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# Gig work in transnational spaces: infrastructures of migration and the simultaneous lives of migrants in the gig economy

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores how platform-mediated gig work is entangled in the migration process across transnational, national and local scales. Drawing on the concepts of *simultaneity* and *migration infrastructure* from critical transnational migration studies as well as qualitative interviews with migrants, the analysis focuses on the figures of three migrant gig workers from both EU and non-EU countries to elucidate two matters. First, we analyse how different forms of citizenship produce different ways of responding to the migration infrastructure that results in frictions and/or smoothness across different times and spaces in the migration process. Second, we analyse how migrants who perform platform-mediated gig work on a local scale in Copenhagen, Denmark, establish particular transnational lives. Thus, this article contributes a timely transnational perspective on the relationship between the growing gig economy and migration.

## KEYWORDS

Platforms; labour; migration infrastructure; simultaneity; transnational migration

## Introduction

‘Yeah ... They laugh at me because I’m an architect in Argentina and now I’m here, in Denmark, doing *Wolt*’, Felipe declared about his family’s view of his gig work on the other side of the globe on one of the food delivery platforms in Copenhagen. ‘But then, when I tell them how much money I get’, he continued, ‘they say what the fuck!’ This article explores how platform-mediated gig work, like the ‘on-demand’ food-delivery work Felipe performs for *Wolt*, becomes part of migration processes and supports transnational ways of living for those who engage in it. By focusing on three other workers – Lucas, Maruf and Thomas – and analysing the various ways that gig work becomes an integrated part of the transnational migration process, we aim to rethink some of the predominating foci in the current literature on the gig economy and migration.

The scarce, yet growing literature on the relationship between the gig economy and migration predominantly addresses three perspectives. First, there is a strong emphasis on migrants’ experiences with precarious working conditions produced by gig work

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platforms (e.g. Van Doorn, Ferrari, and Graham 2022; Zhou 2022). Second, and in continuation thereof, scholars explore how platform-mediated gig work acts (or doesn't act) as a viable 'stepping-stone' for migrants into the institutionalised labour market in the global North (e.g. Newlands 2022; Van Doorn 2021). Third, a growing emphasis is on how gig work platforms make transnational migration more 'flexible' and 'seamless' because of the way such platforms are understood to serve as 'arrival infrastructures' (e.g. Altenried 2021; Van Doorn and Vijay 2021). While this literature together provides crucial insights into the growing relationship between the gig economy and migration, focusing on how migrants arrive to new destinations through gig work, there is an overwhelming emphasis on the receiving society and less on the relationship between the sending and receiving society. To overcome this lacuna, we draw attention to the fact that the mobility and the everyday lives of migrants cannot just be understood within the boundaries of the territory of the nation states or defined by spatial fixity where 'human movement is exceptionalised' (Wyss and Dahinden 2022, 3). This is particularly evident in the underlying logic of the current literature on platform-mediated gig work and migration, which often presumes that gig platforms allow migrants to better 'cross' the borders of the nation state or to 'jump' into the 'stable' national labour market (Andersen et al. 2024). Our aim, on the contrary, is to go beyond the predominating focus on the receiving society and explore instead the *transnational* spaces that migrant gig workers, like Felipe, live in.

Doing so, we analyse how platform-mediated gig work taps into a reality *already experienced* by a multitude of migrants with temporary and/or precarious employment contracts (e.g. Deshingkar 2019; Spanger and Andersen 2023; Wee, Goo, and Yeoh 2019). In this context, gig work – such as the food-delivery work through *Wolt's* platform – emerges as just *one* form of work that allows migrants' to socially reproduce themselves in new national and local settings. Focusing on how multi-scalar mobilities – be they transnational, national or local – are mediated by a vast disparate set of actors and experienced by the migrants themselves, we draw attention to how gig work allows migrants to be locally in the right *place* at the right *time*, while simultaneously using gig work to sustain transnationally mobile lives. To understand this way of living and how gig work is entangled with the transnational migration process, we are informed by the branch of critical transnational migration studies that offers the concepts of *simultaneity* and *migration infrastructure* (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Xiang and Lindquist 2014). With these concepts in mind, we ask the following question: *How is platform-mediated gig work entangled with migration processes that condition migrants' transnational lives?*

