvia, a former Soviet republic that has experienced radical neo-liberalization over the last 30 years. Many studies, mainly focusing on the Global North, have demonstrated precarious aspects of gig work—its short-term engagements, the lack of legal protection and social benefits, and algorithmic management as an autonomy-limiting control mechanism. Given the precarious nature of gig work, we examine why people engage in it. Building on literature that distinguishes precarity as a condition and precariousness as a subjective experience, we analyze reasons for engaging in gig work in Latvia. We identify five types of gig workers based on 56 in-depth interviews with food delivery gig workers in Riga, the capital of Latvia. We analyze differences in our respondents' motivations for choosing this work, their position, and historical mobility in the social structure. Based on this analysis, we find three factors that serve as a basis for a typology of food delivery workers in Riga: gig workers' view of gig work as a temporary vs. a long-term engagement, the breadth of perceived opportunities available, and their emotional satisfaction with the job. We discuss how these findings compare with other studies on gig work and gig workers' subjective experiences.

Keywords

Eastern Europe; gig economy; gig work; Latvia; neoliberalism; platforms; precariousness; precarity

1. Introduction: Research Rationale

With the platform economy on the rise, an increasing number of people across the globe choose platform work as their primary or supplementary source of income. Known as the "gig economy," "gig" denotes a short-term arrangement, one carried out traditionally by a musician but more recently by a diversity of so-called "gig workers" (Woodcock & Graham, 2020). Platforms attract workers promising unprecedented autonomy and flexibility, while an increasing number of studies document the precarious nature of gig work (Barratt et al., 2020; MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019; Ravenelle, 2019; Zwick, 2017). We use narratives of food delivery workers in Latvia, a neo-liberal Eastern European society, to deepen our understanding of why job seekers choose to work for platforms despite their precarity. Building upon 56 in-depth interviews with food delivery couriers in Riga, we divide our respondents into five types. Each has a distinctive experience; some experience gig work as a trap due to precarious conditions shaped by post-Soviet neoliberalism, while others use gig work to reduce the precariousness of their lives.

Precarity as a labor condition became prominent with the decline of secure industrial employment and the rise of the service economy and financial capitalism in the 1970s, prompted by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, as "a theory of political economy," suggested "that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). Such ideas contributed to the state and employers increasingly withdrawing from guaranteeing workers' social security and lifelong employment. Workers were socialized to think of themselves as rational decision-makers who compete for jobs in the labor market or, ideally, become entrepreneurs. Since then, precarity as a labor condition has been associated with insecure, temporary, and short-term employment, leaving workers anxious about their future (Kalleberg, 2009; Millar, 2017).

One could say that the rise of the platform economy has brought neoliberal ideology and precarious working conditions to their extreme (Ravenelle, 2019; Schor et al., 2020). Classification and treatment of gig workers as independent contractors shifts all the risks of the free market from platforms to the workers (Altenried, 2021; Barratt et al., 2020; Mendonça et al., 2023; Ravenelle, 2019). Algorithmic management and the asymmetric distribution of information leave gig workers with minimal control over their working conditions (Shibata, 2020). Platforms promote themselves as spaces where workers can unleash their entrepreneurial skills. They frame and render workers responsible for their precarity (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019) and disguise such labor relations under euphemisms of "flexibility," "workers' autonomy," and "freedom" (Shibata, 2020; Zwick, 2017).

Although the precarity of working conditions across various platforms and diverse socio-geographical contexts can be demonstrated, it is also recognized that the experience of gig work and the precarity associated with it are very heterogeneous (Altenried, 2021; Schor et al., 2020). Due to the lax regulation of employment relations, platforms draw together workers from socially diverse groups and life situations. Individual rationales for pursuing gig work and the subsequent experience of gig work vary even if the formal working conditions are the same. Therefore, to get a fuller picture of precarity in gig work, it is essential to uncover how gig workers with diverse social positions experience these precarious labor conditions in various political and socio-economic contexts.

To address and uncover this heterogeneity of experiences, we follow Millar's (2017) invitation to use Butler's (2016) distinction between precariousness and precarity and examine how precarity as a condition constitutes lived experience. Butler (2016) suggests that precariousness is a universal feature of all lives. Lives are precarious by definition, "they can be expunged at will or by accident," and "their persistence is in no sense guaranteed" (Butler, 2009, p. 25). To be sustained, human life requires a set of social and economic institutions; therefore, "*precariousness* [of life] implies living socially," i.e., "one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other" (Butler, 2009, p. 14). Butler uses the term "precarity" to refer to differential protection against precariousness in a given society. It is a "politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (Butler, 2009, p. 25). This includes different welfare and labor regimes, differential distribution of wealth but also differential representation of specific populations as less worthy of life than others. Precariousness as an ontological and universally shared condition does not permit specific contexts under which human experience occurs since it claims that we all come into existence as precarious beings that need protection. Precarity as a political condition allows us to specify regimes and institutions under which the human experience of precariousness occurs.

In our study, we view precariousness as a lived experience under specific "politically induced" (Butler, 2016) conditions that frame also the precarity of labor (Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011). To analyze the lived experience of precarity means to look at subjective experiences. Armano et al. (2022, p. 31) suggest an analytical distinction between precarity as a "condition" and precariousness as an "experience." Dörre (2014) similarly suggests that precarity comprises structural and subjective criteria. Focus on precariousness as "experience" allows us to see subjectivity's cognitive, affective, and social aspects (Armano et al., 2022; Millar, 2014). Building on this conceptual premise, we then analyze experiences of precariousness (subjective) in platform work in Latvia, a significantly neoliberal society (structural condition).

