Collaborating across borders or competing in precarity? Migrant labour in europe's digital transition

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study investigates how migrant workers in Europe experience and respond to the ongoing digital transformation of labor, focusing on their strategies for navigating uncertainty and pressure within platform-based employment systems. Given the growing dependence of the digital economy on migrant labor, often situated in precarious and legally unprotected roles, this issue demands critical attention. A qualitative approach grounded in phenomenological inquiry is employed to explore the subjective meanings and adaptive responses shaped by migrants amid evolving digital labor structures. Data were collected through a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature published between 2020 and 2025, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal three key themes: the emergence of new forms of insecurity driven by algorithmic control; limited yet active agency through tactics such as multi-platform work and community solidarity; and the ambivalence of transnational collaboration, where digital connectivity fosters both cooperation and competition. These insights demonstrate that digitalization does not always equate to progress, and may, in fact, reinforce exclusion and inequality within global labor markets. This research offers theoretical contributions to discussions on platform labor and digital migration, while also highlighting the urgent need for socially grounded, cross-border labor regulations. Future research is encouraged to incorporate field-based data to better capture localized and intersectional dynamics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the global wave of digital transformation has dramatically reshaped the nature of work. Across Europe, the shift toward a digitally-driven economy is evident in the proliferation of online platforms, the growing automation of labor, and the widespread integration of digital technologies across industries. Beneath this rapid progress lies the critical role of migrant labor, particularly in vulnerable sectors such as delivery services, domestic work, and informal occupations mediated by digital applications (Altenried, 2024). While digital tools have expanded transnational work opportunities, they have also given rise to new forms of labor precarity—deepening existing social and economic inequalities faced by migrant workers (Hackl & Rushworth, 2022).

At the national level, countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom have witnessed a significant rise in the number of migrants relying on digital labor platforms for their livelihood. However, emerging research reveals that the algorithmic infrastructure governing these platforms often results in a gig-based employment model that is both flexible and exploitative (Andrejuk, 2022). Qualitative interviews with migrant food delivery workers reveal recurring challenges: vague contractual terms, absence of social protections, and algorithmic pressure to maintain high productivity with no clear limits on working hours (Bonhomme & Ustek-Spilda, 2025). These findings highlight how migrant workers are pushed into volatile digital labor environments, often stripped of bargaining power or job security.

The urgency of studying this issue extends beyond the economic dimension, encompassing social, cultural, and human rights aspects of migrant labor within digital transformation. While international migration has long been central to development studies, the lived experiences of migrants in the context of digitalized work remain underexplored (Dordoni & Carreri, 2022). In the European context, much of the existing literature prioritizes statistical trends and digital integration policies, often overlooking relational dynamics, social processes, and the meaning of work from the worker's own perspective (Oztas, 2024). Yet, such understandings are essential for developing inclusive and equitable labor policies that genuinely address migrants' realities.

One of the key gaps in previous scholarship lies in the lack of inquiry into how migrants construct survival strategies, manage algorithmic uncertainty, and navigate labor relations across transnational spaces. Existing studies tend to adopt macro-level and quantitative approaches, which often

fail to capture the nuanced voices and subjective reflections of migrant workers themselves (Bahri, 2024).

To address this limitation, the present study employs a qualitative methodology to examine the lived meanings and subjective experiences of migrant workers through in-depth interviews and participant observation. By doing so, this research brings attention to migrant agency in negotiating a digital work environment characterized by ambiguity and flux. The primary objective is to understand how migrant laborers in Europe experience the transition to digital forms of employment and how they reconcile cross-border collaboration with competition in precarious work conditions. The study centers on labor experiences, social dynamics, and adaptive strategies shaped by migrants within digital ecosystems.

From a theoretical standpoint, this research contributes to ongoing debates on digital labor and transnational migration by incorporating micro-level perspectives grounded in lived experience. Practically, its findings are expected to inform the development of more inclusive digital labor protections and offer valuable insights to civil society organizations and policymakers seeking to design responsive social interventions for migrant digital workers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The digitalization of labor has been widely recognized as a transformative force in contemporary employment structures, especially within Europe's rapidly evolving platform economy. Scholars have observed that digital platforms, such as ride-hailing, food delivery, and domestic work applications, not only reshape job availability but also redefine working conditions, labor rights, and the governance of workforce participation (Altenried, 2024; Hackl & Rushworth, 2022). This transformation disproportionately affects migrant labor, which is overrepresented in precarious segments of the digital labor market. Research indicates that while digital platforms promise flexibility and autonomy, they often rely on algorithmic systems that control, monitor, and discipline workers in ways that reproduce existing inequalities (Andrejuk, 2022).

