

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Informalization in gig food delivery in the UK: The case of hyper-flexible and precarious work

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Abstract

This article examines the process of informalization of work in platform food delivery work in the UK. Drawing on qualitative data, this article provides new analytical insight into what drives individual formal couriers to both supply and demand informalized sub-contracted gig work to undocumented migrants, and how a platform company enables informal work practices through permissive HR practices and technology. In doing so, this article shows how platform companies are enablers of informal labor markets and contribute to the expansion of hyper-precarious working conditions.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of platform capitalism and work intermediated by an app or platform results in informalized and hyper-precarious labor forms (Gandini, 2019; Srnicek, 2017; Veen et al., 2020). This article analyses informalization as a process initiated by an actor that leads to lower the floor for working conditions, which may occur in both formal and informal labor market settings (Sassen, 2009). This process can enhance experiences of precarity at work since precariousness is related to the denial of objective employment structures and individual lived experiences that encompass fear of immediate job loss, poor prospects for future employability, and low levels of control over how and when work is performed and remunerated (Heyes et al., 2018).

Srnicek (2017) argues that the platform is a means to consolidate or seize a new form of monopoly control over distribution and production, whereas Aloisi and De Stefano (2022) suggest that the gig economy and algorithmic management have a pervasive power in how work is monitored and how labor rights are shaped. Gandini (2019) and Veen et al. (2020) use labor process theory to articulate how platforms and associated apps realize and control

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labor at the point of production to reduce labor indeterminacy. As this article establishes, platforms also reduce regulatory exposure by exercising a strategic choice to rely on labor contractors rather than employees. Barratt et al. (2020) reveal labor process control relies on inter-contractor competition for gigs that necessitates delivery riders to accept at least 85% of offered gigs. Moreover, Barratt et al. (2020) argue that platforms are 'dual market' makers because they actively create and regulate product and labor markets rather than intermediating between them. Therefore, this article's contribution to new knowledge is an examination of informal work and hyper-precarious contractor practices overseen by a specific platform provider in food delivery gig work. The study contributes theoretically and empirically to the ongoing debate regarding platform-based gig work and the role platform capitalists play in (re)shaping labor markets and working conditions (Aloisi & De Stefano, 2022; Barratt et al., 2020; Veen et al., 2020).

The analysis focuses on informalized non-compliant app sub-contracting initiated and reproduced by legitimate contractors but enabled by company regulations and structures. The dialectic revealed by this study centers on the individual agency of contractors that reinforces rather than constrains capital accumulation within the platform business model. This is in opposition to the interests of those to whom legitimate platform contractors feel compelled to sub-contract their app and account and prompts three research questions: first, how does a gig economy business enable informal contracting practices? Second, what drives individual contractors to supply and individuals to demand informalized sub-contracted gig work within the food delivery sector? Third, how does informalized app sub-contracting create hyper-precarious work?

The app sub-contract labor market captures the relationship between the platform provider, the legitimate delivery courier (independent contractor), and the informal sub-contractor. This relationship may facilitate informalized and non-compliant work practices within the app-based food delivery labor process and thus must be theorized and evaluated empirically. In so doing, this article intersects Barratt et al.'s (2020) argument that platform entrepreneurs and managers act as job creators with the concepts of informal and hyper-precarious work.

This article is organized as follows. The following section reviews the extant literature on the informalization of business and work practices within gig work in general and platform food delivery in particular. In addition, it discusses the role of informalization in sustained hyper-precarious labor and migrant labor in particular. This is followed by a description of the methods and details of the case selection. Next, the findings section outlines how food delivery couriers engage in informalized contracting practices and how managers at the platform tolerate, or not, such practices. The final section discusses the article's main findings and outlines its contribution to the literature.

Theorizing informal work and employment practices in the gig economy

The concept of informalization covers broader downgrading of employment and working conditions, irrespective of whether it occurs at legitimate employers or in the informal non-compliant economy (Cioce et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2019). Key to this conceptualization is that informalization involves a shift in power from labor to capital that often sees labor expelled from an employment relationship to independent contractor status with the denial of the benefits associated with employment status. Concurrently, labor may be expelled into informal, unregulated practice. Empirically, non-compliant business practice in Britain is not a residual presence. Since 2016, businesses using non-compliant labor practices annually generate

10%–12% of Britain's Gross Domestic Product, where many use coercive strategies (Williams & Schneider, 2016). Non-compliant employers engage two and a half million workers, equal to 9% of the legitimate private sector working population generating £223 billion per annum (ACCA, 2017). However, evidence on informalized unlawful sub-contracting arrangements, whether owner or contractor initiated within or beyond formalized businesses or platforms, is less clear.

A digital platform and its digital applications (apps) intermediate between customers who pay for work performed by an employee, worker, or contractor and the producer, with the platform retaining a percentage of the exchange. This article is concerned with the supply of local gigs to deliver food mediated via apps and platforms. The platform creates the relationship between customer, labor (i.e., the contractor), and producer (a restaurant) by programming the required performance of specific tasks and acts as a 'gig creator' (Barratt et al., 2020). It does so by creating and regulating a relationship with labor defined as independent contractors.

Informalization is an emergent business practice in contemporary capitalism wherein new forms of workflow from formal macro-level deregulation by the state to informal meso-level deregulation of business practice standards that result in flexible, innovative alternative forms of worker engagement (Sassen, 2009). Informal work practices associated with self-employment represent a particular form of labor market deregulation, privatization, and associated flexibility in economic restructuring. These forms of deregulation mesh with technological advances to create socio-economic pressures that expel business space, labor, and capital resources from formalized regulation patterns (Sassen, 2014). The dynamics that shape informalization are associated with new technologies that are, in turn, context-specific. A recent study in Indonesia demonstrates that although informal work is a dominant phenomenon, platform work promotes the emergence of informal aspects of employment and working conditions that become structural features of the economy (Ford & Honan, 2019). Similarly, authors 2 demonstrate how informalization dynamics in the Italian logistics sector have to become features of other sectors.