Our study contributes to the body of research on the rationales behind the choice to engage in gig work by focusing on the subjective experiences of gig workers. Lam and Triandafyllidou (2022) focus on immigrant labor and indicate several pathways for immigrants who engage in gig work in Canada, examining their objectives and perceived agency in the labor market. Another study (Altenried, 2021) sheds light on why so many immigrants are engaged in food delivery in Berlin. From those who research immigration and local experiences of labor, several studies in the US demonstrate a diversity of rationales for engagement in gig work across different types of platforms (Dunn, 2020; Ravenelle, 2019; Schor et al., 2020). Schor et al. (2020) observe that the satisfaction and perception of autonomy in gig work depend on the economic dependency level across various platforms. A rare study of gig work outside the global cities of high-income societies (Diakonidze, 2023) shows that the trade-off between gig work's flexibility and standard employment's security is not meaningful for Georgian taxi drivers because traditional standard employment is perceived as insecure.

To understand experiences of precariousness in gig work, we analyze the narratives of the food delivery workers in Riga. We have identified three dimensions that allow us to categorize the complexity of diverse experiences. The three dimensions are a temporal view of the engagement, the perceived breadth of alternative opportunities, and the emotional satisfaction they gain from this work. As a result, we found five types of food delivery gig workers.

2. Neoliberal Context of Precariousness Experience in Post-Soviet Latvia

After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, Latvia went through fairly radical neo-liberalization (Appel & Orenstein, 2016; Bohle & Greskovits, 2007). The need to "adopt neoliberal reforms was especially pressing" to "geopolitical[ly] realign from East to West" (Appel & Orenstein, 2016, pp. 317–318). In comparison to the Western countries where neoliberalism was adopted in the context of a solid middle class (Mau, 2015), the neoliberal reforms in the former post-Soviet republics, including Latvia, were installed in the context where a large part of society was economically disadvantaged (Eglitis & Lace, 2009).

The growth of the Latvian economy was based primarily on consumption and mortgage loans, not industry or agriculture (Hudson, 2014). Hudson describes the post-Soviet neo-liberalization in Latvia as "the evolving financial exploitation, trade dependency, and low-wage policy advanced by Washington and the international financial institutions" (Hudson, 2014, para. 7). This neoliberal approach deepened after the 2008 crisis when the state chose to bail out banks and downsized welfare (Ozoliņa, 2019; Sommers & Woolfson, 2014). Throughout those transformations, Latvian "ruling parties and politicians…embraced the view that the market economy would sort out problems of economic marginality and that there was no critical need for a socially oriented policy" (Eglitis & Lace, 2009, p. 332). Such neo-liberalization in Latvia led to marked income and wealth inequality (Brzeziński et al., 2020, p. 12; Eglitis & Lace, 2009) and comparatively low mean household wealth (Brzeziński et al., 2020, p. 5). These neoliberal transformations could not generate sufficient conditions capable of minimizing the precariousness of life (Butler, 2016).

Labor conditions in post-Soviet Latvia should be seen as embedded in the post-Soviet neoliberal context. For two decades following independence, the state-defined minimum wage in Latvia remained significantly lower than the state-defined subsistence level consumer basket. One-third of all workers received minimum wages. In 2022, the shadow economy constituted 26.5% of GDP, the most significant component being undeclared employment (Sauka & Putnins, 2023). With few exceptions, labor unions have mainly been weak (Sommers & Woolfson, 2014). In this context, gig work, often described as precarious work in the literature (see, for example, Barratt et al., 2020; MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019; Mendonça et al., 2023; Ravenelle, 2019; Zwick, 2017), does not seem specifically more precarious than many other jobs available in Latvia, specifically in terms of wage and overtime pay, ability to control one's work schedule, and regulatory protection. A study on gig workers in Georgia, a former Soviet country, identifies a similar situation (Diakonidze, 2023). The gig workers we interviewed also mentioned that in their previous jobs, they had high workloads and thus could not maintain a work–life balance. Others found their income in their primary jobs insufficient, so they chose gig work to attain additional income. Hudson (2014), when writing on post-Soviet neo-liberalization in Latvia, calls this "anti-labor, anti-industrial, pro-rentier extremism" that is not contested by workers because they are "distracted" by the ethnic conflict between Latvians and the Russian-speaking population and unaware "how different this neoliberal policy is from that followed by Western social democracies" (Hudson, 2014, para. 6).

Besides these labor conditions, neoliberalism in Latvia also entails specific ethical and cultural regimes. As an ethical regime, it expects one to work on oneself and to be self-entrepreneurial (Ozoliņa, 2019). Ozoliņa (2019), in her ethnography of the Latvian State Employment Agency, finds that there are institutions and programs to support the unemployed. However, they are often inefficient and overemphasize the unemployed individual's responsibility to deal with their situation. As a cultural regime, neoliberalism uses "cultural and traditional values,"

as well as emotions, such as the "fears" of immigrants and communists, to survive and legitimize itself (Harvey, 2005, p. 39). Harvey (2005) writes that "the neoliberal state needs nationalism of a certain sort to survive" (p. 85). In the 1990s, such nationalism in Latvia formed in an ethnic frame. Firstly, it was directed against the Latvian Russian-speaking community, especially those who had immigrated to Latvia from other Soviet republics during the Soviet era. They were seen as remnants of the Soviet past. After the Soviet collapse, the Latvian state did not grant them citizenship or political rights. Secondly, there has been a growing "fear of 'outsiders' who may further 'dilute' the 'already-threatened' Latvian national identity" (Woolfson, 2009, p. 954). As we see also among the gig workers we interviewed, the precariousness of life was aggravated by such nationalism. All these conditions shall be considered as we analyze the experiences of gig workers in Latvia.

