Beyond Digital Flexibility

Standing's Labour Securities Framework and the Precarious Lives of Migrant Food Delivery Couriers in Johannesburg

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Abstract

This study examines the precarious working conditions of migrant food-delivery couriers in Johannesburg, South Africa, employed by UberEats, MrDFood, and BoltFood. Using Standing's (2011) framework of labour insecurity and drawing on in-depth interviews with Black African male migrants from Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Uganda, the research reveals complex tensions in platform work. While digital platforms offer advantages like flexible scheduling, multiple income streams, and enhanced earning potential, they also generate new forms of precarity. Couriers face physical risks from crime, economic burdens from rising operational costs, and social insecurity through customer harassment, all while lacking basic employment protections. Although workers develop informal coping mechanisms through WhatsApp networks and support groups, these individual strategies cannot address structural insecurities. The findings demonstrate how platforms create racialised and gendered patterns of precarity among migrant workers, pointing to necessary policy interventions to regulate platform labour and protect vulnerable workers. By examining how platform capitalism intersects with migrant vulnerability in post-apartheid South Africa, this study advances critical debates about platform labour regulation and worker protection in Global South contexts.

Keywords: Food delivery couriers; gig economy; labour precarity; urban employment

Introduction

One particularly cold evening, I decided to use UberEats to order food. Clicking on the black icon app, a favourite selection was made: a chicken and mayonnaise pizza from Roman's Pizza. The subsequent 40-minute period was spent monitoring the delivery progress via the application's tracking feature while watching an episode of the animated series "Big Mouth" on Netflix. The delivery process concluded in synchronisation with the termination of the viewed content, as indicated by a mobile notification. The transaction was completed when the UberEats courier arrived at the residential gate, where the UberEats courier, attired in dark clothing suitable for evening temperatures and positioned on a motorcycle, handed over my pizza. Satisfied with the whole experience, a five-star rating was awarded to the food courier.

This experience highlights several key aspects of modern food delivery services: The integration of technology in streamlining food ordering processes, the multitasking capabilities afforded by digital platforms, the efficiency and convenience of the delivery system, and minimal direct human interaction involved in the transaction, is the new normal of food delivery (Bannor & Amponsah 2024). Apps are fun, safe, and user-friendly, allowing both the customer and food courier to see each other on the app before the trip begins. Reliance on rating systems ensures quality control by verifying that the food delivery courier completes tasks in compliance with the company's policies and customer instructions (Cameron 2024; Prassl 2018). In essence, the entire process is noted for its brevity, practicality, and convenience, suggesting that such services may be reshaping not only consumption patterns but also social interactions related to food acquisition in urban environments. While the convenience for the consumer is evident, this experience prompts critical reflection on the working conditions of food delivery couriers, particularly those navigating urban environments on motorbikes.

The rise and development of the gig economy and digital platforms, driven by advancements in digital technologies, have transformed the world of work. Whether you need legal services or someone who could design business cards or even household cleaning services,

there is probably an app for it. Globally, digital platforms such as Uber, TaskRabbit and Helping use digital technologies to mediate on-demand and short-term work and deliver services between service providers and customers (Cameron 2022; Prassl 2018). For many job seekers, the gig economy provides jobs where they can be self-employed or a chance to earn extra income. Depending on the services rendered, registering as a gig worker on an app is easy with minimal requirements and skills needed. However, it has sparked debates surrounding the precarity and vulnerability of its workforce. Many gig workers are classified as independent contractors rather than employees, depriving them of essential fringe benefits, regular pay, job stability and protections afforded to employees under the traditional standard employment relationship (Anwar & Graham 2020; Prassl 2018).

The gig economy's reliance on digital platforms also introduces new challenges related to algorithmic management, rating systems, and labour surveillance. Many gig workers are subject to algorithms that dictate their job assignments, earnings, and overall livelihoods (Cameron 2024). Additionally, the pervasive use of rating systems can exacerbate power imbalances between gig workers and digital platforms, increasing pressure to maintain high ratings at the expense of workers' well-being. The gig economy's rapid expansion also emphasises broader socio-economic disparities, with marginalised communities disproportionately bearing the brunt of its shortcomings. Vulnerable populations, including migrants, women, and people of colour, often face systemic barriers to accessing quality gig work and are more susceptible to exploitation and discrimination within the gig economy's informal structures (Cameron 2024; Lata et al. 2022).

Focusing on job seekers who are interested in becoming food delivery couriers, digital platforms such as UberEats, Foodora and Deliveroo offer accessible employment opportunities in many European countries. In Africa, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, and Uganda, UberEats, BoltFood and Glovo are well-known digital food delivery platforms, providing jobs for many gig workers (Bannor & Amponsah 2024). In South Africa, UberEats, MrDFood

and BoltFood (which operated until December 2023) are popular digital food delivery platforms (Webster & Masikane 2021). The food delivery platform provides a service to restaurants and customers in return for a commission fee and delivery charge, and the platform then pays the delivery fee to the food courier. The prerequisites are straightforward, typically requiring applicants to hold a valid driver's license, possess a vehicle or motorbike for transportation purposes, and have a smartphone for communication and order management (Kavese et al. 2022; Prassl 2018).