As its empirical context, this article focuses on platform-mediated gig work carried out in Copenhagen, Denmark. Since 2001, the Danish government has implemented a series of highly restrictive migration policies, which limit the access of migrants without an EU citizenship to the Danish labour market. At the same time, the Danish labour market is a highly regulated and institutionalised through collective agreements on working conditions and salaries based on tripartite negotiations between the trade union, employers' associations and the state, which constitute the so-called 'flexicurity model' (flexibility with security). However, while this regulation secures a minimum of rights for many workers, it does not necessarily encompass migrants who perform 'low skilled' work, which leaves them in contingent and precarious situations (Andersen, Spanger, and Hvalkof 2022). This situation is further exacerbated with the growth of the gig

economy as many gig platforms are not regulated by collective agreements, which are otherwise central to the arrangement of the Danish labour market (Andersen and Spanger 2024).

In the following section, we outline our analytical framework as constituted by the concepts of *simultaneity* and *migration infrastructure*. We then move on to describe our case of the food-delivery platform *Wolt* in Denmark, the methodology and the empirical material. This is followed by three analytical sections where we focus on three migrant gig workers: Lucas, Maruf and Thomas. They all work as couriers for *Wolt* in Copenhagen, but both their transnational migration experiences and everyday lives in Denmark are very different from each other. Through their stories, we analyse how migration and gig work at different transnational, national and local scales move migrants as well as how platform-mediated gig work becomes entangled in migrants' transnational way of living.

### Simultaneity, migration infrastructure and gig work

To understand how the mobility and everyday lives of the gig workers are shaped by local, national and transnational activities, we are informed by critical transnational migration studies (e.g. Baldassar and Merla 2014; Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013; Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc 1995). Such studies challenge (1) methodologies that understand national boundaries as *the* boundaries of social fields, and (2) ideas of transnational migration as a linear movement informed by push–pull factors that effectively disconnect the sending society from the receiving society. Instead, migration is seen as a constant *process* that encapsulates mobility practices in and across often more than two nation states, which includes both the time before departure (arranging the journey), the journey(s) and arrival(s) as well as the time spent in the receiving society (shorter or longer periods of time). By combining the concepts of simultaneity (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004) and migration infrastructure (Xiang and Lindquist 2014) we analyse how platform-mediated gig work is entangled with the migration process and supports migrants' transnational lives. Inspired by Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) conceptualisation of *simultaneity*, we pay attention to how gig work co-constitutes a transnational space. The concept of simultaneity allows us to analyse how migrants can carry out gig work in the city, locally, while, at the same time, being present in transnational spaces across two nation states. For instance, this occurs through the ways that migrants maintain ties to their family and friends living in the sending society, send home remittances to family members or use different forms of citizenship to enable new mobility practices across the sending and receiving society. Complementing this perspective, we draw on the concept of *migration infrastructure* offered by Xiang and Lindquist (2014), which enables us to analyse how platform-mediated gig work becomes one of many activities that conditions workers' mobility, which is not necessarily seamless or to-the-point but often filled with frictions of stuckness, de-tours and obstacles.

While migrants often find themselves physically located within the territory of one nation state, Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) highlight how they simultaneously are engaged in social, economic and emotional activities and relationships on both local, national and transnational scales. Such experiences across national boundaries constitute what Levitt and Glick Schiller term 'transnational social fields'. According to Levitt and

Glick Schiller transnational social fields are dynamic, changeable, and highlight how migrants' everyday lives are penetrated by more than one locale. With this theorisation, they highlight that such life is not a question of *either* living and working within nation state borders *or* living a transnational life. By stressing the notion of simultaneity, they pay attention to how migrants are engaged in more than one territory *at the same time*. Doing so, following their lead, analysis profits from distinguishing between *ways of being* and *ways of belonging* transnationally. 'Ways of being' 'refers to social relations and practices that individuals engage in rather than to the identities associated with their actions' (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004, 1010), such as social networks of friends, sustaining family ties, engaging in work that cuts across nation state borders etc. (e.g. Baldassar and Merla 2014; Madianou and Miller 2012). Thus, migrants can be part of a social field but not necessarily identify with the identity politics or cultural categorisations that predominate in that particular social field. By contrast, 'ways of belonging' refers to 'practices that signal or enact an identity which demonstrates a conscious connection to a particular group' (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004, 1010). Drawing attention to their engagement in transnational social fields, we thus analyse simultaneity through migrants' ways of belonging in the sending society and 'how they engage in transnational ways of being, but not belonging' in the receiving society (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004, 1010).