3. Food Delivery Platforms in Riga

Wolt began food delivery operations in Latvia in 2017 and Bolt Food in 2020. Today, by our estimates, based on platform communication in the media and other sources, Riga has about 8,500 food delivery gig workers. Most are registered as self-employed; some have established a small business or use their existing business to provide delivery services. Couriers are responsible for reporting and paying their own taxes, being able to choose between several tax regimes that vary in degree of complexity and regularity of tax reporting and the level of social insurance. Most keep their tax payments to a minimum by choosing the least insured status, underreporting income, or setting up a foreign bank account and not reporting income at all. In the case of Bolt, the option to conduct payments in cash also provides an opportunity to evade reporting. Social insurance and health insurance is an issue of courier responsibility. One exception is the Wolt platform, which has collective insurance against accidents.

The daily work of Wolt and Bolt couriers is algorithmically managed. Even though both platforms have specific rates, algorithms calculate the delivery route and time, the delivery fee of each order, and, most importantly, allocate incoming orders among the couriers. Couriers have the freedom to accept or reject an order, but the rejection of too many orders can be punished by blocking the couriers' account. Based on our observations, overall earnings largely depend on how many "well-paid" orders a gig worker receives and how little he or she has to stay idle without any orders. Even though the platforms claim that orders are allocated based on each courier's location, it is clear that many other variables affect the final output.

As seen elsewhere (Altenried, 2021), entry costs into food delivery gig work are relatively low. However, an ability to invest in appropriate equipment significantly improves couriers' labor conditions and potential to earn. The platform provides a t-shirt, a waterproof jacket, and a delivery bag (for a fee), but work safety and efficiency depend on the courier's access to an efficient means of transport, phones with longer-lasting batteries, weather-appropriate clothing, protective gear, and other equipment. Having several means of transport (e.g., bike and car) allows a courier to adjust to differences in weather and traffic. Similarly to what has been identified in other studies (Schor et al., 2020), a home base in a location with many restaurants is another asset.

4. Method

Our analysis of gig workers' experiences in Latvia is based on 56 semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted from July 2022 to June 2023 with food delivery couriers working through the Wolt and Bolt

platforms in Riga. Neither platform was open to sharing any data on their courier partners. Therefore, we based our recruitment on estimates. A 2022 Wolt-funded Europe-wide survey reports that 80% of Wolt couriers are between 18 and 34 years old, and 90% are males (Wolt, 2023). Elsewhere, Wolt has stated that the majority of couriers in Latvia use cars, 20% use bikes, and 30% work full-time (Lastovska, 2020). We believe these socio-demographics relate equally to both food delivery platforms. There are no data on the proportion of immigrants in the overall courier population, but our observations suggest that, in contrast with national contexts where the vast majority of the couriers are recent immigrants (Altenried, 2021; Kalleberg, 2009; Lam & Triandafyllidou, 2022), in Riga, more than half of couriers are Latvian nationals (similar to, e.g., Diakonidze, 2023).

Our sampling strategy was purposefully aimed at socio-demographic diversity in terms of age, gender, and, in the case of immigrants, the country of origin. Interviewees were recruited by circulating an invite on social media and approaching couriers on the street. Because young male students were significantly more responsive to the initial social media invite, in our subsequent recruitment, we purposefully reached out to non-students, women, and couriers above 30 to ensure that the collected material represents the diversity of experiences and life situations of food delivery gig workers in Riga. We stopped conducting interviews when we felt we had reached saturation in the scope of experiences (Mason, 2010). Saturation was reached much faster with immigrants because almost all immigrant gig workers recruited mainly on the street turned out to be international students and thus shared similar motivations for this job. The socio-demographic composition of our sample appears in Figures 1 and 2.

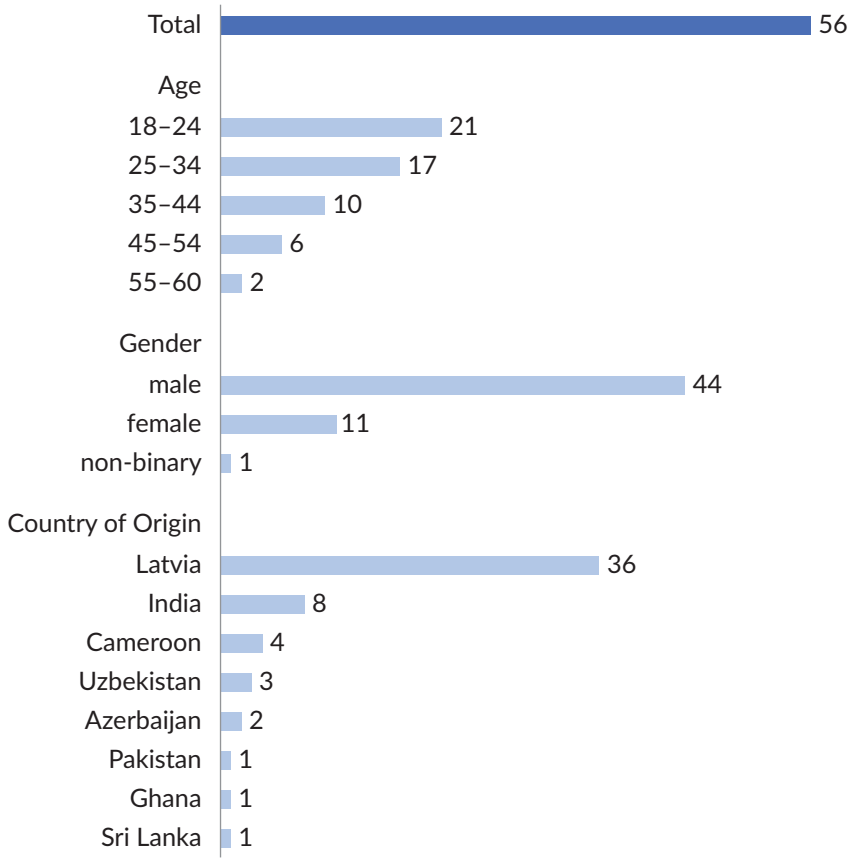

Figure 1. The number of interviewees by age, gender, and country of origin.