Research on digital platform couriers has focused on the following issues. The growth of digital food delivery platforms is linked to advancements in technology, the widespread use of smartphones and the changing nature of urban consumers who need quick, convenient, predictable and safe delivery of meals during or after a busy workday (Alalwan 2020; Bannor & Amponsah 2024; Chai & Yat 2019; Munday & Humbani 2024he). From the perspectives of digital food delivery couriers, studies in the UK, Australia, and China have highlighted several issues: precarious working conditions (Cant, 2019), low pay (Goods et al. 2019), and a lack of job stability due to the temporary nature of the work (Sun et al. 2023). Yet, little research has been done on the experiences of food delivery couriers in South Africa. Webster and Masikane's "I Just Want to Survive" (2021) offers one of the few comprehensive overviews of food delivery workers' experiences in Ghana, Kenya and South Africa, while Moroane's (2023) study looks at the agency of food delivery couriers in Rustenburg, a town in North-West Province in South Africa.

Adding to Webster & Masikane's (2021) and Moroane's (2023) work, this study asks: How do migrant food-delivery platform workers in Johannesburg experience labour insecurity through the lens of Standing's seven securities framework? The city of Johannesburg, South Africa's economic hub and a magnet for cross-border migration, provides a compelling case study to examine the experiences of food-delivery couriers in the gig economy. This article draws on a qualitative study investigating how migrant food delivery couriers navigate and respond to precarious working conditions and begins by situating the study within the broader context of the gig

economy and food delivery work, both globally and in South Africa. It then debates Standing's seven forms of labour insecurity, the methodology followed by empirical findings and concluding remarks.

1. The Gig Economy and Food Delivery Work

The gig economy is a global phenomenon and involves workers using online platforms to engage in temporary, short-term projects or tasks, rather than permanent jobs or standard employment contracts (Charlton 2021; Shibata 2019). Since the 2000s, computers, information and communication technologies (ICT), and electronic devices have become more advanced, allowing cloud computing to open up new ways of organising work and how people work. These technological changes have enabled access to a large pool of available workforce over the Internet by using app-based models as an alternative solution to employing workers under rigid contracts and terms and conditions (Cameron 2024; Lata et al. 2022; Rani & Furrer 2021; Sibiya & du Toit 2022). Governments, city officials, and international organisations also emphasise the flexibility and autonomy of gig work since they are interested in lowering unemployment and increasing economic growth (Shibata 2019). The gig economy can benefit workers, businesses, and consumers by making work more adaptable to the needs of the moment and the demands for flexible lifestyles (Cameron 2024; Kavese et al. 2022; Sibiya & du Toit 2022).

Drawing on labour process theory, three key characteristics of gig work can be identified: Firstly, the app downloaded onto a smartphone serves as the primary interface where customers and workers interact and where the production process occurs. Through algorithmic calculations, the platform ensures hassle-free experiences by managing invoicing and payments, providing a digital infrastructure that facilitates the entire transaction process (Cameron 2024; Lata et al. 2022; Sibiya & du Toit 2022). Secondly, customer feedback plays a central role in gig work. Typically, customers rate workers on a scale of one to five stars, which reflects the worker's trustworthiness and reliability. A higher average score increases the likelihood of repeat bookings for the worker. Thirdly, the use

of technology in gig work extends to managerial control, where the platform's algorithms and digital mechanisms oversee and regulate worker activities and quality control (Moroane 2023; Prassl 2018; Webster & Masikane 2021).

Two forms of exchanges occur on digital labour platforms. The first type is cloud work, which occurs when freelancers with access to the internet can complete tasks (Woodcock & Graham 2020). For example, UpWork, TaskRabbit, and Freelancer are digital labour platforms that connect clients with gig workers offering services such as graphic designs, transcribing services, or web designs, among others. For businesses, cloud work is cost-effective as it allows for a smaller core workforce (e.g. full-time, permanent employees) and a larger peripheral workforce (e.g. temporary, casual workers), which comes with fewer overhead costs. The second type of labour exchange that occurs on digital platforms is geographically tethered, which includes on-demand services in local markets. Unlike cloud work that can occur in any geographical location, in geographically tethered work, workers and clients must be in a particular place at a particular time and tasks cannot be completed solely over the internet (Kavese et al. 2022; Sibiya & du Toit 2022; Webster & Masikane 2021; Woodcock & Graham 2020). For example, SweepSouth is a domestic cleaning service in South Africa that connects domestic workers with clients seeking someone to clean their dwellings in a specific area, while the organisation retains a percentage of the exchange (Nhleko 2023; Sibiya & du Toit 2022). For workers, geographically tethered work on digital platforms provides job opportunities that might be hard to obtain otherwise. In short, geographically tethered digital work also suits workers' skills, schedules, and interests (Sibiya & du Toit 2022; Woodcock & Graham 2020).

