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Racism and food delivery platforms: shaping migrants' work experiences and future expectations in the United Kingdom and Chile

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies have demonstrated that platform work is predominately undertaken by migrant workers. Drawing on a qualitative study of platform-based food delivery work in Chile and the United Kingdom, we examine how migrant workers' experiences of race and ethnicity shape their working conditions and future job prospects in the platform economy. In both countries, migrants perceived platform work to be a way of avoiding forms of racism in the formal economy. However, while in the United Kingdom this type of work lived up to migrants' expectations of providing an environment with fewer overt forms of racism, in Chile, workers experienced high levels of everyday racism when performing platform work. We argue that processes of racialisation have a direct impact on the labour conditions of workers in the gig economy, and that race and migration background play a key role in migrants' labour trajectories.

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KEYWORDS Gig economy; migration; discrimination; racism; digital work; food delivery

Introduction

"Platform labour is predominantly migrant labour", notes an intervention by platform economy scholars, Niels van Doorn, Fabian Ferrari and Mark Graham (2023). An ILO (2021) survey confirms that migrant workers constitute over 70 per cent of workers in the platform-based delivery sectors in Argentina and Chile. Evidence from qualitative studies in cities like Berlin, New York, Amsterdam and Cape Town also suggest that migrant workers constitute a disproportionately large share of the urban gig economy (Lam and Triandafyllidou 2021; van Doorn 2021; van Doorn and Vijay 2022). A

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growing number of recent studies have begun to show how migrant labour shapes the platform economy and intersects with other structural vulnerabilities experienced by migrant workers (Altenried 2021; Lam and Triandafyllidou 2021; Newlands 2022). This includes differences arising from the diversity of workers on digital platforms in terms of their place of origin, formal citizenship (national/non-national), ethnicity/race, and gender.

Migrant labour is essential for digital labour platforms such as those providing ride hail, food delivery and domestic work services because a large and flexible pool of workers enables them to regulate the supply side of their platforms through a combination of incentives, gamification and algorithmic management (Gandini 2019; Jabagi et al. 2019; Woodcock and Graham 2019). Without a continuous influx of newcomer migrants willing to perform low-pay and low-status work, platforms could potentially face difficulties meeting demand for their services from customers (van Doorn and Vijay 2022).

Migrants encounter barriers when entering the labour market. Working in the platform economy offers these workers a means to access income through non-standard jobs (Lamb, Banerjee, and Verma 2021). They also face multiple intersecting vulnerabilities due to their precarious citizenship status, reliance on often exclusionary welfare and employment regimes, language barriers and unfamiliarity with the employment context of their host country (van Doorn, Ferrari, and Graham 2023). Consequently, they may feel compelled to accept low-paying, demeaning jobs (Basok, Bélanger, and Rivas 2014). Platform work is appealing due to its low entry barriers, straightforward on-boarding process, flexibility, autonomy, and sometimes less discrimination in the hiring process (Newlands 2022; Webster and Zhang 2020). However, while offering vital income opportunities, this work is subject to precarious conditions and limited career progression (van Doorn, Ferrari, and Graham 2023). Nevertheless, many migrants prefer platform work over other low-income retail or food service jobs (Newlands 2022; Oppegaard 2020).

In this context, it is vital to analyse barriers to formal employment, along with racialisation processes shaping migrants' platform work experiences. This article examines how migrant workers' experiences of race and ethnicity shape their entry into and continuation within the platform economy in Chile and the United Kingdom. It also explores the extent to which platform work fulfils their aspirations for livelihood improvement. Drawing on interviews with migrant workers, we address two research questions: first, how does racism in the labour market impact migrants' decision to enter the food delivery platform economy? Second, how does their labour experience, particularly concerning racism influence their likelihood of remaining in this economy? Our aim is to comprehend how migration and race/ethnicity intersect in precarious platform-based work, focusing on online food delivery in

these two countries. By examining these cases, we unveil how contemporary racialisation processes operate across different contexts, and how this impacts migrants' digital economy experiences – an area still underexplored. Specifically, we explore how racism shape migrants' work trajectories and ability to access various labour market segments within racialised, classed, and gendered contexts. We define racism as an ideology that creates relationships of domination, wherein whiteness (and the “West” or “Europe”) is perceived as inherently superior to other ethnicities and cultures. This process of “inferiorisation” is characterised by colour, ethnicity, culture, and religion, reproducing colonial logics (Grosfoguel 2012).

We show that many migrant workers in both countries perceived platform work as a means to avoid more overt forms of racism in the formal economy due to the way digital and algorithmically-based infrastructure (supposedly) conceals their racialised identities. In the UK, workers reported that this expectation was largely met, with platform work offering a less overtly discriminatory environment, while in Chile, workers continued to face significant levels of everyday racism when delivering orders. These differences are based on different countries' representations and attitudes towards racialised groups, particularly those “racialised in disadvantage”. We use this term to differentiate between those who benefit from racialisation and those adversely affected by it, understanding how processes of racialisation limit opportunities for certain individuals. By examining workers' experiences, we discuss implications for understanding race/ethnicity and migration in the platform economy, alongside their intersections with gender and class.