Moreover, in the UK, the deregulation of private hire cars in London stimulated what is now accepted as non-compliant labor process innovations over the status of drivers introduced by Uber, the ride-hailing service. The classification of drivers by Uber as self-employed contractors significantly reduced remuneration rates and denied those engaged other conditions of employment such as holiday pay. However, those engaged were held to be workers because of Uber's labor process control function over the driver app.¹ In addition, Uber's non-compliant application of contracting labor stimulated the creation of non-compliant driving jobs (beyond those at Uber) across London and partially undermined the training and quality regime 'the knowledge' for Hackney Cab drivers (Skok & Baker, 2019:4). Other disruptive innovators, such as many nail bars and hand car washes, operate as cash-only businesses. This makes it difficult to calculate wage payments for workers or invoice bills for independent contractors, particularly where those engaged are transient and potentially complicit with business owners (Silverstone & Brickell, 2017). Similarly, purveyors of 'platform capitalism' such as Deliveroo and Uber argue that they are not traditional businesses built on the production of goods or the supply of services but rather an intermediary that brings potential buyers and sellers together. This formulation disintegrates capitalist production relations enabling platform entrepreneurs to argue that they are not bound by business practice regulations such as payment of business rates, appropriate licensing arrangements, and employment regulations such as payment of the minimum wage and associated terms and conditions of employment for workers and employees.

¹<https://www.supremecourt.uk/press-summary/uksc-2019-0029.html>

The UK regulatory framework and platform-based business and employment practices in food delivery

Since the late 1970s, the UK labor market has been progressively reformed by reduced state intervention and weaker protections for labor. Continual neo-liberal reforms advanced by Labor and Conservative governments have created an increasingly deregulated and decentralized industrial relations system. The changes to the labor market framework resulted in lesser institutional protection for labor, emphasizing more individualized and flexible forms of employment (Waddington, 2016). Arguably, this shift was required to respond to the fast-growing needs of a rising new economy based on service jobs, which contrasted with the long-term decline of manufacturing and manual jobs (Coates, 1994; Hyman, 2001). However, the removal of regulation by the state, or deregulation, as it is usually conceptualized, does not necessarily result in the absence of regulation; rather, it enables a shift in regulatory practice. Reshaping regulatory practice has the effect of enhancing the capacity of some actors, in this study a food delivery platform, and reduces the status of others, those engaged in gig work.

Platform businesses tap into the regulatory framework to colonize and re-shape the management of on-demand gig work by defining gig workers as independent contractors (Clark & Colling, 2018). Academic debate and contradictory case law combine to highlight how companies that offer platform-based food delivery work gain a competitive advantage. In particular, the debate is focused on the legitimacy of defining gig workers as independent contractors or workers in an employment relationship (Duggan et al., 2020; Work and Pensions Committee, 2017). In contradistinction to the ruling in the Uber case, the former definition was endorsed by a Supreme court judgment that ruled against an attempt by Deliveroo couriers and their representatives to be classified as workers rather than self-employed contractors. The ruling validates Deliveroo's argument that the terms by which couriers provide their services do not require them to offer personal service but instead permit the use of substitutes (Independent Workers Union of Great Britain v. Roofods Ltd., 2021). Therefore, allowing those engaged to use substitutes will lawfully define delivery couriers as independent contractors enabling platform companies to secure workforce flexibility and competitive advantage by avoiding the application of the hourly minimum wage or holiday and sick pay (Duggan et al., 2020). Moreover, in some sectors, such as parcel and food delivery, responsibilities and costs are further externalized to the independent contractors who are required to possess specific work requirements such as health insurance, working gear, and a mode of transport (bike, moped, car) to participate in the labor process (Goods et al., 2019; Veen et al., 2020).

The ability of platform managers to legitimately apply independent contracting status rather than direct employment can potentially transform regulation in some parts of the labor market. In a study of the food delivery sector in Australia, Barratt et al. (2020) show that this reshaping represents an extension of traditional labor market intermediation into product and labor markets. In other words, platform companies need to simultaneously create and coordinate (a) a product market, intermediating between consumers and restaurants; and (b) a labor market, matching labor supply with the demand generated by the product markets. Barratt et al. (2020) demonstrate that platforms become 'double-market' makers because they go beyond mere intermediation between actors and instead play an active role in creating and regulating both product and labor markets to result in platforms appearing as 'job creators'.

For many, the jobs created by platforms display precarious characteristics, which researchers see as disruptive to the traditional employment relationship as permanent jobs are replaced by gigs where contractors are asked to complete minute tasks for a defined period (Harvey et al., 2017). For instance, recent research found that platform companies can organize their digital platform in ways that end up circumventing (decent) work standards and transforming the labor market by downgrading job quality (Goods et al., 2019; Mendonça & Kougiannou, 2022). The organization of the platform can also create dynamics that restrain

the agency of some workers (Kougiannou & Mendonça, 2021). Furthermore, many forms of labor in the gig economy represent piecework where workers receive payment for completed work rather than a wage (Wood et al., 2019). In addition to piece rates, these jobs demonstrate little reciprocation between employer and employee and afford fewer social and employment protections where workers assume responsibility for maintaining work materials and labor power (Veen et al., 2020). Alternatively, work is ‘put out’ to an individual who in turn may employ another person or team on wages or informalized sub-contract fees. These dynamics are prevalent in construction, care, food and parcel delivery, and private hire driving and provide the potential for platform companies to create new opportunities to further informalize work (Bloodworth, 2018).