Food-delivery work is an example of geographically tethered gig work and it has emerged as a rapidly growing sector in the gig economy (Veen et al. 2020). In South Africa, there are three main digital food delivery platforms. Firstly, UberEats began in Johannesburg in September 2014 and has since expanded to most metropolitan cities in the country (Webster 2020; Kavese et al. 2022). UberEats partners with many eateries, including major fast-food franchises and local

restaurants (Henama & Sifolo 2017). Key features include transparent pricing, real-time order tracking, and the Uber Pass membership for free delivery and other perks (Webster & Masikane 2021). Secondly, MrDFood was launched in 2015 and acquired by Takealot in 2017, expanding its reach and restaurant partnerships (Anwar & Graham 2020). It offers a broad selection of meal options, real-time order updates, and low or no delivery fees (Heiland 2022). MrDFood's Foodie Club loyalty program provides discounts and promotions for frequent users (Johnson et al. 2020). Thirdly, BoltFood, introduced in 2019, operates as a part of the ride-hailing service Bolt (Johnson et al. 2020). Initially launched in Johannesburg, it has since expanded to other cities like Cape Town and Durban (Webster & Masikane 2021). BoltFood offers a user-friendly interface, multiple payment options, excellent customer support, and a loyalty program that rewards users with points for future discounts (Heiland 2022). These three digital food delivery platforms have gained popularity, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Carmody & Fortuin 2019; Webster & Masikane 2021).

While the size and scope of the food delivery platform sector are not clear, food-delivery platforms rely on a workforce of couriers, who use their vehicles (cars, motorbikes, bicycles) to pick up orders from restaurants and deliver them to customers (Christie & Ward 2018). In South Africa, it appears that many food delivery workers are young men, mostly Black Africans and migrants from countries in Southern Africa (Webster & Masikane 2021; Webster 2020). The dominance of migrants in South Africa's food delivery sector reflects broader structural forces: the country's position as Africa's primary migration destination, the urban concentration of migrants, barriers to formal employment, and platforms' strategic targeting of vulnerable workers (Elsley & Snyman 2023). This creates a paradox where platform work simultaneously provides economic opportunities and entrenches migrant precarity.

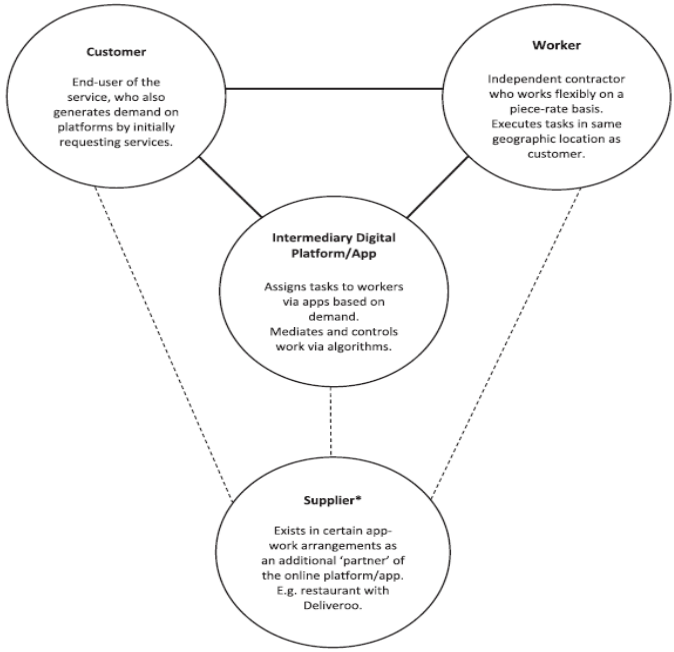

Figure 1: Labour triangle and on-demand work (Duggan et al. 2020)

Figure 1 illustrates that in the digital food delivery economy, the process begins with the customer, who generates demand by placing an order through a food delivery app. This order is then mediated by the intermediary digital platform, which assigns the delivery task to an available food delivery courier based on proximity and availability. The platform's algorithms play a role in managing and controlling the workflow, ensuring timely deliveries. In this arrangement, restaurants act as suppliers, preparing the food ordered by the customer. The delivery platform facilitates this interaction by connecting the customer's order with the restaurant and assigning a worker to deliver the food. The dashed lines in the accompanying figure represent the indirect but essential relationship between customers and restaurants, mediated by the digital platform to ensure a seamless food delivery experience.