Platform labour and migrant workers

Understanding questions around migration, citizenship and transnational mobility has been central to labour studies and given prominent attention in key journals (Anderson 2010; Lu and Hou 2020; Maury 2020; Wang and Wu 2010). Migrant workers were in the spotlight during the Covid pandemic as they accounted for a significant share of “essential workers” and were thus subject to increased risk from the virus (Anderson, Poeschel, and Ruhs 2021). As non-citizens who are subject to immigration controls, migrant workers face greater vulnerability to exploitation by employers. According to Anderson (2010), a heightened sense of vulnerability is a key reason why employers seek to hire migrants due to the control it offers them. Immigration policy actively shapes the working environment for these workers and the nature of their relationship with their employers. As a result, labour market and migration policies often have broader systemic influences over the lives and trajectories of migrant workers and their capacity to find suitable employment.

Although until recently, research on the intersection of platform labour and migration remained minimal (van Doorn, Ferrari, and Graham 2023), a growing number of articles have begun to address the relationship between the two. Research has moved from focusing on structural factors to exploring the subjectivity and agency of migrant gig workers through the use of qualitative methods. Platform labour consists of short, localised tasks that are accessed via an app and are often situated within low-wage sectors such as food delivery, care work, domestic services and ride hail (van Doorn 2017; Woodcock and Graham 2019). Van Doorn, Ferrari, and Graham (2023) argue that platform labour should be viewed as both offering vital opportunities for migrant workers while at the same time threatening to entrap them within a dead-end of degraded labour and low-pay work. They describe it as “simultaneously a site of degradation and opportunity”, providing easy access to income-generating work while frequently occurring in a legal grey area that is below minimum wage, risky and offering limited opportunities for personal development and career progression (van Doorn, Ferrari, and Graham 2023, 1101). When compared to legal, permanent and full-time work with employment rights against discrimination, entitlements to holiday and sick pay and some form of career path within the sector, it is difficult not to see platform labour as a degraded form of work (ILO 2016; 2021). However, it is worth noting that protected, well-paying jobs are typically unavailable to migrant workers who often work in low-paying informal sectors. This raises the question of whether a narrow focus on platforms risks missing important structural factors concerning labour market regulation, welfare regimes and migration policies that have a particular impact on low wage and negatively racialised workers (Huws 2020).

Platform labour is popular among migrant workers for several reasons (Altenried 2021; van Doorn, Ferrari, and Graham 2023). First, it offers low entry barriers and a quick onboarding process, typically allowing migrants to be working for a platform within days. Signing up is usually more straightforward and requires less strict checks than temporary work agencies or permanent jobs in other low-wage sectors. Platforms are eager to onboard new recruits and often provide incentives and referral bonuses, which make the platforms more appealing. Many workers report getting into platform work by hearing about it from someone in their community or being directly referred by a friend. Migrant workers often face forms of discrimination and marginalisation when applying for other jobs. Platforms have relatively open and easy-to-access onboarding process and are comparatively indiscriminate in their selection process. Studies have reported undocumented migrants being able to work for certain platforms because of their lax verification process, enabling workers without a visa and social security details to access income (van Doorn, Ferrari, and Graham 2023). Platforms also offer

work that often requires limited language skills with workers being able to interact with the app without the need for significant verbal communication. This, combined with weekly pay and the option to withdraw earnings and leave without notice, makes platform work an attractive opportunity for migrant workers.

Low-wage jobs – including non-standard work in the gig economy – are often seen as a second-best option and a temporary state of affairs by those undertaking it as it provides the financial resources to satisfy immediate needs, but has limited opportunities for long-term growth and development. Van Doorn and Vijay (2022) have applied the migration infrastructure lens to examine how labour platforms play a key role alongside state institutions as critical infrastructure that assists migrants in integrating into their new host country. They show how digital platforms can be understood as technologically mediated institutions that offer “arrival infrastructure” for pathways of migration, particularly for those entering low-wage labour markets (Meeus, Arnaut, and van Heur 2019).

Lam and Triandafyllidou (2021) examine whether platform work could provide a stepping stone for newly arrived migrants into the broader labour market or whether it constitutes a dead end that traps these workers into low-paid precarious labour. They find that although labour market integration is a non-linear process, platform work can be a useful entry point because it has low entry barriers and offers flexible work that can be combined with study and other responsibilities. According to Webster and Zhang (2020), food delivery can provide entrepreneurial opportunities, but this occurs within gendered norms through which ideas of idle capacities and women’s natural work in the home are marketised through the platform. There is also a risk that workers may not be able to leave this type of work as it can have a destabilising effect on migrant workers’ future employment prospects due to its low occupation prestige, lack of situations to develop language skills and an exploitative labour process that does not provide sufficient opportunities for career development (Lam and Triandafyllidou 2021; Newlands 2022).

Migration status and the lack of citizenship are important factors that contribute to migrants’ work experience in racialised societies, particularly if the migrant is racialised in disadvantage in the host country (see Maldonado 2009), that is, perceived as inferior based on “racial markers” (i.e. ethnicity, language), which vary across contexts (Grosfoguel, Oso, and Christou 2014). Migrants’ nationality also matters, as nationality is deeply entwined with race (Balibar 1991). The racialisation process is further exacerbated by gender and class oppression, which can influence workers’ experience (Grosfoguel, Oso, and Christou 2014).