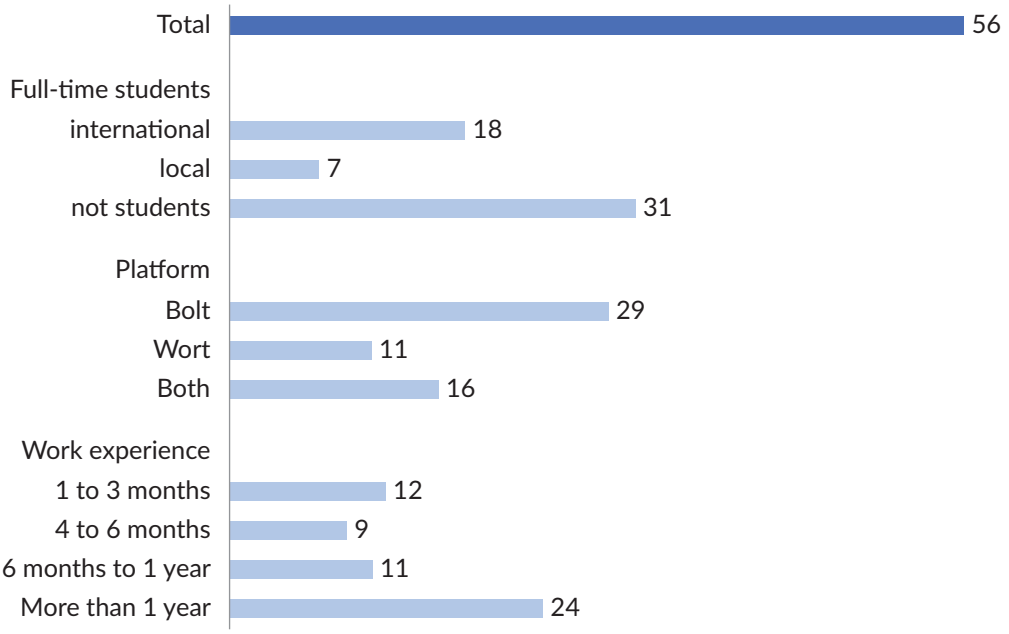

Figure 2. The number of interviewees by their current status as a student and gig work experience ($N = 56$).

Interviews varied in length from 40 minutes to two hours and 63 minutes on average. All interviews were conducted in public places after obtaining informed consent from the respondent. In each interview, we addressed the following themes: (a) career trajectories and the motivation/choice of gig work, (b) precarity and employment status, (c) daily routine and work-life balance, (d) algorithmic control and agency, (e) co-operation with other couriers and perceptions of social attitudes, and (f) subjective feelings about gig work. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were anonymized by assigning each transcript a number and each interviewee a pseudonym that was used to assign quotes in this article.

During interviews and data analysis, we paid attention to respondents' meaning-making following the reflexive approach of Giddens (1991), where a "person's identity is not to be found in behavior, nor—important though this is—in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going" (Giddens, 1991, p. 54). We also took into account that individual narratives are "never fully individual" and reveal "shared experiences" of various social issues (Barabasch & Merrill, 2014, p. 288). We used our "sociological imagination" to avoid respondents' experiential bias by situating their narratives and behavior in the broader context of Latvia and neoliberal capitalism.

Both authors read all the interviews twice. During the first read, we coded data according to the six themes listed above and identified emerging themes. In the second reading cycle, we focused on analyzing the lived experience of precariousness and found three dimensions that structured the diversity of reported experiences of precariousness: (a) how the respondent sees their opportunities in the labor market, (b) whether they perceive this job as permanent or temporary, and (c) how they feel about doing this work. The first dimension is related to the questions about their career trajectories and subjective job evaluation. The second dimension relates to the interview questions about gig workers' motivation for doing this job and their plans for the future. The last dimension is related to the research questions that asked about their feelings about this job, how they perceive societal attitudes toward this type of work, and how they feel about how the platform's algorithm functions. Based on these dimensions, we divided all respondents into

five groups by their approach to gig work and the level of precarity they faced. We titled these types gig work as a job, an in-between, a temporary trap, a trap, and a lifestyle. The types are presented in Table 1 and in the next section in the order of prevalence in our sample.

Table 1. Types of gig work experience.

Type	Perceived range of alternative employment opportunities	Permanent or temporary employment	Emotional orientation
An in-between	Narrow	Temporary	Neutral to positive
A temporal trap	Extremely narrow	Temporary	Positive to negative
A job	Wide	Permanent	Positive
A trap	Extremely narrow	Permanent	Negative
A lifestyle	Wide	Temporary	Neutral to positive

Since it is qualitative research, we do not claim that these types cover all the diversity of food delivery workers in terms of their precariousness. However, the data suggest that based on lived experiences of precariousness in Latvia, platform work might not be seen as more precarious than other standard and non-standard employment experiences. We would need to have a better understanding of the socio-demographics of gig workers from both platforms to be aware of any groups we might have missed or underrepresented.