Informalization and (hyper)precarious work in platform-based food delivery

Slavnic (2010:15) emphasizes the blurred boundaries between legitimate and informal engagement, that is, employment, contracting, informal contracting, and gigging, where ‘the relationships between those engaged and business owners become increasingly asymmetrical, at the expense of labor’. In locally performed gig work such as food delivery, the workforce typically comprises young, white workers (many of whom are cyclists), migrants, and older workers who typically use mopeds or cars (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020; Drahokoupil & Piasna, 2019: 14). Migrant status may make a worker more vulnerable and at additional risk of exploitation. Migrant workers, especially new arrivals, are frequently characterized as more loyal than indigenous workers and willing to work longer hours due to the limited job options and highly competitive labor markets (MacKenzie & Forde, 2009). However, migrants are more vulnerable to forms of precariousness because the capacity to enter or negotiate decent work is frequently hampered by pre-migration and journeying experiences (such as poverty, indebtedness, obligations to support their family in their country of origin, low education and social position, control by intermediaries, and traffickers). The influence of these dynamics may be enhanced in destination countries by socio-legal status restrictions – the application of undocumented status and the use of social exclusion policies such as no recourse to public funds and no right to work policies in the UK. Similarly, poor knowledge of rights and access to information, the enduring effects of indebtedness, and multiple dependence on employers and recruitment intermediaries create significant vulnerabilities (O’Connell Davidson, 2013). What distinguishes migrants from other precarious workers is their location at the nexus of employment and immigration precarity. Due to their unclear legal status, migrant workers may receive harsh treatment and become vulnerable to hyper-precarious conditions. ‘Hyper-precarity’ results from the interplay between flexible and liberal labor markets and a restrictive immigration regime (Lewis et al., 2015).

Employers may tap into lower levels of agency possessed by migrant workers to unlock high levels of discretionary effort associated with underpayment and other informalized work practices in non-compliant contractual relations (Hammer & Plugor, 2019). For food delivery gigs, individual circumstances determine the supply of workers available for gig work, and in the case of migrant labor, visa restrictions, limited English skills, and their vulnerable circumstances mean that gig work is often the only available job in the labor market (Goods et al., 2019). Moreover, platform work can also be particularly appealing to migrant labor because platform companies often appear permissive in enforcing formal requirements such as background and account checks. Given such permissiveness, migrants view this work more favorably than finding employment (Van Doorn et al., 2020). This is particularly so for undocumented migrants as food delivery companies make little effort to check who uses their accounts, giving a new income opportunity to those lacking a visa, work permit, or social security number (Van Doorn et al., 2020). Similarly, platforms tap into migrant labor as a

readily available labor source. For example, the algorithmic management and hyper-flexible forms of engagement they rely on attract migrants willing to accept workplace malpractice that breaches workplace rules because of the necessity to secure an income (Altenried, 2021).

Those who employ workers or engage contractors may create labor utilization strategies that exploit disadvantaged workers who are indebted and prepared to accept exploitative pay levels and non-compliant working conditions less good than those agreed or less than Britain's national minimum wage (D'Arcy, 2017). As a result, these workers are exposed to a greater risk of underpayment and high work intensity, leading to feelings of being an 'underclass' (Goods et al., 2019). The uniqueness of these dynamics derives from how platform companies operate within the existing regulatory framework to undercut traditional employment protections and create work opportunities that provide poor remuneration and lesser social protection than that available to employees (Goods et al., 2019).

In sum, the British state is a central macro enabler of the emergence of platform business practice where policy approaches to labor market compliance, termed light-touch regulation, center on deregulation and flexibility as legal and social norms (Mayer, 2018:131). Therein, state intervention to promote deregulation and labor market flexibility creates material conditions that enable platform managers to frame HR policies that shape sub-contracting and working conditions via vague regulatory distinctions between employment, worker, or self-employed contractor statuses. Within these degradations, macro-level deregulation and erosion of labor and business practice standards and associated meso-level enablers may appear legitimate to some workers. Socially constructed context-specific realities, while exploitative for workers and built on exploitation by platform providers, reflect how the participants experience a situation. The empirical material in the next section evaluates these levels of analysis concerning the three research questions outlined in the introduction.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The case study reported in this article is based on fieldwork on food delivery courier experiences at one food delivery company in a city in the Midlands of England. Food delivery supported by digital platforms and apps is becoming increasingly prevalent in the UK, and the re-configuration of contractual arrangements and employment practices is gaining significant importance in academic and policy debates (Aloisi & De Stefano, 2022; Gregory, 2020). In a country such as the UK, an advanced capitalist economy, where employment and contractual rights appear well developed compared to other national contexts (see Ford & Honan, 2019), it is essential to examine the dynamics that inform context-specific management practice in platforms. Such an examination can reveal how these practices enable the coercion and exploitation of workers and sub-contractors within the broader employment framework and its deregulation.

Data triangulation protocols were followed (Creswell & Miller, 2000) with four primary data sources; semi-structured interviews enabled an exploration of participants' lived experiences captured in their own words while keeping question consistency across the interviews. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, which ensured that the interviewees had the knowledge to respond to the questions (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Table 1 presents data sources and how they were used in data analysis. All data collection received University ethical approval before the fieldwork commenced.