Certainly, gig workers have encountered elevated levels of racial and gender-based exclusion and discrimination from platforms and clients

(Adams and Berg 2017; Galperin and Greppi 2017; Gebrial 2022). Gebrial (2022) shows that processes of racialisation have constructed migrant populations as disposable, dangerous, and less human through three mechanisms: misclassification of them as self-employed workers (i.e. they are denied employment status); exclusion of them from social security benefits; and the stigmatisation of drivers as “brown” and as such perceived as dangerous leading to extreme forms of surveillance. Hunt and Samman (2019) also demonstrated that women who are racialised in disadvantage tend to concentrate in platform jobs that yield lower incomes than their male counterparts, which reproduces structural trends of traditional labour markets and perpetuates racial and gendered inequalities.

Despite assurances that platform work would be impartial and use algorithms to assess workers solely on their abilities, studies suggest this is not the reality. Migrant workers, especially those unfamiliar with the local language, often encounter hostility from both customers and restaurant staff, as well as from strangers on the streets (Huang et al. 2020; Leung 2022). Concerns also arise regarding potential racial biases embedded within platform programming (Popan 2021). Additionally, the linguistic challenges faced by newcomers can isolate them from their peers in the delivery sector.

Regarding discrimination from clients, studies have shown that ratings by clients can reveal discriminatory attitudes and influence workers’ employability (Bajwa et al. 2018). The intricate platform processes and data, perceived as “neutral”, conceal the reproduction of inequalities, endangering job continuity and access for some migrant workers.

The research context: online food delivery in the United Kingdom and Chile

This research compares two qualitative case studies of food delivery riders in the UK and Chile as sites to examine our research questions. We interviewed riders in the UK (London) and in Chile (Santiago and Valparaíso) across multiple platforms, including Uber Eats in both, Just Eat and Deliveroo in the UK, and Pedidos Ya, Rappi, Cornershop (acquired by Uber Eats in 2023) and Didi Food in Chile. The two cases offer insights into platform labour as a phenomenon grounded in specific racial and migrant divisions of labour, shaped by local regulatory contexts and labour markets (Gebrial 2022). Online food delivery was chosen due to its pivotal role in the platform economy and as a testing ground for new management techniques and profit-making strategies (Cant 2019).

Across the sector, employment varies significantly, but typically workers are independent contractors. In both countries, they are often young, male, and of migrant background. Sometimes, riders are undocumented migrants without work rights, renting or borrowing an account from others for up to

£50 weekly (Alderman 2019; Cant 2019; Kusk and Nouwens 2022). Food delivery couriers in the UK earn roughly just under £10 (US\$12.68) an hour, with one in six earning less than £6.45 per hour (Mullino, Boutaud, and Davies 2021); while in Chile they can earn much less, roughly US\$3 (CLP \$2,800) per hour, or CLP\$140,000 (US\$158) per week (and some can earn \$190,000). In Chile, women workers earn 30,000 Chilean pesos (US\$34) less than men, working 10 fewer hours weekly on average (Asenjo and Coddou 2021).

The United Kingdom

In the context of our first case study, 14.8 per cent of the total population were not born in the UK (approx. 10.4 million people¹, including those with UK citizenship) (ONS 2022). The UK's colonial history and current immigration and labour market policies shape the racialised and gendered nature of its labour reserve, determining who is most likely to face misclassification and lack employment protections (Goodfellow 2019; Tilley and Shilliam 2018). Several scholars have illustrated how racism and racialisation have shaped the social hierarchy in the UK, particularly affecting non-white people (Gilroy 1998; Murji and Solomos 2005), including migrants and British people with migration backgrounds. Migration policies have produced precarious workers, and in the UK, not having a legal status usually coincides with having a negatively racialised identity (Anderson 2000; 2010). Racial hierarchies impact access to work, and these hierarchies are created not only through racial categorisation but also through citizenship status (Anderson 2000). As a result, whiteness and Britishness still indicate positions of privilege and power in the labour market.

The UK labour market is characterised by high flexibility and relatively low regulation compared to other European countries (Mayhew 2015). Migrant workers account for an estimated 18 per cent of the workforce (Fernández-Reino and Rienzo 2022). Since the late 1970s, reforms by Conservative and Labour governments have created a largely deregulated industrial relations system, resulting in less labour protection and more flexible employment (Mendonça, Kougiannou, and Clark 2023). Recent changes have seen gig economy companies enabling informal work practices through permissive HR practices and a preference for independent contractor status (Mendonça, Kougiannou, and Clark 2023). With low unionisation levels, employers have wide discretion in hiring, firing, setting wages and determining working conditions.

Migration policies have been designed to strategically include racialised minorities in necessary work during times of economic growth, while denying them welfare access and keeping them concentrated in specific sectors of the labour market (Anderson 2010; Gebrial 2022). The UK has a

particularly pernicious welfare-immigration nexus, embodied in the 2012 Hostile Environment framework – a set of policies designed to make life difficult for migrants, including a “No Recourse to Public Funds” provision. The precarity established by this migration system makes finding work harder and leaves undocumented workers vulnerable to exploitation. This drives many undocumented workers to platform work, fearing illegal working offences if caught in standard employment. Racial discrimination in public places is governed by the Race Relations Act (1968), which prohibits refusing housing, employment, or public services based on colour, race, ethnic, or national origins in Great Britain.