5. Data Analysis

5.1. Gig Work as an In-Between

The most prevalent orientation towards gig work among our respondents was what we have named "an in-between." For this type of gig worker, gig work is a temporary option that allows them to subsist between other engagements. Either they plan to finish their studies and then look for a full-time job, or they are in between two jobs, or they experience short-term difficulties that do not allow them to pursue a long-term career of their choice. Even though their perceived range of employment alternatives is relatively narrow, they believe that these are short-term difficulties, and they plan to "move on" in the long term. Emotionally, their view of gig work tends to be positive because they see it as a short-term condition that allows them to move towards their preferred way of life or maintain the life they have.

Many workers of this type are young. Other studies show that youth are generally more satisfied with "gig work" than "the older age groups" (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019, p. 10). In the current neoliberal era, youth across the globe find it more challenging to pursue linear career trajectories after high school or tertiary education (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019; Wyn, 2020). Families often protect these young people from the precariousness of life. However, many choose gig work to gain financial independence from their parents. A 20-year-old female second-year university student said: "[This job] fulfilled my expectations because it allowed me to move out from my parents and start living independently, to be able to buy food and other things that I wanted" (N0011). Ernests, an 18-year-old high school senior, explained: "I realized that I needed to earn some money because I turned 18, and then I didn't want to take it from my parents anymore because I'm an adult" (N0022). He and other *in-between* gig workers praise this job for its flexibility

since many of these young adults have other activities they are involved in and do not want to be interrupted by their job-related duties. For example, Ernests has an intensive schedule of folk dancing and, because of this, cannot do a regular job with a proper work schedule:

> I began to look for a job, but the first month of the summer, I mean June, was fairly busy with folk dance classes since we were training for the song and dance festival in the US. Thus, it took work to apply for any job. I could not be at work from eight to seven in the evening—I needed flexible employment. And then I found Bolt. (N0022; from here onwards, if not marked as "original," a quote is an author's translation from Latvian)

A third of young gig workers in the UK work for platforms because of a lack of other alternatives (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019, p. 10). Young Latvian adults we interviewed, however, mention that they see other opportunities in the labor market but choose gig work because it is relatively better paid than other jobs available for young people. "There was no better income elsewhere," Ernests explains (N0022).

Some adults also use gig work to fill temporary gaps in their labor market trajectories. Such gaps, increasingly common worldwide, have become more pertinent in neoliberalism, which emphasizes flexibility in employment. For example, a 52-year-old male who had retired from 20 years of service in the police did food delivery until he could buy a new car to be a taxi driver again, a job he does permanently as an additional income to his pension from the police service. Another example is 50-year-old Intars, a welder by profession, who, after the Soviet collapse, worked as a bartender and later moved abroad to work on various construction projects in Sweden, Norway, and England. He used this job as a temporary solution because his last assignment in construction, which was supposed to be in England, did not work out. He now does a food delivery job full-time and, overall, is satisfied with it but admits that his wages do not match his income abroad. In the future, therefore, he intends to look for another job abroad:

> This is a temporary job for me. I'm not going to work there for the rest of my life. I am also looking for and waiting for some new projects. Anyway, I'm leaving. I could work in Latvia, but they only want to pay you a little. I know what I know, what I can do. Because everywhere [in Latvia], they promise to pay one thing, but they pay another. (N0042)

Although this job is precarious and does not guarantee security and stability, it is the best option to solve their present needs.

5.2. Gig Work as a Temporary Trap

The second most prevalent type of orientation towards gig work among our respondents is "temporary trapped" and includes predominantly immigrant students from Asia and Africa. Their life in Riga is rather precarious due to the immigration regime and the cultural perceptions this regime creates. They have highly narrow opportunities in the labor market because of visa regulations and language barriers. Their emotional satisfaction with gig work is relatively neutral. Some are satisfied because they have a job despite the limitations imposed by the immigration regime, while others feel disappointed for not being able to access other labor market opportunities.

As elsewhere in the world, local visa regulations do not allow international undergraduate students to work for more than 20 hours per week. As long as they are undergraduates, their opportunities in the Latvian labor market are limited. Many try to find a job related to their education, such as business, accounting, or IT. Still, the companies do not value their application due to the limited hours they can work and, according to our respondents, also because they are foreigners and employers prefer nationals. Their disadvantage in the labor market might also be related to xenophobia towards other ethnicities and races in Latvia (Tumule & Milovs, 2022):

> If you want to work full-time here for someone, you must have at least a 30-hour work permit. My card shows 20 hours because I am an undergraduate….So, many employers would reject my application due to this fact. (N0026, original)

There are few other opportunities in the labor market for this type of individual, but they are limited and may conflict with their study schedule. For example, some reported having worked for a restaurant or call center at international travel companies, but it interfered with their study and sleep schedule. Some mentioned that they have tried part-time jobs and some informal employment, such as cleaning. For those reasons, a food delivery job was often represented as the only alternative. Additionally, platforms offer easy entry with practically no barriers or requirements (Altenried, 2021):

> There was no alternative, actually—the only option was Wolt couriering. But it was easy to make an account in Bolt, so I started in Bolt….It was easy to start because you don't need any interviews or job experience. And you can work whenever you want. (N0049, original)

Some reported that they saw almost no other employment alternatives. They said the few other alternatives they considered were as poorly paid as food delivery. So, doing food delivery work was a way out of the situation created by the immigration regime since the government agencies have no control over how many hours a food delivery worker is doing. In their case, food delivery gigs solve their income needs for a temporary period until they become subjects of different immigration regimes in Latvia or abroad or move back home. Nevertheless, this comes at some risk of losing one's visa. One of our respondents recalled a case where police caught an international student for a parking violation, which led to further investigation into whether he had been paying taxes for his delivery work (N0026). Our respondent was unaware if this person lost his visa—he certainly could have. In this instance, we see how gig work can aggravate precarious life situations.