The fieldwork was conducted between February 2019 and December 2019 and draws on qualitative data from 31 semi-structured interviews with food couriers. The age of those interviewed ranged from 19 to 45, where most were male (29 of 31), 22 indicated that they were British, and nine were migrants, of whom five were from non-EU nations. At the time of the fieldwork, the five non-EU migrants reported that they did not possess (and therefore were

TABLE 1 Data sources and use

Source	Type of data	Use in the analysis
Social media	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Private Facebook group 2. Private group Facebook Messenger chat 3. Public Facebook Page 	Gather information regarding informal work practices. Understand intermediary/migrant relationship functioned and how it was permitted. Cross-check the truthfulness of interview statements and observation notes.
Interviews	<p>33 interviews were conducted: 31 couriers and two gig economy company managers. All audio-recorded (but one) and transcribed. Note 1: Interviews lasted between 45 min and 2h, with an average duration of 1h.</p>	Gather data about algorithmic management as a control mechanism, and facilitator of formal and informal employment relationship, particular focus was given to the intermediaries/migrant relationship; formal and informal contracting; and couriers' working/family lives.
Non-participant observation	<p>Four courier network meetings (three meetings were audio-recorded); Five courier network leadership meetings (all meetings were audio-recorded): Note 2: Average duration of network meetings and leadership meetings was 2h.</p>	<p>Gather data regarding formal and informal work and employment practices, and experiences of couriers regarding such practices.</p> <p>Contextualize interview narratives.</p> <p>Triangulate facts.</p>

waiting for) the necessary documents (sometimes unsuccessfully) to work legitimately. Six legitimate couriers have intermediated informal sub-contracting and rented out accounts to undocumented migrants. The data also draw on interviews with two food delivery company senior managers. The interview themes centered on the lived experiences of work and working conditions, the nature of work, the labor process with particular emphasis on the role of informal sub-contracting, and the impacts of work relations on the lives of couriers and migrants in particular.

The five migrant couriers from beyond the European Union (South America) indicated they were undocumented and could not legally work in the UK. English was not their first language, and all five acknowledged that they did not possess sufficient language proficiency to conduct interviews in English. Interviews were conducted in their mother tongue (Portuguese and Spanish). All five acknowledged renting accounts from acquaintances, family members, or simply from someone who posted on social media. All reported having access to formal account details in exchange for a monthly fee. Due to the hard-to-reach characteristics of these participants, access to them was complicated and involved the researchers spending extensive time trying to earn their trust to participate in the research project. Four migrant couriers agreed that their interviews could be recorded, and one interviewee decided to participate in the research project but declined consent to the interview being audio-recorded. In this case, the researcher spent several hours on different days conversing with the interviewee face-to-face and during phone calls. During these multiple meetings, notes were taken and registered during the interview. After the interview, the data were transcribed to MS Word while the reported events and circumstances were still fresh in the researcher's memory (Patton, 2014).

Crucial data were also collected from non-participatory observation of four couriers at a courier network² meeting and five network leadership meetings, where the theme of informal sub-contracting was frequently and extensively discussed by leaders and members of the courier network. Further analysis flowed from a private Facebook group page and Messenger chat initiated by couriers, where renting out accounts to undocumented migrants was frequently discussed. All data sources were key to securing a multi-layered and comprehensive understanding of informal sub-contracting as a social phenomenon, how legitimate couriers engage in sub-contracting and the impact of sub-contracting on the working lives of undocumented couriers.

The analysis process was the same for all qualitative data captured in the study. NVivo (Version 12) was used to code the qualitative data. Open coding was initially used to identify concepts, moving from in-vivo, a simple descriptive phase, to second-order codes based on thematic analysis (Maanen, 1979; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Observation notes, recordings, minutes of meetings, and online chats were essential for informing interviewees' recollections of events. Interviews and chats complemented observations by giving a rich insight into how workers experienced work, employment, and formal/informal business practices deployed by the gig economy company.

Data analysis followed an open-ended abductive approach based on iterative stages of thematic coding of our qualitative data. Thematic analysis is a method used to systematically identify, synthesize, and organize data that offers insight into patterns of themes or meanings across a given data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, an abductive approach allowed for a tight but evolving framework (Dubois & Gadde, 2002), where the researcher can move between theory and participant accounts where each informs the other to answer research questions within the project (Cunliffe, 2011).

RESULTS

Informalization of work beyond employment was identified within the food delivery gig labor process, where the findings are presented in two main sub-sections. The first reports how the gig economy company enables informalized work practices and how couriers engage in informalized sub-contracting. The second sub-section examines how the employer tolerates informal work practices initiated by couriers and how this reinforces hyper-precarity, poor remuneration, and weak health and safety standards.

Colonizing regulatory practice to enable informalized work

This sub-section presents macro- and meso-level findings that reveal how the food delivery company enables the creation of an informal market for sub-contract undocumented migrant couriers. The findings demonstrate how the colonization and re-shaping of regulatory practice around self-employment create the conditions for the diffusion of informal work practices.

Macro-level contributions to the extant literature demonstrate how gig companies attempt to legitimize their status as supply chain intermediaries rather than employers to enable self-employment practices (Gregory, 2020; Veen et al., 2020). The findings from this study extend this theme by highlighting how the food delivery company sought to further colonize regulatory practice on self-employment status by 'flexing' entry requirements to the labor process.

²A courier-initiated network with the purpose of organizing couriers and discussing issues relevant to their working conditions and the labour process.

One-way managers did so was to change from a self-service booking (SSB) to a free log-in system. The SSB system is an algorithm that establishes a limit of couriers for specific time slots depending on forecasted customer demand, to which couriers are required to sign up in advance. Couriers are given prerogative based on their tenure, performance, and attendance record in high-demand periods such as weekends and bank holidays. This change was made because a danger with the SSB system was the appearance that the employer allocated shifts to contractors based on different criteria. The movement toward a free log-in system meant that all couriers were then eligible to sign up to the app at any given time regardless of tenure, individual performance, or level of customer demand. One manager elaborated on how the engagement status of a courier and the associated technology used by the company enables them to navigate within and transform the regulatory practice:

[Gig economy company] operates mostly on trial and error (...) the contractual relationship (...) provides us with the opportunity to offer our riders and customers the most tailored experience in terms of costs and flexibility. Over the years, we have introduced a number of contractual practices and policies with the riders – some of which have worked well, and some haven't. We are able to introduce new recruitment, entry requirements, or training practices that are more flexible. Technology enables us to do that because, first, we are at the forefront of business practice, and second because we have that distance [that technology enables], and we can evaluate in a more rational way the consequences.