Furthermore, we are informed by the concept of *migration infrastructure* (Xiang and Lindquist 2014), not only as an epistemological point of view but as a systematic analytical framework. Our aim is to analyse how platform-mediated gig work is often not the sole reason for migration but must be understood in its relation to many other activities, actors, and forms of work that occur throughout the migration process. Following Xiang and Lindquist, migration is characterised by 'multi-directional and self-adjusting movements' intensely mediated as unstable, fragmented, short-lived processes that might take sudden unexpected de-tours (see also Lin et al. 2017; Lindquist and Xiang 2017; Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh 2012). Thus, migratory movement is not conditioned by a fixed system, but rather mediated by a multitude of institutions, activities and practices which are highly context-dependent yet function through the entanglement of different logics. While this mediation of migration is often unstable and fragmented, the entanglement of different logics produces an infrastructure that 'retains a particular stability and coherence' due to a particular constellation of both human and non-human actors that facilitate and condition mobility practices *across* national and local contexts (Xiang and Lindquist 2014, 132).

To understand the *particular* stability and coherence of the migration infrastructure, we look for different constellations of human and non-human actors encapsulated in four different dimensions: The commercial, the regulatory, the technological and the social (Xiang and Lindquist 2014, 124). These dimensions operate according to their own logics, practices and interests. The *commercial* dimension operates according to the logic of profit encompassing employers, temporary agencies and brokers that sometimes solely operate within the nation state and sometimes across transnational border to recruit, organise and/or transport workers (e.g. Goh, Wee, and Yeoh 2017; van Eerbeek and Hedberg 2021). The *regulatory* dimension operates according to the logic of the nation state through the practices of the authorities (e.g. the immigration authorities, the police). This dimension also encompasses state-designed visas and bureaucratic processes that control migrants' residence and work permits in an attempt to govern a

specific ‘to-the-point’ or ‘just-in-time’ migration (e.g. Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Xiang 2012). The *technological* dimension encompasses the variegated forms of technologies involved in communication and transportation operating according to the logic of efficiency. In this case, gig platforms and means of technology play a crucial role for migrants when conducting gig work or when they need to acquire residence and work permits. The *social* dimension operates according to the logic of informality and addresses the relational networks such as contact with family members, friends and peers both in the receiving and sending societies.<sup>1</sup>

The entanglement of these dimensions across space and time establish what Xiang and Lindquist call an ‘infrastructural involution’ that facilitates and conditions the mobility practices that move migrants. To further develop this understanding of migration infrastructure – and to overcome its seemingly lacking attention to the agency of migrants – we have elsewhere emphasised how the migrant workers respond to the migration infrastructure (Spanger and Andersen 2023; see also Carling and Collins 2018; Krifors 2021). Doing so, we emphasise how the tensions between the agency of migrants and the migration infrastructure produce *convoluted mobilities* that position the migrants in precarious and contingent labour relations. In similar vein, Schapendonk et al. (2020) highlight the uneven nature of the transnational migration process, as they – from the perspective of migrants – conceptualise the migration process as spatially dynamic, where the movements of humans are shaped by multiple shifts of direction, de-tours and return mobilities in attempts to reach particular destinations.