While the process is effortless, little is known about the experiences of food-delivery couriers. Recent studies by Webster & Masikane (2021) and Kavese et al. (2022) offer important insights, highlighting crime and hijackings, traffic accidents, low pay, and long hours. They also note the development of informal courier organisations and WhatsApp groups for mutual support. To expand on these works, this article contributes to new insights by drawing on Standing's (2011) seven forms of labour insecurity.

2. Precarity, the Seven Forms of Labour Insecurity and the Gig Economy

In Guy Standing's influential book "The Precariat: A New Dangerous Class (2011), the term precarity or the collective term "precariat" is used to describe the growth and the socio-economic conditions of low-income and status workers typically associated with temporary and seasonal work in the aftermath of neoliberalism. Market competitiveness and individualisation transferred risks and insecurity onto workers and their families, which Standing (2011) argues caused a new precarious class where employment stability and security are undermined. He (2011:17) contends that the precariat lacks seven forms of labour security that historically protected workers.

The first form of labour security that the precariat typically lacks is labour market security, which refers to adequate earning opportunities to maintain a decent living. It also includes the risks of losing a job and its consequences (Standing 2011). Regarding gig workers, the flexibility of choosing tasks and working hours is undermined by algorithmic management and market uncertainties that create new types of labour precarity. Gig workers like Uber drivers are not guaranteed adequate earnings, and they are often forced to work longer hours, often after hours and during weekends, to secure an adequate income (Cano et al. 2021).

Employment security is the second form of labour security that Standing (2011) identifies. This refers to workers' protection against unclear changes to employment conditions or arbitrary dismissals. Unlike full-time employees under a standard employment relationship (SER) who enjoy employment security, gig workers are classified as

independent contractors, lack basic employment protections and can be terminated unfairly. For example, Uber drivers face algorithmic control where their accounts could be temporarily or permanently deactivated, affecting their ability to work and earn income (Kute 2017). Similarly, domestic platform workers' accounts can also be deactivated if they cancel services on short notice due to personal circumstances (Sibiya & du Toit 2022).

Job security, which refers to skill development, career progression and stable employment is the third type of labour security that Standing (2011) recognized. Companies typically invest in their full-time employees' where good employees could be promoted to senior positions with advanced responsibilities. For gig workers, however, platforms often undermine career advancement and development by fragmenting tasks into discrete tasks. For example, household cleaning platforms do not invest in their domestic workers' transferable skills, they do not recognise years of services, and they prohibit a personal client-worker employment relationship, which jeopardises opportunities to develop stable employment (Sibiya & du Toit 2022).

The next form of labour security is work security, which entails occupational safeguards and compensation against illness, work-related accidents or mishaps and exploitative scheduling practices (Standing 2011). Unlike full-time permanent employees under the (SER), who often have protections regarding health and safety at work, gig workers are systematically undermined by these protections. Gig workers such as Uber drivers must bear traditional employer costs such as vehicle maintenance and insurance, sacrifice income during illnesses and cover expenses related to accidents since these responsibilities are transferred to the worker (Kute 2017). As an example, domestic work platforms do not protect domestic workers against work-related accidents or injuries. This becomes the worker's financial responsibility. Additionally, illness-related cancellations could lead to accounts being deactivated, which again affects domestic workers' ability to secure work and income (Sibiya & du Toit 2022).

Fifthly, skill reproduction security entails when workers are professionally trained by employers to improve the skills, productivity

and competitiveness of their workforce (Standing 2011). However, gig workers, such as platform domestic workers, are hardly ever provided with training opportunities to increase their skills or employability. Thus, skill development is transferred to the gig workers themselves, who must carve a niche in the labour market.

Standing (2011) identifies income security as the sixth form of labour security that the precariat often lacks. Income security is defined as the assurance of stable and predictable income. Full-time employees under the SER often receive a fixed salary and annual salary increases linked to inflation. Yet, gig workers, such as Uber drivers, face multiple mechanisms of income destabilisation, such as algorithmic fare fluctuations, compulsory platform commissions of 25% of earnings, and escalating operational costs such as fuel and data costs, causing unpredictable and inconsistent income for Uber workers (Kute 2017).

Finally, representation security is defined as the ability of workers to have a collective voice to change and improve their working conditions (Standing 2011). While full-time employees under a SER are often unionised, the nature of gig work makes it challenging for gig workers to unionise. Gig workers often work in isolation and have little or no access to formal grievance procedures and peer support, which affects their representation security. For example, Uber drivers often do not have union support, and they have to rely on informal networks and strategies to organize. Informal WhatsApp support groups were found among UberEats couriers as a way to deal with workplace discrimination and customer exploitation (Webster & Masikane 2021).

The seven forms of labour insecurity proposed by Standing (2011) provide a useful framework to analyse how food delivery couriers experience precarity. This article, therefore, aims to contribute to new insights into precarity among a little-studied group of digital food couriers.