5.3. Gig Work as a Job

We found that many food delivery gig workers in Riga view gig work almost as a permanent job and plan to pursue it for the foreseeable future. They either gig work full-time or combine it with other employment. They see multiple other opportunities but choose gig work because it allows them to deal with the precariousness generated by neoliberal conditions, where an ever-increasing optimization of time and efficiency expected at workplaces alienates people from one another and the self. They have a relatively positive attitude towards gig work.

Many respondents report prior experiences of hectic work schedules and high workloads that interfered with their work-life balance and care responsibilities. Some had also experienced controlling and abusive

behavior from superiors. They felt they were not able to control their lives. They argue that gig work gives them more opportunities to realize their agency and autonomy. Some have established small businesses that give satisfaction but sometimes insufficient income (for example, a bicycle repair shop or an electrical engineering service). Although entrepreneurship is welcome under neoliberal conditions, it is not always easy to sustain in practice (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019). Therefore, they choose gig work as a reliable way to compensate for insufficient or unstable income from another job or private business. Others engage in gig work full-time, working from five to seven days a week, eight to 16 hours per day, and having, reportedly, significantly higher than average income. Gig workers of this type feel positive about this job and choose gig work even though they feel they have many opportunities in the labor market.

For example, Raimonds, a 36-year-old IT professional, started delivering food between project-based IT gigs but soon realized he could earn the same money with less stress by just delivering food. He is married and has two kids. Although this job seems more precarious than what he had before, it is more compatible with his family life and care responsibilities (Ivancheva & Keating, 2020; Millar, 2014):

> IT jobs involve regular ill-treatment. Therefore, I prefer to work for myself. Then, I can be sure that nobody mistreats me. I can work when I want. I can take a vacation when I want. I can easily adjust my vacation plans to my wife's. I can babysit whenever it is needed. When my wife comes home, I can leave for work. Moreover, I do not have to worry if she is caught in traffic and is running late. I do not have to rush. I can wait for her and leave when she comes in. On sleepless nights, I can get up and Bolt. (N0009)

Another example is 35-year-old Egils. He has a degree in business administration and additional training in electrical engineering. Once we ask why he does not work in the sphere of electrical engineering, he responds:

> I have no interest in it. One situation is that you do something because you are interested in it, but this situation changes once you have to do it professionally. Deadlines, speed, you get chased all the time. No, this is not for me. (N0001)

He wanted to avoid standard work relationships with tight schedules and high demands. He found food delivery work to be compatible with his pace of life and schedule. It gives him a sense of freedom and an improved understanding of self. In both examples, their choice to do gig work is against the current market logic where aspirations for high achievements and profit dominate. However, they choose this job to ensure the well-being of their relatives and themselves (Ivancheva & Keating, 2020).

These gig workers seem to have a higher degree of control over their work. Some had worked as full-time couriers before the dawn of the platforms. They seem well-versed in how the platform functions, know their rights, are aware of algorithmic management, and therefore can assess it critically and, to a certain degree, use it for their own benefit. They work strategically, selecting specific times and places to work and switching between several means of transport (a bike, a car, an electric scooter) depending on the opportunity to minimize empty periods and get better-paid orders. Many keep in touch with other couriers and share information about demand fluctuations and the best spots to pick up orders. In this way, they can adjust their working hours to other demands in their everyday lives. For example, 24-year-old Martins has a master's degree in IT. He has worked as a video producer and has tried out multiple full-time jobs in logistics

and retail. Martins works six to seven days a week, sometimes up to 14 hours a day, and earns an average of 70 to 100 euros daily. He uses an electric unicycle he bought specifically for food delivery gigs, an investment that has long since paid off. He is also a sim racer and runs his own YouTube channel, which he believes might evolve into another source of income in the future. Martin is happy with his current way of life:

> I have friends with IT jobs and sitting in offices all day. I don't judge them. I am happy that it works for them, and they probably earn more money than I do. I prefer to keep my expenses low to be able to spend time outdoors—to experience life and movement in the city. Flexibility and freedom are essential to me. I am cautious to say "freedom" because I work a lot—14 hours a day is a lot. But I cherish the opportunity to go offline any time. I could work less. But I like this work and therefore working these long hours comes easy. (N0014)

Overall, for gig work as a job type, the availability of gig work helps them navigate their lives, giving them a sense of well-being. Similar to the other types discussed below, this type is also critical of platforms, especially the stagnation and squeezing of income. They know this job does not offer social security and often no steady flow of gigs. However, this job is better for them in the context of their former job and its work–life balance.

5.4. Gig Work as a Trap

Another type of gig worker chooses gig work because their lived experiences were shaped by the neoliberal policies and practices of the state in ways that compromise their agency. We have named this type "a trap." For them, gig work becomes a permanent job because it is the only real way they have to sustain their lives. Workers of this type are forced into gig work because they do not see other opportunities in the labor market. Due to this involuntary dimension, they do not feel good about this job. Different from gig work as a job type, they do not express much enthusiasm to understand the platform algorithm to make their work efficient. Their primary strategy is to organize their work around the busy hours that platforms advertise.