To us, the critical insight of the theoretical framework formed by the concepts of simultaneity and migration infrastructure is that it shows how the nation state is just *one* out of many actors that facilitate and mediate the migration process. In particular, we aim to show how the operations of the regulatory, commercial, technological and social dimensions together produce a particular migration infrastructure informed by different logics that migrants need to respond to. We thus do not see gig platforms merely as arrival infrastructures (Van Doorn and Vijay 2021), nor do we understand the role of gig platforms to be anywhere like the role of migration brokers. Instead, we situate gig platforms *as a part of* a migration infrastructure that conditions migrants’ mobility, while emphasising how platform-mediated gig work enables transnational ways of belonging and ways of being simultaneously. Despite the very explicit focus on the ‘on-demand’, ‘just-in-time’ characteristics of gig work such as food delivery, ride hailing or private cleaning (e.g. Chen and Ping 2020; Zheng and Wu 2022) and the way that gig platforms create low barriers and easier access to national labour markets, this transnational perspective, we argue, shows how the production of transnational, national and local mobilities occurs through frictions of the diversified temporal and spatial arrangements necessary to put the migrant ‘just-in-place’ (Wells, Attoh, and Cullen 2021).

## Methodology

The article takes its point of departure from migrants’ work as ‘on-demand’ couriers for the food-delivery platform *Wolt* in Copenhagen. Together with private cleaning platforms such as *Happy Helper* or *Hilfr*, food-delivery platforms are by far the most widespread gig platforms in Denmark. Multiple food-delivery platforms such as *Just-Eat*,



*Hungry*, *Uber Eats* and *Foodora* operate in Copenhagen, yet *Wolt* is one of the largest companies with more than 4000 couriers nationwide (Wolt 2021). Since 2022, *Wolt* has expanded its services to include the delivery of groceries through multiple so-called ‘dark stores’ in the four largest cities in Denmark, which to a large degree follows a growing trend seen elsewhere in the global North (Attoh, Wells, and Cullen 2024; Sadowski 2020; Shapiro 2023). The main difference between *Wolt* and the other food delivery platforms is the contract conditions. Despite a legal decision by the Danish National Tax Board that deemed the couriers as wage-earners according to institutional categorisations that structure the Danish labour market, couriers remain independent contractors with *Wolt* (or partners, as the company labels them). Like many other gig platforms around the world, *Wolt* operates in an institutional void that is yet to be regulated. This leaves gig workers without sick pay or pension benefits they would have had access to if they had been directly employed by the platform.

We draw on data from 15 semi-structured interviews with male migrants in the age group 25–45 years old consisting of EU and non-EU citizens from Romania, Italy, Greece, Slovakia, Bangladesh, Argentina, Turkey and Nepal. Recruiting interviewees with both EU and non-EU citizenship was a particular sampling criterion due to the difference EU status makes in relation to border, migration and labour market policies in Denmark. According to an internal survey with more than 1500 couriers shared with us by the CEO of *Wolt Danmark*, *Wolt* courier work is predominantly carried out by men (85 per cent), which might explain why we had difficulties finding women couriers. The interviewees were recruited through (1) snowball methods with the help from a student assistant enrolled in an international MA programme and who through this knew some *Wolt* couriers and (2) by contacting couriers in public spaces as they were waiting to pick up orders. All our interviewees were actively working on *Wolt*’s platform in Copenhagen at the time of the interview.<sup>2</sup> The migrant workers were informed about the research project and its purpose, to which they have all given their consent. All interviewed migrants are anonymised. Finally, besides the interviews with migrants working as *Wolt* couriers, we interviewed the CEO of *Wolt Danmark* and had multiple informal conversations with other relevant actors, such as officers in the trade union 3F (the largest trade union in Denmark for ‘low-skilled’ workers) and activists from the grassroots organisation *Wolt Workers Group*. All the formal interviews were conducted in the autumn of 2021 and 2022. Finally, the article draws on an archive of *Wolt*’s marketing material, internal surveys conducted among couriers handed to us by the CEO, news media reporting on the affairs of *Wolt* and its couriers and the interaction of *Wolt* couriers on social media platforms such as *Facebook* since 2020.