(P22, Manager, Interview)

Most couriers appear to mirror management views, stating that their engagement status was prone to the imposition of changes in terms and conditions of work. There was a strong sense among most couriers interviewed that the imposition of a flexibilization rationale enabled platform managers to implement different work practices, such as changing log-in requirements or the payment system, which typically benefited the company and further pushed responsibilities to couriers. One courier stated:

'Being self-employed is [the gig economy company's] 'bread and butter' (...) they don't have to pay holiday and sick days and all that sort of [stuff] (...), but it also gives them the initiative and room for manoeuvre to make changes to the App, our contracts, to the pay, to anything. The only initiative I've got is to leave and join another App'.

(P17, Courier, Interview)

The flexibilization of the entry requirement is a process that underpins the ability of managers at the firm to define couriers as self-employed, enabling further externalization of responsibilities. What turned out to be a key factor in defining couriers as independent contractors was that they assumed responsibility for finding and validating replacement couriers to sustain the contracting relationship with the company.

Furthermore, our findings show that couriers ignored these responsibilities by renting their accounts and sub-contracting to individuals who were not fully enrolled yet or did not yet have all the required authorization to participate in the food delivery labor process. While it is the case that couriers initiate sub-contracting, the evidence suggests the platform enables this process. Specifically, couriers reported that they could easily find loopholes in the sign-in and the verification of identity processes. As one manager explains, the company is aware of these 'fraudulent activities' and seeks to tackle them through enhanced technical and bureaucratic control systems:

'The use of more robust systems of identity verification which combines the algorithmic control of a selfie taken by the rider with the direct local feedback from partner-restaurants and other users (couriers and customers) to identify the fraudster.'

(P20, Manager, Interview)

However, our evidence suggests the emergence of an informal relationship between the platform provider, legitimate food delivery couriers, and informalized sub-contractors. The formal relationship between the platform and the courier (independent contractor) provides space for an additional informalized sub-contracting relationship enabled by the platform. Our findings show that the informalized sub-contracting between the formal courier and undocumented (migrant) couriers flows from the manner in which the platform managers operate within the existing regulatory framework.

The evidence to support this claim comes from courier testimony and material on the company's website demonstrating that the food delivery company allows a courier to appoint other contractors to complete their orders. Couriers identified three different ways in which this occurred: (1) working for a food delivery company and, after their shift ended, renting their account to other couriers; (2) having a full-time job outside the gig economy and renting their food delivery company account to couriers documented or undocumented; (3) working for one food delivery company and renting an account from a second food delivery company to another courier at the same time, which can be seen as an enhanced extension of 'multi-apping' (Veen et al., 2020:401). This latter point, in particular, highlights the attempts of some couriers to fully exploit the opportunities that informalization affords by monetizing the phenomenon of multi-apping. In an extreme case, these dynamics could result in one individual holding multiple accounts in different apps to rent them out, introducing a new dimension of monetization of platform work.

Therefore, it is also the case that responsibilities imposed by the food delivery company on couriers are in turn externalized to other couriers as informalized labor sub-contractors. The company website and associated communication channels with couriers, such as company-run forums and FAQ websites, highlight that it is solely a courier's responsibility to undertake checks when appointing substitutes and complete the appropriate compliance form, thus externalizing responsibilities to the couriers. These requirements include proof of adult status via passport or driving license and possession of the right to work documentation for the UK (that they are documented and not subject to any unspent criminal convictions). Disclosure and barring service (DBS) checks are available online for a £25 fee that either the bona fide courier or sub-contracted courier must pay: '*we (couriers) have to pay and takes ages to fill in*' (P24, Courier, Interview).

Most couriers interpreted the company's policy of externalizing responsibilities as a '*no man's land*' but one where many took advantage of the permissiveness in monitoring and checking procedures. For instance, in most interviews, couriers reported that they were not deterred by the need to provide DBS checks. A courier who previously engaged with informally sub-contracted undocumented workers comments:

'If you rent your account out, you're supposed to do a criminal record, right to work check on whoever you're giving it to. We all know that is not going to happen though because it's too much hassle, and quite frankly, no one cares. (...) It's not like people do it with any type of malice... I mean, sometimes they're just mates.'

(P17, Courier, Interview)

Couriers also suggested that some app account holders did not use the substitution process but took advantage of the company's '*lack of control*' to simply rent their credentials and identity '*as a way of making easy money*' (P06, Courier, Interview).

Similarly, the leader of the couriers' network stated:

'You see a lot of people doing this [renting their account] because the demand is there (...) and because the company overlooks this situation. They're pretty much passing the legal responsibility and costs onto the rider who are renting the account. It also gives [the company] a huge supply of workers who are desperate, have no options for lawful employment and are willing to accept lower standards and pay.'

(P01, Courier, Interview)

These findings show how formal business practice enables the creation of an unregulated informal market for contractors that managers at the company appear to condone. This perspective was frequently discussed in other forums such as courier network meetings and social media chat groups. Therein undocumented migrant couriers reported that they secured forms of engagement via networks. These migrants have little or no English language skills, qualifications, and labor market skills. All the undocumented migrants working as couriers who were interviewed reported burdensome loans and other sources of debt that they incurred to gain entry into the UK. This indebted status was compounded by necessary expenses (bicycle, helmet, bag, etc.) to start the labor process. Therefore, all migrant couriers reported relying on networks (sometimes involving family members), either as information providers or employment intermediates, to secure a much-needed income, which would then enable them to begin repayment of loans.