Platform-mediated gig work is extensive in the UK, with 14.7 per cent of working people across England and Wales (roughly 4.4 million people) having performed platform work at least once a week (TUC 2022). On-demand food delivery is a thriving business in London and other large UK cities. The primary food delivery platforms include Just Eat, Deliveroo, and Uber Eats. These companies typically rely on the independent contractor model for their riders (Duggan et al. 2020). In 2022, Deliveroo agreed with the union GMB to introduce a collective bargaining framework for pay and conditions for all riders, although they remain formally self-employed (Rolf 2022). Under this agreement, riders receive a national living wage only while delivering orders, resulting in total pay falling below minimum wage levels in some cases.

Chile

In Chile, migrants represent 8.1 per cent of the country’s total population – significantly less than in the UK. Most of them correspond to a South-South migration, with their country of origin being Venezuela (32.8 per cent), followed by Peru (15.4 per cent), Colombia (11.7 per cent), Haiti (11.4 per cent), and Bolivia (9.1 per cent), among others (INE & SERMIG 2023). Most of these migrants are regularised (only 6.6 per cent of them are irregular). Migration policies in Chile have historically restricted non-white migration and a new migration law enacted in 2021 (Law 21,325) has reinforced this policy objective (Bonhomme 2023). This law updated the previous migration legislation dating back to 1975, during Pinochet’s dictatorship. The previous legislation was based on a national security approach, viewing migrants as potential threats. While this new law aims to formalise migrants’ access to education, health, and labour rights – rights already granted by previous legislation – it also introduces mechanisms that could perpetuate migrants’ irregular status (Thayer 2021).²

Historically, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) migrants in Chile have faced discrimination and social exclusion, especially those racialised in disadvantage (Bonhomme 2023), despite sharing similar ancestries (except

Haitians) and a colonial past. Like other Latin American countries, whiteness has been taken for granted (Loveman 2009) based on the narrative of *mestizaje* that views Chilean national identity as constituted solely by European-Spanish and indigenous ancestries (*mestizo*) and rejects any African ancestry, a misconception that warrants correction (Bonhomme 2023). The state's *mestizaje* racial project aimed to achieve a progressive whitening of Chilean people, assuming that such a racial mixture would eliminate the non-white ancestries (Goldberg 2001). However, this construction of whiteness has meant the denial of Chilean society's heterogeneity, and implies an anti-indigenous and anti-black racism against LAC migrants (Bonhomme 2023). By self-identifying as *mestizos*, Chileans also feel "whiter" than other Latin Americans who are perceived as having more prevalent indigenous and/or African physical features.

Structural racism as well as the current hostile migration policy has perpetuated the limited access that LAC migrants have to the formal labour market, and the platform economy has attracted many of them with its (supposed) entrepreneurial flexible character and better pay. The labour market in Chile is characterised by poor job quality, low-income, short-term or atypical contracts, limited pension benefits and an increasing reliance on subcontracting models (ILO 2016; Sehnbruch 2004; Stefoni, Leiva, and Bonhomme 2017). Migrants' precarious legal status has led them to informal jobs in which they are more exposed to exploitation and abuse from employers (Bonhomme 2020). A quantitative study showed that 49.5 per cent declared that their first job was informal, and 62 per cent of them belong to the lower income category (CENEM 2023). Only over a decade ago an anti-discrimination law was enacted³ (Law 20.609). The right to equal treatment and non-discrimination in the labour market is enshrined in Chile through several international treaties (ratification of Convention 111 in 1971) (Rodríguez-Burr 2020), yet racial discrimination persists.

In this context, platform work has become a permanent or complementary income option for migrant workers. The main food delivery platforms are Uber Eats, Rappi, Pedidos Ya, and Justo. Approximately 2.3 per cent of the active population works on digital platforms. 60 per cent of them are migrants, 64 per cent had some degree of tertiary education, and 71 per cent are self-employed, lacking access to social security (Fuentes and González 2022). Chileans mainly work in transportation apps, while migrants dominate food delivery due to the need for a driver's license and vehicle ownership (Arriagada et al. 2023).

Research methods

In 2023, we conducted a qualitative study based on 60 interviews with platform-based food delivery migrant workers⁴ in the greater London area in the

UK and in the cities of Santiago and Valparaíso in Chile (30 in each country). We crafted discussion topics for interviews covering their labour trajectories upon moving to the host country, platform work experiences, and future expectations. The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis (Fossey et al. 2002, 728–729).

In the UK, we found participants by leaving short messages on relevant social media groups, engaging workers at frequented rest points, and employing snow-balling techniques. The sample consisted of 16 men, 9 women, 3 non-binary and 2 transgender participants. They were from a wide variety of countries including South Africa, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Ghana and Jamaica. Half of them had completed university education. In Chile, we found participants in the main meeting points in Santiago (capital city) and Valparaíso,⁵ and some using snow-balling sampling. The sample consisted of 23 male and 7 female participants, 15 living in Santiago and 15 in Valparaíso. They were from Venezuela (26), Colombia (2) and Haiti (2). Almost half of them (13) completed university or have higher technical education (see [Appendix 1](#)).

During ethnographic visits we did the interviews in the same place or we scheduled interviews via Zoom. Interviews lasted about an hour on average. Interviewees in the UK were given a £25 voucher following the interview as compensation for their time. In Chile, workers participated in the interviews voluntarily. In both countries, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in an anonymised form.