To analyse how transnational spaces, defined by social, cultural and economic relations across national borders, impact the everyday lives of migrants carrying out gig work in Copenhagen, our semi-structured interview guide was inspired heavily by transnational migration methodologies (see e.g. Kleist 2004; Smith 1994). Thus, the interview was centred on questions such as: What kind of everyday practices (including work tasks) do interviewees experience, when and where? Who do they care for, and where? Who do they engage with, how, when, and where? Based on the interviews, we identified the following analytical themes: The relationships that the migrants form in and across transnational, national and local scales throughout their migration processes, their working experiences in particular their experiences of being a courier for *Wolt* in

Copenhagen, and the actors (humans and non-humans including family, colleagues, state institutions, social media etc.) involved in the migration process following the different dimensions of the migration infrastructure.

In the following, we turn our attention to the stories of Lucas, Maruf and Thomas. These three stories are not representative of all the experiences of the highly heterogeneous group of migrants that work as gig workers. Instead, we use these stories to capture this heterogeneity by understanding Lucas, Maruf and Thomas as different *figures* of migrant gig workers. Together, these figures capture many of the overarching conditions, logics and dynamics that are reflected in our interviews with migrants about their migration and their experiences of working as gig workers. Besides having experiences as *Wolt* couriers, the figures of Lucas, Maruf and Thomas reflect how different citizenship statuses respectively EU citizen, dual citizenship, and non-EU citizens affect their migration process, and how other temporary work experiences are crucial to this process. The following three sections are centred respectively around Lucas, Maruf and Thomas. Focusing on one figure at a time, we analyse (i) how the migration infrastructure creates both frictions and smoothness of movement, which is both conditioned by the gig economy and conditions the possibility to perform platform-mediated gig work, and (ii) how platform-mediated gig work enables migrants to live everyday lives that simultaneously cut across the transnational, national and local scales. Together the stories of Lucas, Maruf and Thomas, show how platform-mediated gig work in different ways conditions and sustains transnational ways of living.

### Smoothness, stuckness and the land of possibilities

‘The Nordic countries are really friendly’, Lucas told us, ‘and everyone has the same possibilities’, which is why he decided to migrate from Romania to Denmark in search for the best conditions to achieve prosperity. Despite having the ability to move freely around other nation states in the European Union as an EU citizen, his journey to Denmark would turn out to be far from a linear process. At first, Lucas went to the Czech Republic facilitated by a company that hires Romanians as construction workers there. ‘In Czech Republic, I stayed with a lot of Romanians’, he continued, ‘and a few of them told me about someone who had a [delivery] company [in Denmark]’. After just two weeks of construction work, Lucas left the Czech Republic and joined a group of other Romanians who were already distributing advertisements in greater Copenhagen but who lived in the southern part of Sweden. Like in many other cases within agriculture or construction (Spanger and Hvalkof 2020), Lucas’ new employer organised his housing in Sweden and the transportation to greater Copenhagen. He thus commuted 4 days a week in the regional borderlands of the southern part of Sweden and the Eastern part of Denmark. His residence and income were not registered in Sweden, Denmark or Romania. Everything was undocumented. Thus, his initial migration was conditioned by the infrastructural involution of the social and commercial dimensions that took Lucas from Romania to the Czech Republic through Sweden and on to Denmark, a movement that relied on informal network of peers in the same situation as him – searching for ways to earn an income and engaging in a range of work along the journey.



After a couple of months, Lucas eventually decided to move to Copenhagen when he got a documented employment contract at a subcontractor for one of the biggest distribution companies in Denmark. Here, he would work for a couple of months in the Northern part of Zealand before he heard about the opportunity to sign up as a ‘partner’ with *Wolt*. To Lucas, this seemed like a quick and easy way to earn even more money. However, while he previously had worked as an undocumented migrant, his documented status now meant that he had to figure out the Danish regulatory system to register as a one-man company despite his clear language limitations. As he recounted:

I went into SIRI [Danish Agency for International Recruitment and Integration] and tried to use Google Translate, but it was not good enough. I had written something down in advance from home. In the end, I got my CPR number [civil registration number] ordered. It usually takes two to three weeks to get it, but for me it took five months. I came in February and by July I had my yellow card [a card that allows access to the tax financed health system].