Juris, a man in his mid-40s with two degrees, in economics and law, has been pushed into gig work involuntarily by the broader political and economic circumstances dictated by financial neo-liberalization. His life situation dramatically changed following the 2008 crisis. Before the 2008 crisis, he worked as a high-level manager for a Swedish company. Since the economy was booming and he had a family with two kids, he took a mortgage for a house. As the crisis hit, the Swedish company departed Latvia and he lost his job. The Latvian economy contracted by 25%, and unemployment was over 20%. He could not find a job to pay his mortgage in this situation. The Latvian state chose to bail out banks but not the people (Sommers & Woolfson, 2014). He lost his mortgaged house to the insolvency process, after which he still owed a quarter of a million euros to banks. Since he is in insolvency, all he earns above the state-defined level is appropriated by bailiffs and debt collectors. He does this job because it gives him the autonomy not to report all income to the State Revenue Service, and thus, it allows him to maintain a dignified life for his family members. In the interview, he indicates that this income allows his family to live a decent life: "This [income] is significant for me because it allows my family to use a car or shop without calculating whether we can afford it" (N006).

Juris has worked as a gig worker since this job opportunity appeared in Latvia. He reflects that, initially, he felt as the only "white" person who did this job, implying that this is not a job to be proud of. Ravenelle (2019, p. 161), in her analysis of New York platform workers, found that feelings of shame about this job are common for those where this job has meant moving down the social ladder.

Debt has also been a reason for doing gig work for Signe, a 40-year-old single mother (N0024). She faces insolvency due to unsecured loans that she took to cover her daughter's medical fees. As a lone parent with only a primary education, she could not find herself a sufficiently high-paying job, so she has been struggling with poverty. She chose gig work because debt collectors had contacted her previous employers, which led to them changing their attitude towards her, and as a result, she decided to quit. Since, in her case, this job did not mean losing her status, she had a neutral affective disposition towards the work.

Above, we discussed how neo-liberalization in Latvia was coupled with or legitimized by nationalistic policies. This legacy has shaped Alexander's pathway to gig work. A 57-year-old Latvian Russian-speaker who got an industrial technical college education during the Soviet times, he has worked for the largest alcoholic beverage producer in the Baltic states for 27 years but recently lost his job due to downsizing. He cannot find another job because of poor Latvian language skills.

Latvian language proficiency is a state-set requirement, a legacy of Latvian post-Soviet neoliberalism and stringent nationalism. After the Soviet regime collapsed, citizenship was automatically granted to pre-1940 citizens of Latvia and their descendants. All those who had settled in Latvia during the Soviet era could get citizenship only through naturalization by proving proficiency in the Latvian language and history. Those who failed or saw the naturalization process as humiliating received the passport of a Latvian non-citizen. International organizations, for example, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, have criticized Latvia for this approach. Nevertheless, Latvia kept this discriminatory approach, rendering life for unnaturalized persons precarious.

This is also the case for Alexander. His parents came from other Soviet republics, but he was born and raised in Latvia. Failure to pass the language exam excluded him from the Latvian citizenry and restricted his opportunities in the labor market. Alexander would like to work as a taxi driver but cannot because it also requires that he pass a Latvian language exam: "At my age, I have no job in Latvia without knowledge of the language. Not at all" (N0053, translated from Russian).

He feels his precarious life situation is aggravated by the precarious labor conditions that gig work offers. He is supposed to work for Bolt as an independent contractor with a low salary, from which he is supposed to pay high taxes. When we ask him what it means to him to be an independent contractor, he answers with resentment towards the Latvian state: "In principle, it does not mean anything to me. The government sucks out from me the last cent I earn here" (N0053, translated from Russian).

He also indicates that he does not like "anything" about this job and feels others look down on him for this job. Among all the other types of gig workers we identify in this study, gig work as a trap type of workers experience is the most precarious.

5.5. Gig Work as Lifestyle

Finally, a small group of our respondents do not even strive for permanent employment; they approach work and life as a series of gigs. On the one hand, we can interpret them as the neoliberal workers par excellence who have entirely accepted the precariousness of life and do not expect to be safeguarded against it. On the other hand, they might also be interpreted as those who have wholly evaded the neoliberal way of life, where the accumulation of economic wealth and the development of a professional career are key measures of individual success.

For them, a gig is almost a lifestyle. Ranging in age from 18 to 35 and coming from different social strata, they embrace the precariousness of life and shift from one temporary position to the next. For them, working for a food delivery platform is just one gig among many. Overall, they see many opportunities in the social structure and labor market. Their engagement with gig work is temporary because their primary purpose is to explore and move on. They tend to develop a neutral or positive affective disposition towards this job.

For example, 20-year-old Krisjanis, an orphan raised by his grandmother, lives from a series of temporary non-platform gigs. He has always felt financial strain and, for some time, has been homeless. For the past year, he has worked as a mascot of a local hospital, carried out in-store food tasting, been an extra in movie crowd scenes, done some acting and writing gigs in advertising, volunteered or worked for a small fee at various festivals, and participated in a live-streamed Nutella eating contest organized by a betting platform. His most permanent source of income is his blog, where he occasionally asks people to donate money. Krisjanis tried food delivery for half a year before moving on to other gigs.

This type of gig worker includes many artistically or creatively inclined people: artists, bloggers, and musicians. Even though they engage in gig work to earn subsistence, exploring this novel form of work is as vital as making money. In contrast with those who approach gig work as a job, these workers are much less pragmatically oriented in their explorations—less interested in cracking the algorithm to make it work for their benefit and more eager to experience life from a novel perspective. For example, when asked about the positive aspects of working for Bolt, a 34-year-old upcoming product designer praised the possibility of meeting local celebrities or entering spaces typically inaccessible for common people, such as hallways of fancy apartment buildings. Another interviewee, a 35-year-old performance artist, talked about the possibility of using WhatsApp chats among couriers as material for his performances.