3. Research Design and Methods

Johannesburg, South Africa's most populous city with approximately six million residents, is a vital context for studying food delivery

couriers due to its economic significance and complex social dynamics. Johannesburg serves as the financial hub of Southern Africa, attracting migrant jobseekers from economically disadvantaged neighbouring nations such as Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Malawi and Eswatini (Masuku 2023). However, over two million people in Johannesburg face poverty, earning less than R1200 (USD 300) per month, with 62% of Black Africans affected compared to only 1% of the White population (Abrahams & Everatt 2019). This economic disparity drives many to seek employment in the gig economy, including food delivery services, making Johannesburg an ideal context for studying the experiences of food delivery couriers.

The study adopted a qualitative research design to explore food delivery couriers' lived experiences. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to recruit participants. For purposive sampling, participants had to be migrant men working as food-delivery couriers for UberEats, MrDFood or BoltFood in Johannesburg. These criteria aimed to capture the experiences of a key demographic group in the food delivery workforce, where black African migrant men dominate (Webster, 2020). Once a few participants were identified, snowball sampling was used to identify additional participants with a similar profile.

Initial participants were approached at popular food pickup spots where couriers congregate. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven food-delivery couriers to elicit rich narratives about their experiences regarding their working conditions and coping strategies. Eight interviews took place in person in the parking lot at a local shopping centre where food delivery couriers wait for deliveries. However, being in my early 20s, and a black African female South African, I was apprehensive to conduct the interviews alone. Consequently, my sister and her male partner accompanied me to the parking lot but they were not involved with the interviews. They waited in their car a short distance while I interviewed the food delivery couriers. Three other participants gave me their cell phone numbers and I conducted their interviews via WhatsApp call at a convenient time. Afterwards, I deleted and blocked their numbers to avoid possible harassment.

Table 1: Profile of participants

Pseudonym	Age	Nationality	Main employer	Years of experience
Enoch	30 years	Malawi	UberEats	3 years
Kevin	29 years	Zimbabwe	UberEats	3 years
Kabelo	32 years	Zimbabwe	UberEats	3 years
Butshi	28 years	Zimbabwe	MrDFood	3 years
Franko	38 years	Zimbabwe	MrDFood	2 years
Givanie	27 years	Malawi	MrDFood	2 years
Thembabi	35 years	Zimbabwe	MrDFood	3 years
Gatsheni	35 years	Zimbabwe	BoltFood	3 years
Farrell	30 years	Malawi	BoltFood	2 years
Prosper	30 years	Malawi	BoltFood	3 years
Eric	28 years	Uganda	BoltFood	1 year

All participants identified as Black African men aged between 27 and 38 years. This age range indicates that food delivery work tends to attract or is more accessible to younger adults, possibly due to the physical demands of the job and their greater comfort with technology. Six participants were Zimbabwean, four Malawian and one from Uganda. Three participants are primarily employed by UberEats, four by MrDFood, and four by BoltFood. The interviews, averaging an hour each, followed a flexible guide that covered key topics such as work history, experiences with the delivery platform, job benefits and challenges, safety concerns, customer interactions, earnings and costs, and coping strategies. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and thematically analysed.

Regarding the ethical procedures, a consent process was implemented to ensure ethical compliance and participant protection. Each participant was presented with a detailed consent form that outlined the nature and purpose of the study, participant expectations and responsibilities and underlying ethical considerations and safeguards. Strict adherence to ethical guidelines was maintained throughout the research process. Participant dignity and integrity were prioritised, with all interactions conducted

respectfully. Confidentiality was rigorously upheld. To protect participants' privacy, pseudonyms were used to ensure that no identifying information was revealed. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Participants were informed of their right to refuse to answer any questions they found uncomfortable, terminate the interview at any point without consequence and withdraw from the study at any stage. No financial compensation or other incentives were offered for participation in the interviews. This approach was adopted to minimise potential bias and ensure the integrity of the data collected.

4. Working as a Food Delivery Worker in Johannesburg

Labour Market Security

Labour market security, as defined by Standing (2011), refers to adequate income-earning opportunities and the ability to secure stable work in the labour market. Interviews with food delivery couriers revealed surface-level labour market security, where they mentioned that their current job offers better payment than other service-related jobs such as private security or gardening.

> For now, I think my salary is better because I get paid during the month (every two weeks) and do not have to wait for month end as I can cover other unexpected expenses that surface during the month. [This is] unlike my previous job, [where] I only got paid month end and the salary was less - Butshi, MrDFood (03/05/2023).

Like Butshi, Eric, Gatsheni, Franko and Kabelo also mentioned that they earn more money working as a food delivery courier than in their previous jobs. The benefit of being paid bi-monthly means food delivery couriers have the financial flexibility to cover unexpected expenses. However, payment frequency does not mean adequate income or long-term stability and predictability. Food delivery couriers acknowledged that long working hours are needed to earn basic earnings. For example, Prosper, a BoltFood courier, said: "I am

putting in many hours so that I get a better salary at the end of the week because it is hard, so I work from 8 am until 9 pm".