Thus, due to language barriers, Lucas got stuck while trying to acquire a minimum of rights and to become a documented worker, which would allow him to be ‘onboarded’ to *Wolt*’s platform. As flexible as the gig platforms brand themselves to be, Lucas got stuck trying to figure out and respond to the regulatory dimension of the migration infrastructure despite his status as an EU citizen. Hence, the intertwining of the technological, the regulatory and the commercial dimensions of the migration infrastructure created a new set of frictions for Lucas, however, when he moved from the status as undocumented to documented, which echoes other stories of migrants’ engagement with the regulatory system in Denmark (Andersen, Spanger, and Hvalkof 2022). The inaccessibility of the Danish state digital registration system complicated and created an experience of stuckness in relation to his immediate desire to be quickly ‘onboarded’ as a *Wolt* courier.

Lucas’ migration process and experiences with the Danish state system stand in stark contrast to his perception of gig work. Like many of the other interviewed migrants, Lucas reproduces the narrative of gig work as highly ‘flexible’, which has also been an initial point of analysis in the literature on platform-mediated gig work (e.g. Chen and Ping 2020; Wells, Attoh, and Cullen 2021). Here, workers are often left to believe that the algorithmic architecture of gig platforms produces seamless local mobilities to be ‘just-in-time’ and ‘just-in-place’ (see also Pirina, Della Puppa, and Perocco 2024; Zampoukos, Butler, and Mitchell 2024). In part, this perception is upheld due to the ability to tap in and out of the app whenever workers want to. Lucas compares this flexibility to a high degree of ‘freedom’ both in his everyday life and in the way that he can organise his working hours. Interestingly, however, this articulation of flexibility of gig work is not only related to Lucas’ local situation in Copenhagen. In fact, his local working arrangements are far from flexible. He works uninterruptedly 6 days a week as courier and checks *Wolt*’s app multiple times during the day. Around 10–11 am, he turns on the app close to the surge in demand around lunch time and then again around 4 pm for the dinner-time surge. His workday typically ends around 10 pm. Despite the long hours and as he would tell us later in our conversation, Lucas appreciates the profitability of gig work in Denmark (compared to similar work in Romania), which simultaneously can support a certain transnational way of living.

In the migration process of both Lucas' and our other interviewees, platform-mediated gig work is far from the only available work in Denmark that they take up *after* they arrived. For Lucas, platform-mediated gig work is favourable due to the way that he can incorporate it into his future trajectories, which are not only confined to the territory of the Danish state. Specifically, he combines such gig work with a car detailing business that he started with another Romanian migrant in a similar situation. 'This is like my second project ... I'm still trying to learn it. Maybe I will find a way to develop other projects. In the future it might be a source of money and it is much easier than delivering food for *Wolt*'. To Lucas, the work as a *Wolt* courier is therefore transitional, but not as a strategy or stepping-stone into the Danish institutionalised labour market, of which he had already been a part (as previously highlighted). Instead, the local gig work acts as a stepping-stone to start up other small businesses that are not necessarily tied to the national Danish labour market but are easily movable to other national settings. As a way of being, Lucas embeds himself in networks of other Romanians both in his responses to the migration infrastructure that moved him to Denmark and his endeavour to make the most out of his presence in Copenhagen. Moreover, to make the most out of the income as a *Wolt* courier in Copenhagen, he keeps his expenses low by subscribing to media platforms such as *Netflix*, *Spotify*, or his phone plan in Romania where the cost is significantly lower than in Denmark. Through these ways of being he is able simultaneously to maintain certain ways of belonging to his family and friends in Romania through other social media platforms such as *Facebook* but more importantly through remittances. Although he needs to make enough money to sustain a viable way of living in Copenhagen, he stresses how the income generated from both gig work and his car detailing business support his brother and sister by paying their university tuition fees in Romania, for example. As Lucas' story shows, platform-mediated gig work conducted in the local setting of Copenhagen enables a particular transnational everyday life, which is shaped by a worker's simultaneous ways of being and belonging across the borders of nation states within the European Union. While Lucas' pathway to platform-mediated gig work was messy, his EU citizenship enabled him to simultaneously be present in two nation states.