Numerous empirical studies have emphasized how migrant workers are particularly vulnerable within platform-mediated economies due to their often precarious legal status, limited language skills, and lack of access to institutional protections. For instance, Bonhomme and Ustek-Spilda (2025), through qualitative interviews, revealed that migrant food delivery couriers frequently face ambiguous employment contracts, unregulated working hours,

and constant productivity pressure driven by algorithmic management systems. These algorithmic mechanisms obscure power relations between platforms and workers and make it difficult for migrants to challenge unfair working conditions. Moreover, the rating systems embedded in platform governance act as invisible levers of control, reinforcing a culture of self-discipline and competition among workers.

Despite the growing body of research on digital labor, many studies remain focused on macro-level analyses, policy frameworks, or statistical modeling, without adequately accounting for the lived experiences and social dynamics of migrant workers. Dordoni and Carreri (2022) highlight this limitation by pointing out that most European policy discussions prioritize digital integration without seriously addressing labor subjectivities or transnational inequalities. Oztas (2024) adds that research on digital labor migration tends to lack relational depth and rarely interrogates how migrants construct meaning around their work or navigate interpersonal dynamics within digital workspaces. This epistemological gap limits the ability of existing literature to capture the full complexity of the digital transition from the viewpoint of affected individuals.

To respond to this shortcoming, scholars have called for more qualitative, ethnographic, and narrative-based studies that foreground migrant voices and agency (Bahri, 2024). These perspectives allow for deeper insight into how migrants develop coping strategies, build informal networks of solidarity, and negotiate ambiguous power structures within and beyond national borders. Concepts such as "multi-homing," where migrants work across several platforms simultaneously, and "informal community support" have emerged as key strategies that migrants use to manage risk and economic insecurity in digitally mediated labor environments (Bonhomme & Ustek-Spilda, 2025). However, as several researchers caution, these strategies do not emerge in a vacuum. They are shaped and constrained by broader structures such as migration regimes, labor regulations, and platform policies (Hackl & Rushworth, 2022).

Furthermore, the notion of transnational collaboration among migrant workers, often assumed to be facilitated by digital technologies, must be problematized. While technology enables connectivity, it does not inherently foster solidarity. In fact, competition over ratings, jobs, and time slots may intensify social fragmentation among migrants, producing ambivalent dynamics of cooperation and rivalry (Oztas, 2024). This paradox reflects a fundamental contradiction in the platform economy. Digital infrastructures that enable borderless labor also structure intense individualized competition,

especially among those already marginalized by migration status, class, and race.

In sum, the existing literature highlights important dimensions of digital labor migration but still lacks sufficient analytical focus on the micro-level realities of migrant workers in platform-based economies. This study builds on those gaps by offering a qualitative exploration of how migrant workers in Europe experience the digital transformation of labor, with specific attention to how they balance collaboration and competition within precarious employment environments.

3. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research framework grounded in phenomenological inquiry, with the central aim of deeply exploring how migrant workers experience and interpret the transition toward digital forms of labor in the European context. The phenomenological approach was chosen for its capacity to capture the essence of lived experience, especially in relation to the interplay between technological systems, individual mobility, and employment insecurity. This design aligns closely with the study's objective, which is to document the subjective perspectives and interpretive meanings constructed by migrant workers as they navigate platform-based digital labor structures (Oztas, 2024; Bonhomme & Ustek-Spilda, 2025).