Because they are not looking for long-term affiliations, this type highly values that you can easily enter and exit the pool of gig workers and that the work does not require any identification. An 18-year-old student of a prestigious high school who comes from a wealthy family and is very engaged in music production says:

> You can decide not to come in for a month if you want to. And then you can simply go online and start working as if nothing has happened. I love it. I love to have this very free schedule. I have more time to do what I really want to do, and I don't have to follow any directions. (N0017)

These gig workers do not rationalize life and labor in precarious terms but in terms of opportunities. Precariousness is instead seen as a normal part of their lifestyle.

6. Conclusions

Other studies on gig work demonstrate the heterogeneity of precarity across different types of platforms, such as food delivery, ride-hailing, global freelance, hospitality, and others (Dunn, 2020; Ravenelle, 2019; Schor et al., 2020). In contrast, we show that the experience of precarity varies even among gig workers of the same type of platform. Our study demonstrates that even if food delivery couriers face the same precarious labor conditions, their subjective experience of precarity varies. Some are trapped in gig work due to the political and economic conditions of post-Soviet neoliberalism. Others have found in this job an escape from neoliberal conditions prevalent at previous workplaces where ever-increasing optimization of time and efficiency alienate people from one another and the self. Still, for others, gig work helps navigate their precarious life by providing a temporary way to earn a living in-between other engagements.

We find that gig workers of a "job" type view this job positively. This finding contrasts with Schor et al. (2020), who find that satisfaction with gig work varies along with the dependency on income from the platform—those who are more dependent tend to feel less satisfied (Schor et al., 2020, p. 841) and argue that the platform dependency "undermines the flexibility and autonomy" (Schor et al., 2020, p. 851). As we demonstrate above with our "job" type, there are couriers who work full-time and are fully satisfied with this job. We find that their satisfaction with gig work is related to the fact that overall, they perceive their opportunities in the labor market as relatively wide and choose gig work because, in the context of their prior working experience, it provides greater autonomy and freedom, including the ability to combine work with hobbies, family, and various caregiving duties. Gig work as highly flexible employment is more compatible with gig workers' various care responsibilities. This finding also resonates with other precarity studies exploring the link between precarious employment and care responsibilities (Ivancheva & Keating, 2020; Millar, 2014).

Other scholars find that algorithmic management results in alienation and loneliness. Glavin et al. (2021), looking at platforms in Canada, argues that algorithmic control creates "ideal work conditions for fostering a sense of personal estrangement and isolation, as captured by perceptions of powerlessness and loneliness" (Glavin et al., 2021, p. 400). The contrast between gig workers in Canada and Latvia may come from differences in overall living conditions in both countries. Precarity and social insecurity of traditional employment in Latvia make gig work labor conditions more appealing and preferable. Instead of the sense of alienation and loneliness, gig workers of "job," "in-between," and "lifestyle" types showed a better work–life and work–family balance and had a healthier sense of self. This finding resonates with the precarity studies that emphasize that there is no "firm division between life and work identities" and, therefore, we should look at precarity through "an understanding of a life-work continuum" and not "competition but on love, care, and solidarity" (Ivancheva & Keating, 2020, pp. 254, 271).

In contrast with other studies of gig workers that focus on immigrant labor (Altenried, 2021; Lam & Triandafyllidou, 2022) and argue that platforms are particularly appealing to undocumented immigrants, we find that, in the case of Riga, at least half of all gig workers are locals and immigrants are documented, specifically, international students. There is a possibility that there are undocumented immigrants among gig workers in Riga that we failed to recruit, but it is unlikely that they are predominant in the local gig worker population. The predominance of locals on both platforms can be explained by the relatively recent arrival of platforms in Latvia. Altenried (2021) suggests that platforms use the same strategy while entering new

markets: They first offer somewhat competitive pay and attract locals to gain a market share. However, they then gradually worsen working conditions and lower remuneration. As a consequence, locals or "the first generation riders" exit the gig economy and are replaced by "the second generation, legal immigrants" and later by "the third," undocumented immigrants whose opportunities are even more limited (Altenried, 2021, pp. 9–10). Many of our "job" type respondents, who had worked for Wolt or Bolt since they entered the Latvian market, mentioned how the pay and working conditions had significantly worsened over the past year. The differences between gig workers in Riga and Madrid or Berlin, at least to some extent, might be a consequence of the differing stages of control the platforms are able to exercise over each market.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors

Iveta Ķešāne is an associate professor at the Department of Cultural Sociology and Management, Latvian Academy of Culture. Iveta received her PhD in sociology from Kansas State University (USA). Her research interests are related to the sociology of emotions, cultural sociology, political sociology, development sociology, and migration sociology. Iveta received her PhD in sociology from Kansas State University (USA). Her work appears in such peer-review journals as *Cultural Sociology*, *Emotions and Society* (with L. Ozoliņa), *Nationalities Papers*, *Emotion, Space and Society*, *Social Currents* (with L. Frank Weyher), and *Communist and Post-Communist studies*. Currently, Iveta is working on a study on the meaning and practice of autonomy in the platform economy.

Maija Spurina is a researcher at the Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies, Latvian Academy of Culture, where she currently (2022–2024) leads a research project on the autonomy of gig workers in food delivery platforms. She holds a PhD in sociology from the New School for Social Research, New York. In 2018, she was a post-doctoral fellow at Yale University, Macmillan Center for International Studies. She is interested in digitization of culture and everyday life, collective memory, nationalism, and digital research methods.