### To-the-point yet pressed for time

Unlike Lucas' non-linear migration process from Romania to Denmark, Maruf's journey from Bangladesh to Denmark was quite straight forward. Yet, while Lucas' transnational life between Denmark and Romania had the possibility of being permanent due to his EU citizenship, Maruf's is highly contingent on a temporary visa, which makes his transnational life in Denmark filled with uncertainties and frustrations due to his Bangladeshi citizenship. Maruf's way to Denmark relied on an international student visa, which in recent years has come to function as a ticket for a particular kind of 'to-the-point' migration. Enrolled in an MA programme on business and logistics at one of the Danish universities, his visa allowed him to continue his stay in Denmark for a limited period even after receiving his MA degree depending on his ability to generate a steady income.<sup>3</sup> Hence, unlike Lucas who enjoyed 'free movement' within the European Union due to his Romanian citizenship, Maruf is pressed for time.

Despite having obtained a new degree in Denmark – and despite that he already held a MA degree from the US – Maruf finds himself positioned at the margins of the institutionalised labour market, which is otherwise crucial for him to continue to stay in Denmark: ‘I was struggling to find a job’, he told us. ‘An English-speaking job, so yeah, I don’t know [why], but it is the truth. But still, most of the Danish people are nice’. Paradoxically, while Maruf stressed that Danes are nice, he repeatedly highlighted his experiences of different forms of racism and discrimination – at the university, in the public space of Copenhagen and when he applied for vacancies within the area of his expertise in Denmark. While these instances are ‘extremely rare’ according to Maruf, such experiences permeated his migration process. Here, platform-mediated gig work becomes a viable option in migrants efforts to respond to the infrastructural involution of the regulatory and commercial dimension that establish a transnational migration infrastructure in which student-migrants enrolled in higher education become both a profitable business for the state and a source of cheap labour power (Goyette 2024; Maury, Hakala, and Näre 2024; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Zampoukos, Butler, and Mitchell 2024). And as Maruf desperately wanted to stay in Denmark, gig work for *Wolt* became the favoured option. ‘They pay you good, they are flexible’ Maruf highlights, ‘I mean really good compared to, I mean other jobs, similar jobs, like odd jobs’. Like Lucas, Maruf would often compare his experiences with the multiple other temporary forms of work during his time in Denmark to the benefits of gig work. ‘I find it really good because, literally, it is really good’, as he continuously stressed in our interview. To him, these ‘odd jobs’ are just temporary means to secure an income until he finds work that corresponds with his educational background. Navigating the Danish labour market, in other words, remains a challenge to him and this is closely related to the state-designed temporality of his visa status.

In the beginning, Maruf’s transnational everyday life and educational aspirations in Denmark were supported by his parents through their real-estate business in Bangladesh. As part of the upper middle-class in Bangladesh, they paid for his travel expenses and visa papers (an estimated 2000 EURO) and the tuition fees at the Danish university (around 17,000 EURO) while also supporting his accommodation and living costs for his first 6 months in Denmark. This support was not only financial but also social and emotional. ‘We like to keep in touch all the time’, Maruf stressed as he highlighted the frequent phone calls between him and his parents, ‘we take care of each other’. Yet, due to the high living expenses in Denmark, he was quickly forced to find an alternative income beyond the financial support from his family to which the possibility of gig work presented itself after many other working experiences in Denmark. Besides renting out rooms to fellow Bangladeshis who were enrolled at the same university, Maruf took up different forms of work in his attempt to navigate the Danish labour market where he would continuously face discrimination despite his educational qualifications. ‘I was trying to find any kind of job so that I could focus on my studies, which was why I started working in a restaurant for 25 DKK (3,50 EURO) per hour’. Due to the extremely low salary in a Danish context, he quit shortly after. Instead, he found work at an e-commerce consultancy. Yet, he had multiple disagreements with his boss about how to organise sales work, which led him to be fired in the span of 2 days. In desperate need for work, one of his fellow Bangladeshi classmates at the university told him that he had

recently started working as a *Wolt* courier and suggested that Maruf could sign up on the platform, which he did soon thereafter.