Entering the platform economy

Our findings demonstrate that the perception of the reduced likelihood of experiencing racism and discrimination incentivised migrant workers, especially those racialised in disadvantage, to enter the platform economy. Interview data in both countries indicated that the perception of experiencing less racism was one of the primary reasons for online food delivery workers to sign up to platforms, alongside the possibility of earning decent pay on the platform and the relative ease of the onboarding procedure.

The difference between the two countries lies in the relative weighting of migrants' motivating factors. In the UK, those racialised in disadvantage found the perception of racism in the formal labour market to be the most significant reason for starting platform work. However, in Chile, priority was given to pay, with the straightforward onboarding procedures of digital platforms (compared to other jobs) ranking second, ahead of concerns about racism in the formal labour market. The findings suggest that this may be attributed to experiencing racism within platform work as well.

UK-based migrant workers perceived structural barriers due to discriminatory hiring practices, deterring them from formal employment in the broader

labour market. Many expressed these frustrations by referring to feelings of discrimination based on race, their migrant backgrounds, being born outside the UK, or lacking proper documentation. However, when these issues were further explored, most interviewees expressed racial discrimination as the primary issue.

The racism they experienced was either explicit or more subtle. In certain cases, the experience of racial discrimination was based on overt practices of differential treatment and the employer was upfront about their discriminatory views. One worker reported a time in which they were explicitly turned down for a job as a carer because they were black, whilst another said: “after I have gotten my bachelor’s degree, I went to apply for a job to teach and I was not employed ... [they] told me they were looking for white, not black” (Yasmin, South Africa). For other interviewees, their experiences of racism were more ambiguous as their employers had not been so upfront about their views. In some of these cases, it nevertheless remained clear to workers that racial discrimination may have played a major role. One worker stated, “it’s hard to tell sometimes ... You feel like you are discriminated. But they’re like sugar-coating it” (Chilton, Jamaica).

Some participants cited experiences of being turned down repeatedly for job offers in favour of a successful white candidate, concluding that racism was the cause. As Faith from Ghana asserts,

most times ... they’re making me feel like I’m not worthy, or I’m not good enough for the job ... I get responses, like, I’m not fit for the position ... most times, I will find out that they kind of prefer a white person.

Another said that every job application process for jobs requiring higher level qualifications that they had gone through had ended at the interview stage, with the one exception of a black-led research organisation (Munezero, Rwanda).

Many of the participants interviewed in the UK were highly qualified and aspired to work in education, healthcare or academia. Some had given up these goals due to discrimination they faced in the recruitment process for the formal labour market or after multiple rejections for jobs. One non-binary interviewee emphasised they had a nursing qualification, but had been repeatedly unsuccessful in securing a nursing job, stating they had actively been discriminated against on the basis of gender and race. Carlos, who was a personal trainer in Brazil, expressed a desire to retrain in the UK and improve his language skills so he could get a job in his field of speciality, but he experienced discrimination and so turned to online food delivery.

In contrast, migrant workers who self-identified as white reported experiencing fewer barriers when applying for work. Participants from New Zealand and Russia reported not experiencing any discrimination, however, they did state they had some questions about their accent and language

skills. As Sasha from Russia noted, “I don’t think I can call it a kind of discrimination ... But of course, people are always looking at your age, at your language. How fluent is it? How good can you communicate with customers?”

For those migrant workers self-reported as non-white who experienced discrimination in the formal labour market, the perception that platform work offered an escape from these explicit forms of racism was frequently cited as a major advantage to working for digital platforms. One worker reported “[on] racial lines they don’t discriminate. [There’s] no bias” (David, Canada). Bijou, a transgender woman from the Caribbean said “It’s easy, because it’s made in a way that’s accessible, it respects one’s gender, race and ethnicity”. Munezero (Rwanda) commented on the sheer number of workers that are racialised in disadvantage who work on the platforms: “This job is the only job that I know in the UK that has a huge proportion of minorities, of people of colour ... you get a sense that this job is for us”.

This sense of escape from discrimination was expressed by both highly-qualified workers and those with fewer formal qualifications. Some also expressed platform work as a welcome change from workplaces where they experienced direct racism from others, such as service work:

I don’t think I’ve really had lots of bad experience with customers or get discriminated by the customers. So I think that is something that I will say I really enjoy about my work right now. Because when I was working as a shop assistant it was very difficult sometimes ... a lot of insults. (Cindy, Canada)

In Chile, the perception of the likelihood of experiences of racial discrimination in the formal labour market was also prevalent, especially for those racialised in disadvantage, but it was understood by most interviewees as secondary to questions of pay. Many undocumented migrant workers had jobs in construction, warehouses, or dishwashing, as these were available to them without legal papers. Due to their precarious status, these jobs paid less than formal employment. Platform work was preferred because it offered higher earnings compared to these other options. Luisa (Venezuela) reported that the reason she joined a food delivery app “was mainly monetary because well, I’m a foreigner and I’m undocumented so, like, most jobs, yes, we accept you, but because you’re undocumented, we’re going to pay you less”.