'I was lucky (...) I was able to borrow my cousin's [food-delivery platform] account at no cost, so I could start working immediately to pay some of my debts. It's not like I could just wait months until I could start working. I can now focus on getting more skills to get other more stable jobs'

(P23, Courier, Interview)

Other undocumented migrant couriers relied on searching social media posts created by intermediates, who, for a monthly fee, provided the account sign-in credentials, mopeds or bikes and gear (such as thermic boxes and waterproof jackets) to undertake the work:

'The way I started working was to search on Facebook for adds offering accounts (...) it's pretty impressive how these people have all this set up... they asked me if I needed a bike, gear and a helmet for an extra fee. The [company] does not even seem to bother checking when I signed in with a different mobile... that pretty much tells you how much they facilitate.'

(P03, Courier, Interview)

The following sub-section presents findings on how the creation of informal contracting practices led to hyper-precarious working lives for couriers that trapped them in a web of exploitation overseen by the platform but enacted by 'legitimate' couriers.

Informalized sub-contracting: Furthering hyper-precarious work practices

Our findings show that sub-contract couriers operate within increasingly exploitative work practices that result in hyper-precarious working and living conditions affecting them and

their families, such as a highly variable and unpredictable income. The impact of informal sub-contracting and intermediation described above contributes to greater precarity and insecurity levels. The findings in this study go beyond Goods et al. (2019) and Veen et al. (2020) to suggest a heightened vulnerability flowing from the informal contractor relationship that migrant couriers had with their engagement brokers. For example, the undocumented migrant couriers reported that they feared *'losing income overnight because (the intermediary) can increase the fee or stop wanting to rent you the account'* (P24, Courier, Interview). The legitimate couriers who intermediated informal sub-contracting confirmed this perspective by reporting that most undocumented couriers showed feelings of anxiety and weariness about losing their income. All couriers, previously or currently engaged with informal sub-contracting, acknowledged their vulnerability primarily because migrant workers were typically unable to seek alternative employment due to their undocumented status or lack of language proficiency. Three interviews with undocumented migrant couriers highlighted the struggle to make enough money to fulfill their expectations of having relatively comfortable living conditions and their obligation to pay off debt. Financial concerns were consistently highlighted as taking up considerable time and effort in their daily lives. For example, one interviewee described his situation as a migrant worker and how difficult it is to *'deliver food while hungry'* (P23, Courier, Interview). In addition, the courier highlighted the required work effort to make ends meet and comply with obligations to support family back home was compounded by the enduring debt related to his journey into the UK and purchase or rent of material to start working as a food delivery courier:

'There are a number of obligations I have [to fulfil] even before starting taking some money for myself and my family. I work every day (...) Fridays and weekends or holidays I work sometimes over 15/16h to compensate for the little hours during weekdays because honestly it doesn't compensate working for more than 6/7h a day (...) The way I see it is: the weekdays I work to pay debts of material and back home [debt related to the journey to the UK] and the bike and account rental; on weekends when I do most of working hours is for me and my family (...) money is tight, but somehow we're managing.'

(P23, Courier, Interview)

The company's pursuit of greater flexibility heightened this inherent economic insecurity flowing from informal contractor engagement. The change from an SSB system to a free log-in system resulted in more couriers available for work in the city which meant greater competition for incoming orders. Most couriers saw this change as intensifying the already precarious situation in which they worked. All undocumented migrant couriers reported having to work for longer hours to pay debts and the engagement intermediary and still cope with financial responsibilities:

'I used to work 30h per week, plus [super-]peak [shift], which for that amount of time and comparing to what's out there, I could earn quite good money. But now I must do 50% more to earn the same – roughly 60/65h a week and weekend. (...) The pay goes down but unfortunately bills do not.'

(P25, Courier, Interview)

Migrant couriers consistently reported that their remuneration was less than the hourly rate an employee would receive under National Minimum Wage. This was the case because of greater competition for customer orders and, therefore, longer waits between orders and at restaurants. A willingness to work long hours is essential for those couriers who commence work with a considerable debt due to the purchase of bikes or mopeds, a powerful smartphone able to run multiple apps simultaneously, and the essential gear (such as thermic bags and waterproof jackets). One

migrant courier highlighted the tension between the hours at work, the costs of working, and insufficient pay:

‘I don't know anyone who is not working constantly so that can earn enough to pay all costs, bills, debt and still have some money to survive. If I consider all the hours and money I have to spend to work, I get way below the minimum wage.’
(P26, Courier, Interview)

The outdoor, road-based, and physical nature of the food delivery labor process means that couriers are inherently exposed to health and safety hazards. Moreover, interviewees explained how the pressures of heightened competition among couriers often meant engaging in dangerous behaviors to maximize hourly pay. When asked what strategies they applied to compensate for lower pay, couriers consistently pointed to dangerous and unlawful behaviors that involved running red lights and using the sidewalk. Couriers also referred to potential accidents with cars, road-rage (from drivers), and fatigue which augmented potential risks in addition to these expulsions. The informal sub-contracting relationship and undocumented status that some migrant workers were under meant they could not secure workplace insurance cover.