Other food delivery couriers also confirmed that they typically work 12 hours every day since there are so "many workers doing the same job" as them. The competitive working environment means many food delivery couriers must maximise working time and work evenings and weekends to earn a basic income. Thus, algorithmic-based work creates uncertainty and impacts food delivery couriers' labour market security.

Employment Security

Interviews with food delivery couriers revealed that they do not have employment security as there is a clear lack of transparency from platforms regarding employment regulations. Several food delivery couriers mentioned that there are often "deductions made from our salaries that [we] don't understand". In addition, a food delivery courier shared the following story of how the platform temporarily deactivated his account without a clear motivation:

> I remember I made a delivery in Sandton at night, and they robbed me of my phone. I could not complete the delivery … They ended up pausing my app for two days, saying I ate customers' food. I did not work for two days. No money, nothing – Prosper, BoltFood (05/05/2023).

Prosper's experience indicates a lack of employment security as platforms can arbitrarily suspend workers' accounts even in cases of being victims of crime. Eric echoed a similar sentiment: "Sometimes they lock their drivers out of the app without an explanation". Thus, Prosper and Eric could not make any earnings when their accounts were deactivated. Food delivery couriers have no protection against arbitrary changes to their employment, and they are often not informed about such changes, which severely impacts their earnings and employment security.

Job Security

Standing's (2011) concept of job security, which encompasses the ability to maintain an occupational niche, skill development and develop a career path, is fundamentally challenged in platform-based food delivery work. None of the participants mentioned that they received proper training, which jeopardises any possible career development.

> I would not say I received training because when I first began, I got the app and everything was done online. There was no serious training. Even the training I got was online. They ask some questions, you respond, and then they activate you – Kevin, UberEats (05/05/2023).

Unlike standard employment where companies often invest in their workers' skills, platforms' minimalist approach to professional development impacts food delivery workers' job security. Without proper training or skills development, they can be replaced easily by other job seekers. In addition, Thembabi's account of routine discrimination and harassment from other road users highlights another form of job insecurity:

> The problem that I come across on the road, especially during rush hour, is that people with cars do not respect us on the road, and we get discriminated against because we drive motorcycles. They shout at us and call us names – Thembabi, MrDFood (03/05/2023).

Thembabi's experience was echoed by Kevin and Givanie, who described how they are often verbally abused by the public. These experiences reveal how food delivery's low social status and public stigmatisation create barriers to establishing a legitimate professional identity. As evidenced by Thembabi's testimony, food delivery couriers face routine public disrespect and discrimination specifically tied to their mode of transport, where motorcycles become stigmatising markers of lower occupational status. This stigmatisation intersects with broader patterns of job insecurity in platform work, where the absence of career development pathways,

limited skill development opportunities, and the lack of professional recognition create job insecurity and precarity.

Work security

Interviews with food delivery couriers revealed a crisis of work security, characterised by multiple layers of physical risk and an almost complete absence of protective measures (Standing 2011). For example, Prosper shared his experience of being in an accident:

> At the end of the day, if you get involved in an accident, it becomes your and your family's problem. You end up digging into your savings to cover hospital bills for your recovery. The company basically does not care about such things – Prosper, BoltFood (05/05/2023).

Prosper's experience highlights the lack of work security as food delivery couriers have no guaranteed protection against work-related injuries or accidents. He had to cover these expenses personally. The lack of company protection against illnesses or accidents means food delivery couriers often support each other.

> When one gets injured during deliveries, we as the delivery drivers come together to make means to assist you. We contribute the amount of money that we can and help where we can. For example, we normally contribute R100 or R200 to assist should you get injured – Gatsheni, BoltFood (07/05/2023).

In addition, the physical dangers of working as a food delivery courier include infrastructure-related hazards that directly impact workers' safety and earning capacity. Kabelo's testimony about navigating Johannesburg's potholed streets during load-shedding highlights the lack of work security: "When there is load-shedding, it is not safe. I can drive into it and damage my bike. Especially during load-shedding, I can't see the potholes." Poor infrastructure increases the chances of accidents, which again impacts earning potential and personal expenses.

Additionally, interviews revealed that the absence of sick leave or health coverage creates a situation where food delivery couriers must

either work while ill or face income loss. For example, the testimonies of both Enoch and Franko, who said, "If I don't work, I don't get paid", and "If I'm sick, I cannot work, but then I don't get my money", highlight the lack of work security of food delivery couriers.

Skill Reproduction Security

With non-existent training, food delivery couriers have developed informal support systems to Food delivery couriers have developed sophisticated informal knowledge-sharing networks in response to the platforms' failure to provide structured skill development opportunities. This is vividly illustrated in Thembabi's description of WhatsApp group dynamics:

> We use WhatsApp to talk with each other. For example, when there is danger in a certain area, we inform each other in the group. We also help each other with other challenges if somebody is sick – Thembabi, MrDFood (03/05/2023).