Many of these workers, particularly those self-defined as *mestizos* or white, were well educated and had university qualifications but as migrants they could not always have these degrees recognised in Chile. Due to this, although some had worked in their fields of expertise in Chile, they received a lower income than expected, so they moved to the delivery apps. Workers that were racialised in disadvantage in Chile (self-identified as *mestizos* or Afro-descendants) experienced racism in previous informal jobs. Better pay, alongside experiences of racism, were the main reasons for entering the

platform economy. A self-defined Afro-descendant participant referred to his former Chilean boss, stating:

He was racist (...) I mean, he treated me well. He'd say, 'These black people, I'm going to fire all of them. The only black person who is going to stay here is you. I'm going to kick them all out'. He told me that he was going to fire them all out and he really did. I was the one that he left, and I left. (Oscar, Venezuela)

This narrative illustrates intersectional discrimination experienced by workers. In this instance, Venezuelan nationality somewhat counterbalances race and migration status, despite being undocumented, exposing them to exploitative labour conditions. Similar to Oscar, others mentioned being coerced into extra hours under threat of deportation by their employers. As Oscar told us: "They always tell you that ... they're going to deport you because you don't have papers, that you have to look after your job. So, it's always like a threat".

Louis, an Afro-descendant Haitian working in the construction industry, was fired for speaking out about racism and defending fellow Haitian workers:

The company considered me as a threat (...) Because I complain a lot (...) They tell you 'do this job for \$5,000' and then they want to pay you \$3,000 ... you know what I mean? And the difference was ... You do the same job as Chileans, yet in the end, they secretly pay Chileans more.

Although higher pay motivated migrants in Chile to enter food delivery work, compared to those in the UK, racism was present in both local labour markets against non-white migrants. While in the UK migrants faced discrimination in recruitment processes, hindering their access to formal job opportunities, in Chile, alongside similar exclusions, migrants reported racism in low-income informal jobs (informal or temporary contracts).

Remaining in the platform economy

Interview data revealed a striking contrast in migrant workers reasons for remaining in the platform economy and the relationship between this work and their broader life goals. In the UK, many participants appreciated the flexibility of the gig economy, finding it compatible with their studies, childcare, and other jobs. They continued in the platform economy due to minimal experiences of racial discrimination as online food delivery riders. Although some saw it as temporary, there was not a sense of unbearable or soul-crushing work. Few reported direct discrimination while working the apps. In Chile, in contrast, migrant workers encountered discrimination and everyday racism on the streets and with clients during deliveries, making their work significantly more challenging than that of migrants in the UK.

In Chile, many workers said they had adverse experiences with other people (both pedestrians and car drivers), such as attempts to drive them over, or yelling racist slurs in the street. As Óscar (Venezuela) told us, one time “it was on green for me to pass, but there was a man waiting to go. So I’m pedaling ... And he says ... “Hurry up ... you black cunt, go back to your country, you fucking asshole”. Others also claimed that Chileans had purposefully damaged their work vehicles. They also experienced discrimination from the Chilean police who stop and fine them in random procedures, even those with a visa, for minor and unjustified reasons. Some undocumented participants reported being detained in random procedures.

Delivering orders was challenging for many due to racism from clients and concierges. This impacted migrants’ ratings on apps. In all neighbourhoods, Afro-descendant participants have been called “*negro*” by clients. For instance, Franklin, an Afro-descendant Venezuelan, reported being told by a client that they were going to “*spoil the race*” (of Chilean society), following which the client rated him negatively on the app. Some workers refuse deliveries in upper-class neighbourhoods in both cities due to intensified discrimination there. Participants attribute this mainly to racism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and class issues. For instance, when Omar (Venezuela), self-identified as *mestizo*, was laughing, a woman told him, “what are you laughing about, you don’t have anything, you migrant “*roto*””. This classist expression emerged in the twentieth century to refer pejoratively to Chilean low-income city-dwellers. Henry (Venezuela), self-defined as *mestizo*, also told us a humiliating experience with a client when the client refused to pay for the order:

‘Look, my order is coming cold, motherfucker’, he said. He threw it. I felt humiliated. I wanted to cry (...) He got into the lift and left (...) Tears came to my eyes, really, I was thinking ‘I want to go back to Venezuela, I can’t stand this.’

Participants noted concierges’ refusal to engage, requests to wait outside, and instances of racist remarks. Making them wait was a means of asserting their superiority. Roberto (Venezuela) received a threat from a concierge regarding his (supposedly) irregular migration status: “you don’t even have papers ... you don’t even have an ID (...) Leave the order ... do it!” Sexual harassment has also been reported, involving both women and men who have been “invited” by men to engage in paid sex in their apartments. This underscores the intersectionality of migration, race, and gender, intensifying the risks and susceptibility to sexual abuse encountered by migrant women and men.

In the UK, such overt instances of racism were less frequently reported. Having fewer of these experiences, migrant workers stayed on the apps because it gave them the flexibility to fit in with other activities. Asiya (Kyrgyzstan) reported, “I’m studying as a musician ... so I need something where I

don't have to commit as much ... you work whenever you like so that suits your needs". Chilton from Jamaica was working to launch their own business, and found that flexibility and the ability to pick up extra shifts could support them in that endeavour: "I'm working on my own business plan ... in between when I don't have any orders". Others mentioned that they could balance childcare commitments and work for platforms with greater ease, like April (USA): "it's flexible working ... I'm a mum of one ... when you're on maternity or something like that, or maybe your child isn't feeling well, it's flexible for you". Enjoying more personal leisure time was also felt to be more possible in platform work. As Matt from Canada asserts, "being able to balance my work and personal activities".