Independent contractor status means the worker carries all the risks in the labor process. However, in this study, interviewees highlight that economic, health, and safety risks are compounded by informal engagement and undocumented status, which means individuals become particularly vulnerable. All informal undocumented couriers mentioned their struggle to navigate the informal labor market where protections are non-existent and workers are exposed to the vagaries of the market. Food delivery platform work, in this case, lays bare informal undocumented couriers to work and income insecurity and workplace risks, leading to feelings of heightened exploitation and vulnerability. One courier mentioned, “*I struggle being a migrant, and it feels I'm easily exploited as a result*” (P27, Courier, Interview). Interviews with legitimate couriers and members of the couriers' network show that undocumented migrant couriers were exposed to a greater risk of exploitation and descended into hyper-precarious working conditions, sometimes because of the actions of fellow couriers. For example, one leader of the couriers' network reported:

‘Some people gradually slide into poverty who work in these jobs, yes, certainly. But I think majority of people who really get fucked over by these companies we will never hear from, because they either have to try and go home [country] or they may just live in a tent in a park.’

(P02, Courier, Interview)

The technological structure that underpins the platform compounded these hyper-precarious working conditions. Algorithms and platforms are theorized as opaque structures designed to prevent workers from directly engaging with an employer, its management, and associated business and employment practices (Gandini, 2019). This obscure technological arena is intensified by contractor intermediation that creates a two-layered barrier making it difficult for some workers to have a direct formal relationship with the company. This barrier kept them in the realm of non-compliant work practices regulated by a third-party actor (i.e., the intermediary). In turn,

‘[Food Delivery Company] relies only on technology, the App, to interact with us. If we have an accident or any other problem the [intermediate] can be like a barrier... the company becomes even more obscure. It's like a ‘wall’ that makes us more vulnerable to the risks typical of this type of work’.

(P24, Courier, Interview)

Figure 1 below presents our macro-, meso-, and micro-level findings.

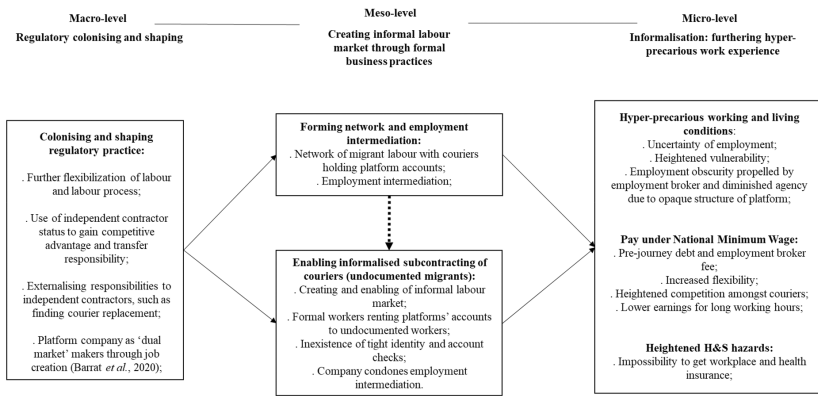


FIGURE 1 Summary of findings

DISCUSSION

This article examines how the organization of food delivery gig work mediated via a digital platform condones informalized engagement of contractors. The theoretically informed empirical findings advance knowledge by showing that the economic, technological, and social behavior of actors within gig food delivery is embedded in social relations that informalize work, an advance generalizable across the locations in the UK where this platform operates. The findings also demonstrate that within these relations, a series of complex embedded dependency relationships between and within the different actors in the labor process create conditions for the emergence of informalized sub-contracted work practices. However, the rules, technological apparatus, and labor instruments first degrade work for legitimate couriers, then informalize work for undocumented couriers. The discussion centers on the three research questions that aim to advance knowledge on the links between formal gig business and work practices and informalization of work, and the role one gig economy company played in the exploitation of labor, undocumented migrants in particular.

On the first research question, the primary research contribution from this project that advances knowledge centers on the demonstration of workplace pressures that enable informal work practices. By advancing the 'dual-market' maker framework, our findings demonstrate how management at the platform allows the creation of an informal labor market for contractors that flows from formal business practices. By securing greater courier flexibility and availability, the free log-in system enabled permissiveness in regulating entry requirements to the food delivery labor process. A High Court judgment also enabled permissiveness in that contractors engaged by this organization lie outside its organizational boundaries, that is, employment. This, in turn, facilitates the conditions for formal couriers to create informal networks of sub-contracted undocumented migrant workers (Figure 2) who do not yet possess the right to work credentials and therefore remain undocumented and cannot create an app account.

Previous research argued that gig economy companies tend to take advantage of flexiblized labor markets to categorize couriers as self-employed independent contractors and, in this way, cut labor costs by circumventing the imposition of employer on-costs such as national insurance contributions, holiday and sick pay, as well as health and safety regulations (Duggan et al., 2020). In this article, the opportunity to use informal sub-contracted undocumented workers represents the creation of an arms-length relationship, which is key within a digital platform-based business model (Veen et al., 2020). The availability of undocumented couriers also acts as a form of discipline as the absence of immediately available alternative job options

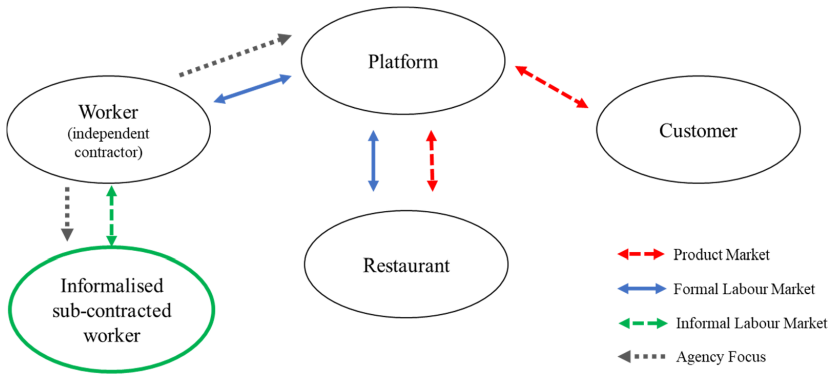


FIGURE 2 Intermediated labor and product markets (adapted from Barratt et al., 2020) with the informalized sub-contracted worker added by the authors.