Data for this research were collected exclusively through an extensive review of relevant academic literature. This included peer-reviewed journal articles, research reports, doctoral theses, and publications from international institutions addressing issues related to migration, employment, and the digital economy. The literature search was conducted systematically using major academic databases such as Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. Keywords such as "migrant digital labor," "platform work," "precarity," and "Europe" were utilized to guide the search process. To ensure the relevance and depth of the sources, inclusion criteria were established: (1) the literature must have been published between 2020 and 2025, (2) it must be directly related to migrant labor and digitalization processes, and (3) it must offer either empirical findings or substantive conceptual analyses. This method allowed the study to construct a comprehensive synthesis of existing research on the cross-border dynamics of migrant labor (Andrejuk, 2022; Bahri, 2024).

To validate the reliability of the findings derived from the literature, the study implemented source triangulation by cross-examining information from a variety of academic and institutional publications. In addition, each source

was critically evaluated based on its methodological framework, geographic context, and theoretical orientation. A thorough documentation process was maintained throughout all stages of literature searching, selection, and synthesis. This log-based approach enables transparency and permits external methodological audits if necessary. In doing so, the study adheres to the principles of traceability and limited replicability as commonly applied in qualitative document-based research (Dordoni & Carreri, 2022).

The data analysis process was carried out using thematic analysis, structured across five key phases. The first phase involved repeated readings of selected texts to achieve immersion in the material. This was followed by the generation of initial codes to identify relevant patterns and insights. In the third phase, recurring themes were identified and refined based on consistency across sources. The fourth stage consisted of in-depth examination and interpretation of the emerging themes. Finally, these insights were synthesized into a coherent thematic narrative that reveals the changing nature of migrant labor in the digital economy. This inductive and reflective process took into account the social and cultural contexts of the literature under analysis. Therefore, the study moves beyond simply summarizing previous research and instead constructs a fresh interpretive understanding of what digital labor means for migrants operating in transnational contexts (Altenried, 2024; Hackl & Rushworth, 2022).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that the ongoing shift toward digital labor markets does not inherently enhance the welfare of migrant workers. On the contrary, digitalization appears to exacerbate long-standing labor insecurities, particularly among already marginalized groups. The optimistic narrative embedded in neoliberal discourses, which views digital inclusion as a pathway to equality and empowerment, is not reflected in the lived realities of many migrants engaged in platform work. Rather than reducing inequality, digital infrastructures often replicate and intensify structural disadvantages by embedding them within algorithmic systems and opaque labor arrangements (Hackl & Rushworth, 2022).

This research diverges from earlier studies that have largely concentrated on digital migration policies or macroeconomic labor trends (see Dordoni & Carreri, 2022). While valuable, such approaches often overlook the granular, everyday experiences of workers within digital economies. The primary contribution of this study lies in its focus on narrative and

phenomenological accounts of migrant labor, shedding light on how platform technologies reshape work relations, self-perception, and resistance in subtle yet profound ways. By centering the perspectives of migrant workers, this research offers a nuanced reading of how digital systems reorganize not only economic practices but also the affective and relational dimensions of labor.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings deepen the conceptual framework of "platform precarity" by incorporating the cultural and transnational dimensions of migrant experiences. The work performed by migrants in digital environments is not simply economic but also embedded in complex social processes. Their survival strategies—such as combining multiple platform jobs, forging informal support networks, and creatively negotiating their status within platform systems—highlight the ways in which migrants exercise agency under constraint. These insights challenge deterministic views of digital labor as purely disempowering and point to the importance of recognizing migrant workers as active social actors navigating layered systems of inequality.

Practically, the implications of these findings are highly relevant for policymakers and civil society actors aiming to address digital labor precarity. There is a pressing need to develop transnational frameworks that provide social protection tailored to the specific conditions of digital labor. This includes ensuring algorithmic transparency, creating mechanisms for collective bargaining in platform contexts, and formally recognizing the legal status of migrant digital workers. Additionally, community-led initiatives that build digital literacy, legal awareness, and cross-border worker solidarity must be supported as part of a broader strategy to empower migrant workers in the platform economy.