This peer-to-peer knowledge exchange system reveals how workers have created their own mechanisms for skill reproduction and competency development in the absence of formal training structures. The range of shared information, including safety alerts, literacy support and platform updates, demonstrates the value and necessity of these informal learning networks.

The multi-functional nature of these knowledge-sharing networks is further evidenced by

Similarly, Butshi shared the following: "WhatsApp groups for when you maybe get involved in an accident or have trouble with your bike. You can WhatsApp the group and ask for help." This reveals how workers have developed systems that combine immediate practical support with longer-term skill development. The groups serve not only as emergency response networks but as informal training platforms where workers can develop technical knowledge (bike maintenance), safety skills (danger awareness), and platform navigation capabilities (understanding updates). This represents a worker-driven approach to skill reproduction security

that stands in contrast to the platforms' minimal investment in worker development.

However, while these informal networks demonstrate remarkable worker agency and collective solidarity, they also highlight a fundamental failure in platform work's approach to skill reproduction security as conceptualised by Standing (2011). The fact that workers must create their own skill development systems rather than receiving regular structured training and professional development opportunities from the platforms reveals a systematic underinvestment in worker capabilities. This reliance on informal peer-to-peer learning, while valuable, cannot fully compensate for the absence of formal skill development pathways, professional certifications, or recognised competency frameworks. The situation ultimately represents a transfer of responsibility for skill reproduction from platforms to workers, further entrenching precarity by making professional development dependent on informal networks rather than institutional support.

Income Security

Interviews with food delivery couriers reveal that they experience income insecurity since fare fluctuations affect the stability and predictability of income, and all their operational costs are their responsibility. Butshi said that he makes around R3000 per week, but then he needs to pay for his petrol and data himself. He said the following: "Petrol prices are a huge problem for us drivers because, you see, the petrol is expensive; however, the money is not enough". Similarly, Enoch said, "Petrol is another problem because it strains our income. We have to take money from our own pockets".

Food delivery couriers are also not paid per hour or do not receive a minimum wage. Their wages are determined per delivery, and working in a competitive environment and algorithmic control affects the stability and predictability of their wages. To increase their income, some food delivery couriers work on multiple platforms. As Farrel explains: "I work for MrDFood, BoltFood, and I also do private deliveries … This helps me with my earnings". Similarly, Givanie said the following:

> I mainly work for BoltFood, but sometimes I work for UberEats and MrD. I also work Uber and Takealot. I deliver parcels on Uber, so sometimes I close the food app and open the one for parcels and deliver parcels; at least this closes the financial gap – Givanie, MrDFood (07/05/2023).

Platform stacking is a strategy to diversify income sources, improve wages and compensate for slow periods. It also shows that single-platform income is insufficient, and many workers must resort to other platforms based on demand and peak times. Interviews with food delivery couriers also revealed that they support each other in crisis times since their income is often not enough to cover expenses.

> We help each other financially, you know. If you are short of money, we can make a plan, maybe each of us contribute R20 for you. We are trying to change, to improve our conditions – Farrel, BoltFood (05/05/2023).

Like Farrel, Butshi also mentioned that he gave money to a co-worker while waiting for an order, who needed it for personal expenses. This shows that single platform-based earnings are inadequate and that workers develop informal financial safety nets by helping each other financially. Thus, platforms seem to generate income insecurity while simultaneously pushing workers to create their own support structures.

Representation Security

Standing's (2011) concept of representation security, which includes formal union representation, collective bargaining rights, and protected grievance procedures, is limited for platform food delivery couriers. Yet, interviews revealed that they demonstrate remarkable agency in developing alternative forms of collective voice. Kevin described how he was actively involved in strike action to fight an increase in fuel prices and wages:

> Sometimes, we do strike. We come together until the management gives us attention to express our grievances. For example, if it is with regards to petrol increases, we tell them that we will not deliver until they increase money - Kevin, UberEats (05/05/2023).

Three other food delivery couriers in this study, Enoch, Eric and Franko, also mentioned that they participated in strikes in an attempt to improve their working conditions. These experiences illustrate that labour precarity drives collective strike action among food delivery couriers since formal union structures are absent. WhatsApp groups are another strategy that food delivery couriers use to share information and show solidarity.

Thus, platform work paradoxically encourages new forms of worker organising while intentionally causing a fundamental deficiency in representation security. Although workers have demonstrated incredible resilience in creating alternative methods for representation through spontaneous strikes and WhatsApp networks, these unofficial systems are unable to offer the full representation security that Standing deems necessary for decent work.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study used Standing's (2011) framework of labour security to provide an overview of how Black African male migrant food delivery couriers in Johannesburg deal with different kinds of precarity. One of the study's main findings is that, even though platform food delivery provides relatively easy access and flexibility to earn money, there are noticeable gaps in all aspects of labour security.