secures a regular full-time workforce capable of responding to customer demands. Therefore, the food delivery company actively or vicariously enables the use of undocumented migrant labor in the labor process. This opportunity arrives through a permissive technological and procedural apparatus coupled with the increasing demand for low-cost labor. Management at platforms utilizes technological tools (such as digital platforms and algorithms) to introduce practices that enable them to create hegemonic but permissively enforced controls over work and the labor process. In this case, the externalization of responsibility for regulatory compliance and related costs to independent courier contractors. Therefore, in this article, technology and flexible permissive labor markets facilitate a reshaping of interactions between formalized employers and contractors to illustrate how the former colonizes and shapes regulatory practice giving rise to informal app sub-contracting.

The regulatory framework combines with the enhanced capacity of technological advances (the platform and the app) to create spaces wherein informalized regulation occurs. This theorization and its empirical underpinning illustrate Sassen's (2009, 2014) argument that informalized business and labor engagement policies tend to flow from deregulation. Exclusion poses distinct challenges and ushers in exploitation dynamics greater than those observed and documented in the formal labor market (Goods et al., 2019; Veen et al., 2020).

On the second research question, our findings advance knowledge on drivers and dynamics of informal sub-contracting between formal and informal migrant contractors (Altenried, 2021; Van Doorn et al., 2020). Key to this dynamic is the critical role that platform policies play in promoting the agency of some (legitimate couriers) to undermine the agency of others (undocumented migrant workers). The possibility of securing additional income by renting out accounts and credentials results in formal account holders creating informal networks of undocumented migrant food delivery sub-contractors who do not yet have the right to work in the UK. Legitimate account holders become engagement brokers who operate within personal and professional networks and use social media and family/social ties to tap into the opportunities permitted by the platform; this enables platform managers to underpin the exploitation of undocumented workers vicariously via legitimate couriers. The undocumented appear trapped in this sector because of the absence of a strong network of contacts, recognizable labor market skills, and limited language skills.

Although our study shows undocumented migrant contractors welcome the informal work opportunities, our findings also advance knowledge on how these dynamics act as a potential progress inhibitor for migrant labor by locking workers into a sector and associated forms of informalization and exploitation. The exploitation of undocumented migrant labor with little

or no recognized skill within the national contexts where they operate can become dangerous for workers and society. Workers can find themselves in a highly disadvantageous position due to the inherent vulnerability and hyper-precariousness they face. In addition, it is increasingly difficult to step into the formal labor market and get a better job, which will become more so due to the forthcoming Nationalities and Borders legislation that imposes a points-based system for migrant workers to gain entry to the UK. For society, the risks are that as the gig economy grows, there is a greater danger of an expansive informal labor market and more underemployment across the economy.

On the third research question, our findings reveal complex social and production dynamics that interconnect with a courier's work, personal life, and migrant status. The informal engagement observed in this study promotes forms of work that enable hyper-precarious working lives. The business and worker models, while structured and deployed legitimately by an employer, do not prevent but instead enable the application of informalized contracting practices. The combination of highly flexible labor markets and highly permissive technological/procedural apparatus in food delivery platform work results in hyper-precarity experienced by undocumented workers.

As this article shows, hyper-precarity is the result of an interplay between flexible and liberal labor markets with restrictive immigration regimes (Lewis et al., 2015). Therefore, the nexus of informal contracting, technological obscurity/intangibility, and immigration status produce three outcomes: (1) pay levels less than the hourly minimum wage, (2) transactional/insecure relationships with contractor broker, and (3) risk of bodily injury coupled with restricted access to healthcare. Food delivery gig work can be a stepping stone for those who face structural difficulties accessing secure, well-paid jobs (Van Doorn et al., 2020; Veen et al., 2020). However, as our evidence demonstrates, rather than this, food delivery work invariably results in the most vulnerable individuals in society (those who are undocumented) enduring ultra-exploitative conditions. Moreover, because pay levels are low for contractors, they are effectively below the hourly threshold for employees who receive the national minimum wage. This leaves legitimate couriers, especially informal sub-contract couriers, increasingly unable to fulfill their financial commitments where they become highly vulnerable to health and safety hazards.

CONCLUSION

In Britain, formalized compliant employment, contracting opportunities, and related models of capitalist labor relations exhibit dramatic contractions. In turn, this contraction witnesses the erosion of gains secured for workers on a voluntary basis via collective bargaining and, more recently, via an extension of individual employment rights and minimum wage legislation. Erosion expels some portions of capital and labor from standard measures. Formal explanations cannot fully capture the switch in the logic in the UK's political economy wherein platform providers and gig work appear as a disruptive feature in contemporary business practice. For example, in this study, documented couriers often ignore the right to work requirements imposed on them by the food-delivery company to comply with British legislation when they use substitute couriers. Therefore, documented couriers effectively re-produce an intermediary role and impose it on undocumented contractors, where these individuals are brokered into engagement but informally so. Future research should focus on understanding whether these dynamics are specific to the digital platform food delivery segment or apply to other segments of the platform economy. The dynamics presented in this article also show the divisions among groups of workers, contributing to the discussion and understanding that gig workers are a heterogenous group, with a diverse set of interests, such as their attachment to the job. Scaling up the study of informal gig

work to other segments of the platform economy would provide a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of the phenomena, but it would also flesh out the different agency strategies engaged by different groups of gig workers to make their employment conditions and working lives better.

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