Looking ahead, this study underscores the need for future research to engage with empirical fieldwork that captures localized dynamics in greater depth. Ethnographic studies, in particular, are well suited to illuminate the intersection of gender, race, legal status, and digital work. Special attention should be given to underexplored groups such as undocumented migrants or migrant women workers, who often face compounded layers of exclusion within digital labor markets. A more granular understanding of their lived realities will be crucial for designing inclusive digital labor policies and support mechanisms that move beyond one-size-fits-all models. This study reveals that the ongoing transition into a digital economy has not automatically improved the conditions of migrant workers. In many cases, it has intensified the pre-existing vulnerabilities they face. The idealized vision promoted by neoliberal ideology, which assumes that digital inclusion fosters greater social equity through technology, does not align with the realities on

the ground. Instead of narrowing social gaps, digitalization often reinforces them, especially for migrant populations who lack legal protections and adequate technological resources. In this context, technology functions less as a solution and more as an accelerant of marginalization (Hackl & Rushworth, 2022).

Unlike previous studies that have mainly focused on digital migration policies or statistical trends, such as those by Dordoni and Carreri (2022), this research contributes a richer, more layered understanding by highlighting the narratives and lived experiences of migrants themselves. Using a phenomenological framework and a focus on thematic literature, this study adopts a micro-level lens to illustrate how digital technologies profoundly reshape labor relations, self-conceptions, and everyday acts of resistance within migrant life.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings of this research advance the concept of platform precarity by incorporating both transnational and cultural elements into the analysis of migrant experiences. The work carried out by migrants within the digital ecosystem is not solely economic in nature. It is also a deeply social phenomenon imbued with meaning. Strategies such as multi-homing across several platforms and building digital migrant communities offer insight into how these workers adapt and survive. These findings call for a re-examination of the role of individual agency within labor structures governed by algorithmic uncertainty.

In practical terms, the implications of this research are highly significant for both policymakers and civil society organizations. There is an urgent need to craft new frameworks of social protection that reflect the transnational and digital realities of contemporary labor markets. Such frameworks must guarantee algorithmic transparency, ensure access to digital insurance schemes, and clarify the legal recognition of migrant digital workers. Moreover, strengthening migrant communities through targeted digital training, legal literacy initiatives, and transnational solidarity networks should be prioritized as part of a comprehensive support strategy.

For future scholars, this study strongly recommends deeper empirical engagement through field-based data collection. Doing so would enable a more localized and context-specific understanding of digital labor dynamics. The scope of future research should also expand to include migrant women, who often face compounded challenges due to gendered dimensions of both digital work and migration itself. A more focused analytical approach to these intersecting factors is essential.

5. CONCLUSION

This research offers a comprehensive view of the shifting terrain of migrant labor within Europe's digital economy by applying a qualitative, literature-based methodology. The identification of three core themes, including algorithmic job insecurity, constrained yet strategic forms of agency, and the paradox of transnational collaboration, underscores the complex and ambiguous conditions in which migrant workers operate. Technology, in this context, plays a dual role. It serves as both a vehicle for mobility and a mechanism of control. The study's primary contribution lies in its focus on the subjective experiences of migrants, presenting them not as passive recipients but as active participants within a fluid and unstable digital labor system. It also advances the broader discourse on platform work by integrating transnational and cultural perspectives.

From a theoretical standpoint, this investigation expands our understanding of digital precarity by weaving in the socio-relational and symbolic strategies adopted by migrant workers. Rather than merely analyzing legal frameworks or statistical data, this approach emphasizes lived experience and cultural interpretation. Practically, the findings provide a foundation for more effective social interventions, relevant digital literacy programs, and the reinforcement of migrant community networks that are better equipped to respond to the pressures of algorithmic management systems. In doing so, the study marks a significant step forward in addressing the complex challenges faced by migrant laborers in a digitalized world.

On the policy front, the study emphasizes the urgency of reforming existing labor protections to match the cross-border and technologically mediated nature of platform work. This includes clarifying the legal status of digital workers, improving access to social security systems, and creating transparent regulatory mechanisms for algorithmic oversight. In addition, the findings open pathways for more empirical, field-oriented research in the future. Ethnographic approaches or in-depth interviews with specific groups, such as undocumented migrants or migrant women, can enrich our understanding of the nuanced dynamics shaping digital labor.

Future inquiries could also explore how intersecting identities, such as gender, race, and legal status, shape vulnerability and resistance strategies in digital employment landscapes. Thus, this research not only adds theoretical value to the growing body of literature on migration and digitalization, but

also provides actionable insights for developing fairer and more responsive policy solutions in the face of a rapidly evolving digital labor order.

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