Many UK-based workers considered that food delivery platform work offered sufficient income to sustain themselves. They appreciated its flexibility compared to more formal employment, which often demands strict schedules and specific time commitments. Platform work contrasts with what some workers felt was the inflexible and punitive nature of formal employment, a theme picked up on by Munezero (Rwanda): "I hate the traditional work system. The nine to five and your boss was there to tell you what to do". Several participants expressed no desire for careers beyond platform work, while others expressed a desire to do something else at one point.

Another key reason for remaining in the platform economy was the relatively stress-free nature of the work. Some of the participants were highly qualified, but enjoyed the freedom and the ability to switch off due to a lack of scrutiny from direct managers, and an escape from the all-encompassing, high-stress nature of other jobs. As Miguel (Brazil) stated, "I'm quite happy about this work ... for me the freedom ... I listen to audiobooks, educational programmes ... If you're tired, you can go home at any moment, you just need to finish your last order".

In Chile, migrant workers often do not foresee a future in the platform economy, given the precarious labour conditions and racism, making it a challenging job. According to Omar (Venezuela),

Projections don't exist here (...) you're a slave to the application (...) you don't go anywhere from here, where would you go? ... senior delivery man? No, that's not going to happen. They don't do anything for you. Here you're a delivery boy, you do that and that's it. And God willing, nothing bad will happen to you.

Participants are aware of the risks involved in this line of work; tragically, some migrant workers have lost their lives in traffic accidents as well as been murdered by clients. As Domingo, Afro-Colombian, stated,

you never know ... we're on the highway ... so, it's dangerous. Every day we deal with 30, 40 people. We don't know each person's mood (...) a migrant was killed recently ... The customer said "you took too long" ... and he killed him.

We can confirm this grim reality, as demonstrated by the unfortunate deaths of two participants in job-related traffic accidents during a broader research project led by the first author. Given the choice, workers in Chile would prefer formal employment opportunities, especially if they are well-paid, over fulfilling delivery orders.

While no interviewees mentioned acquiring extra work-related skills, platform work helped them raise money for future entrepreneurial projects. The relatively good pay compared to other jobs available to migrants motivates them to sustain their families and send remittances to their home country. Some participants who borrowed accounts hoped to regularise their migration status in the future to have their own account.

No, it [not having immigration papers] doesn't affect me ... I mean, I'd rather like to have my papers and own account. So that I don't have to ... Every day that I ask for a photo, to go there, to have my photo taken. I'd like to have my own papers and account (...) That's the only thing that affects me. (Óscar, Venezuela)

In sum, migrant workers in the UK reported experiencing racism in previous jobs but did not mention many such incidents while delivering orders. Being a rider enabled them to earn money for entrepreneurial ambitions or leisure activities. The absence of overt racism in online food delivery gave them more reasons to stay in the job. However, this was not the case for migrants in Chile. Discrimination based on ethnicity, nationality, and migration background made this work significantly more challenging. Unlike in the UK, these issues incentivised them to leave the platform economy as soon as possible.

Discussion and conclusion

Globally, platform work has predominantly been undertaken by migrants who have been instrumental in the growth of these companies. The low entry requirements make this work attractive to newcomers. In the formal labour market, migrant workers face barriers due to their precarious citizenship status, racial discrimination and gender. They also have challenges validating their educational qualifications and having employers recognise prior work experience. The flexibility promised by platform work is often emphasised as a key benefit for those responsible for childcare. However, as this study reveals, the labour conditions, social environment, and relationships between workers and clients vary significantly for migrant riders in Global North countries like the UK and Global South countries like Chile. While the motivations for entering this economy may be similar, the experiences and future expectations differ markedly, with racism being a key factor. The findings indicate that the (supposed) concealment of racialised bodies through platforms' digital and algorithmically-based infrastructure may

enable workers to enter this market, yet it does not prevent racism from users/clients while they perform their job.

The differences between migrants based in the UK and Chile were pronounced when discussing their future expectations and reasons for remaining in this type of job. While in the UK, some portrayed their job as stress-free and flexible, in Chile, many viewed platform work as oppressive. Given that it involves mobile work and is service-based, connecting with people on the streets, drivers, clients/users, etc., workers in Chile were susceptible to experiencing racism and anti-immigrant sentiment from the host society. These issues were less evident in reports from migrant workers in the UK, possibly due to the study's location in London, a diverse and metropolitan city with a significant migrant population and more progressive attitudes than elsewhere in the UK. However, as noted at the beginning, hidden forms of racism (i.e. cultural racism), may still persist in this postcolonial urban setting. Additionally, not all food delivery migrant workers are racialised in disadvantage, as there are white migrant workers, which also influences the representations associated with this type of job. Conversely, in Chile, most platform workers are Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) migrants who, despite sharing similar ethnicity and colonial past, are racialised in disadvantage within this context.