Firstly, the findings show that algorithmic control and the competitive nature of platform food delivery undermine the labour market security of food delivery couriers. Long working hours, often exceeding 12 hours, and weekend work are necessary to make a living from this job. In addition, many food delivery couriers wait hours for an order – a time for which food delivery couriers are not compensated. This indicates that food delivery work is ineffective in sustaining long-term livelihoods. Secondly, employment security is also jeopardised by algorithmic surveillance and control. Food delivery couriers are often threatened with unexplained deactivation of accounts that affect their earning potential and employment security. For migrant workers, who are already at an increased risk in South Africa's discriminatory and xenophobic labour market,

this algorithmic management system and the workers' status as independent contractors create an especially precarious situation.

Thirdly, food delivery couriers lack job security since they do not receive professional training from platforms. This means that platform food delivery couriers do not have proper career prospects in this sector and are replaceable by other job seekers with similar skills. This is problematic since it appears that food delivery platforms create a low-skill equilibrium, where workers do not gain transferable skills that might help them find other better-skilled jobs. Migrants might especially benefit from formal skill development, which can help them upskill in an economy where unemployment is high. In addition, food delivery couriers are also often victims of verbal abuse and ridicule by the public, which reflects the general devaluation of service labour in South Africa. This highlights how occupational stigma contributes to their precarious working conditions and lack of job security.

Fourthly, the work security of food delivery couriers is threatened since platforms do not protect workers against accidents, violence, or illness. This is a particular concern for food delivery couriers working in Johannesburg, a city characterised by poor infrastructure, potholed roads and high crime rates. The lack of occupational safety nets forces food delivery couriers to choose between income and personal safety. This might explain why few women work as food delivery couriers in South Africa, as long hours and evening work could discourage women from participating in this sector. For migrant workers who lack any form of alternative support, work insecurity adds to their precarious situation.

Fifthly, findings also show that food delivery couriers lack income security, as their earnings are insufficient to maintain a decent livelihood. Food delivery couriers often work for more than one platform and rely on casual jobs to increase their earnings. It appears that food delivery work does not significantly impact the creation of decent work for its workers. Income remains low and precarious and workers must find alternative ways to supplement poor income. Finally, skill reproduction and representation security are also compromised by the reliance on informal knowledge-sharing

through WhatsApp groups. While these networks demonstrate worker solidarity, they cannot substitute for formal training programs and the reproduction of skills. The absence of formal unionisation represents a critical representation security concern, though workers show agency through informal strike actions and digital organising. In the long run, these spontaneous strikes and informal networks will not significantly change or improve the working conditions for workers.

While these labour insecurities are a concern, there is some scope for interventions to improve the working conditions of food delivery couriers. Firstly, all platform workers, especially vulnerable workers such as food delivery couriers, must be recognised as employees and not as independent contractors. Policy advocacy and legal changes should be implanted to help food delivery couriers gain access to basic service protections and benefits. Food delivery couriers frequently face dangerous situations, and all platforms should be legally obligated to ensure the health and safety of their workforce. There should also be clear regulations and platform transparency regarding algorithmic decision-making. Perhaps platforms could involve worker representatives when decisions or changes are discussed. Secondly, public-private partnerships could address infrastructure challenges while community initiatives could work to reduce public harassment and promote recognition of food delivery workers' essential role in urban service provision. For example, photos of people harassing food delivery couriers or their car registration numbers could be shared on social media or other public platforms. This could change how society views and treats food delivery couriers. Thirdly, professional development opportunities should be formalised through structured training programs that enhance both technical and soft skills, with particular attention to the needs of migrant workers. Support for formal collective organisation is crucial, building on existing informal networks to develop effective collective bargaining mechanisms. These interventions would mark a first step toward recognising and protecting food delivery couriers' vital role in contemporary urban society.

Regarding the study's limitations, this study provides scope for future studies on this topic. Firstly, this study mainly focuses on migrant male platform workers' experiences, and future studies could include female food delivery couriers and compare their experiences with those of males. Secondly, this study is also restricted to Johannesburg, and future studies could include other cities where food delivery couriers operate to explore how they navigate and respond to precarity. Thirdly, this study points to food delivery couriers' agency to change their working conditions. A more detailed analysis of their agency could be conducted by drawing on Katz's (2004) theory of resilience, reworking and resistance. Finally, studies could focus on the value of emotional labour in food delivery work and explore how food delivery couriers use emotional labour as a strategy to receive tips from customers. For example, du Toit's (2012) study on petrol attendants' use of emotional labour is an example of researchers exploring the use of emotional labour among food delivery couriers.

In conclusion, this analysis through Standing's framework reveals how platform work, while offering apparent and flexible opportunities, perpetuates various forms of labour insecurity and worker exploitation. Without effective interventions, platform food delivery will continue to limit decent, secure, and dignified work, reinforcing inequalities in an already fractured labour system.

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