Studies suggest Chileans' perceptions towards LAC migrants have turned more negative over time, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside a significant increase in irregular migration, primarily from Venezuela (see Castillo et al. 2023). This inevitably shapes the representations that non-migrants have of food delivery workers, a group largely comprised of Venezuelans. In the UK, food delivery workers might not face as frequent forms of direct racism. However, in Chile, the delivery process and workers' interactions, as well as their qualifications through the apps, appear to provide opportunities for individuals with racist attitudes and anti-immigrant sentiments to express hostility towards migrants. This makes food delivery work a real threat for workers, as racism tend to be more overt in public and digital spaces (see Bonhomme and Alfaro 2022). In Chile's food delivery sector, racism persists in public spaces, with workers facing racism on the streets and from clients, as well as in digital realms, where prejudiced attitudes are expressed through detrimental ratings on the app. The racism encountered by LAC migrant workers in the platform economy mirrors the racism they usually experience. As previously mentioned, LAC migrants are viewed as non-white "others", despite sharing similar ethnoracial backgrounds with most of them. Grosfoguel (2012) notes that Westernised elites in former colonies of the Global South, such as Chile, have perpetuated colonial racist practices against "inferiorised" ethnoracial groups. Racism pervades social classes and is deeply ingrained in the national identity, characterised as *mestiza* (Bonhomme 2023).

Race plays a pivotal role in the migrant trajectories of individuals before they enter the platform economy in both countries. However, in Chile, race exerts a more pronounced influence on the current labour experiences of food delivery migrants compared to those in the UK. This is particularly evident for those racialised in disadvantage, who face higher levels of racism and riskier situations involving non-migrants, the police, and platform clients. Racism significantly shapes the labour conditions of South-South migrants and the risks they encounter on the streets. In some instances, it impacts their ability to receive orders and retain their job, directly affecting their app ratings and, consequently, the algorithm that determines their earnings. As van Doorn (2017, 907–908) asserts, “Platform labor remains thoroughly embedded in a world created by the capitalist value form, which hinges on the gendered and racialized subordination of low-income workers, the unemployed, and the unemployable”.

This research contributes to enhancing our understanding of platform work and the processes of racialisation it involves in different contexts. The challenging conditions of platform work vary from country to country. While the UK and Chile cannot stand in for all Global North and Global South countries respectively, they can serve as a starting point for understanding the contemporary processes of racialisation involved in platform work and the differences that arise in the various forms of racism that exist in different locations.

Moreover, the article highlights that race is a significant factor: non-white migrant workers face more discrimination than white migrants and consequently are subjected to greater risks while performing this mobile job on the streets. Therefore, solely analysing the labour conditions of the platform economy is insufficient for understanding migrant workers’ experiences and job expectations. It is also essential to delve deeper into the relationship between migrant workers and clients/users in different host societies to truly grasp workers’ aspirations and the future prospects of this digital labour market. Further comparative research that explores migrant workers’ subjectivities and experiences of platform work in other societies could be invaluable in equipping policy-makers with knowledge and aiding in the formulation of public policies and regulatory frameworks that govern platform work at the user level. This, in turn, would penalise those who harbour racist attitudes and practices towards delivery drivers. However, this might on its own not be enough, and might require more wide-ranging changes related to broader anti-racism initiatives in society.

Notes

1. 3.54 million were nationals born in EU countries and 6.85 were born outside the EU.

2. Among these mechanisms is the new requirement for a consular visa to be processed in the migrant's country of origin before entering Chile (Thayer 2021). For many economic migrants, this entails obtaining a work contract from a distance, a nearly impossible task given the short-term and unskilled nature of most available jobs. Additionally, the law includes other requirements, such as prohibiting the exchange of the temporary residence permit (90 days) for a temporary residence permit upon arrival in Chile. Previously, this was the avenue through which migrants could secure employment and obtain a work visa after entering the country as tourists. Overall, these policies discourage migration and regularisation, perpetuating migrants' irregular status.
3. The anti-discrimination law was enacted in 2012 and guarantees the exercise of their rights and liberties to all, without arbitrary discrimination, including on the basis of race among others. However, it was initiated primarily to address gender discrimination.
4. Here, we define a migrant worker as someone born outside the host country without full citizenship there.
5. Santiago, the capital city, boasts the highest population, while Valparaíso, a port city, stands as the second most populous. Both concentrate a greater number of migrants, and most delivery platforms operate there.

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Ethics statement

All participants gave informed consents. To maintain confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms. In the UK, the research was approved by the REO Research Governance Team, University of Essex, Ethics ETH2324-0092. In Chile, it was approved by the Scientific Ethics Committee, Universidad Autónoma de Chile, CEC 17-22.

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Appendix 1. Sample Description

Country of Birth	Gender			Highest Educational Qualification						
	Female	Male	Transgender	Non-binary	None education	Primary School	High School	College/ University	Postgraduate	
South Africa	3	3		1			2			
Canada	1	4		1			1			
USA	1			1						
Brazil		2								
Eritrea		1			1					1
Lithuania		1				1				
Russia	1									1
Kyrgyzstan	1									
Jamaica		1								
Ghana	1									
Caribbean										
Mali		1								
New Zealand		1								
Australia		1					1			
Uganda		1					1			
Rwanda		1								1
Mexico	1						1			
Kenya										1
Total	9	16	2	3	1	1	6	6	19	2

Country of Birth	Gender		Highest Educational Qualification		
	Female	Male	High School	Higher Technical Education	University
Venezuela	7	19	13	6	7
Colombia		2	2		
Haiti		2	2		
Total	7	23	17	6	7