Like all our other interviewees, he did not plan to work for *Wolt* or other gig platforms prior to his arrival in Denmark. Back in Bangladesh, Maruf was aware of the emergence of gig platforms like *Food Panda*. According to recent studies, the gigs offered by *Food Panda* are carried out by highly precarious workers (Fairwork 2022) and, thus, very far from Maruf's everyday life as a member of the Bangladeshi upper middle class. Tables turned, however, with his move to Denmark where he – disillusioned – experienced a discrepancy between his class consciousness from belonging to the Bangladeshi upper middle class to representing the precarious migrant gig worker positioned in the lower strata of the class hierarchy. At the same time, being racialised in a white society as a brown migrant working as a gig worker, the intersection of his body, citizenship and labour affirmed his marginal position, which is far from a novel experience of migrants trying to navigate the national labour market in Denmark (Spanger 2022).

Whereas platform-mediated gig work for Maruf is seen as a degradation in his country of origin, gig work for *Wolt* in Denmark becomes one of many fluctuating forms of work necessary to generate an income while attempting to navigate the Danish labour market and to adhere to the requirements of Danish migration policy. For Maruf, *Wolt* emerges as the most preferable option due to the transparent higher rates of payment per hour (around 180 DKK according to Maruf), which was much more than *Doorhub*, another gig platform that operates in Denmark by subcontracting couriers to *Just-Eat* and that he had briefly worked for prior to *Wolt*. Thus, the promise of a higher income at *Wolt* was crucial, but Maruf also continuously touched on 'the flexibility to adjust' that gig work offers. It supplements and allows him to also work remotely as a customer service worker for larger multinational tech companies. Phrased almost identically as Lucas, Maruf stressed: 'You know, you can work anytime – and you can stop anytime!' And yet, Maruf's circumstances force him to work all the time. Ironically, his ways of belonging in Bangladesh but simultaneous ways of being in Denmark force him to come to terms with many of the experiences that he had complied with in the sending society, specifically when it comes to his perceptions of gig work, as described above. Maruf's story, in other words, shows how gig platforms *become part of* an existing migration infrastructure; rather than facilitating mobility practices to *arrive* in new settings, gig work becomes as a means to physically *stay* in a desired place – in this case Copenhagen, Denmark.

### Privileged yet deprived

Fed up with the unstable economy in Argentina after having worked in his parents' travel agency, owned his own restaurant, and worked at a ski centre in the span of 5 years, Thomas decided to migrate to Denmark in the beginning of 2016. He already had a network of Argentinian friends living in Denmark and due to his ancestors from Italy, he was able to apply for an Italian citizenship. He tried applying already in 2008 but got stuck in the Italian bureaucracy due to his limited knowledge of the application process as well as missing documentation and ended up travelling around Europe for 3 months only to return to Argentina again. Come 2016, he decided to try again and travelled to Italy to see the application process through. With help from friends living in

Italy, he found accommodation and by hiring an Italian law company that has made a business out of helping Argentinians like Thomas, he was able to fulfil the paperwork. 'If you are not a local or like fluent in Italian maybe you will have a harder time', Thomas told us, 'I guess I saved a lot of time by having this guy help me through this paperwork'. He waited 5 months for his citizenship to be granted. In the meantime, he spent some of his savings travelling around Europe. Thomas would not shy away from the fact that what propelled him to apply for an Italian citizenship was the opportunity to have a mobile life in Europe. Yet, his migration process to Europe would be shaped by de-tours and breaks and was also briefly cut short by the pandemic in 2020.

Immediately after he received his dual Argentinian-Italian citizenship in 2016, he migrated to Denmark where he already had organised a position in the service industry through his social network of other Argentinians already in the country:

I started working as soon as I arrived. I was lucky enough to get a job. That was pre-pandemic times and, well, I got a job in a hotel nearby where I lived so, everything really worked out great. I worked a fixed number of hours per month according to a temporary contract. I was soon offered a permanent contract but then the pandemic hit. The hotel management decided to close the restaurant after the pandemic. So, I was searching for new opportunities, new jobs ...

Eventually, Thomas was forced to go back to Argentina but returned to Denmark in late 2020 when travel restrictions were lifted. As the restaurants were hesitant to employ staff again due to the unstable times right after the pandemic, one of his friends suggested that he signed up on *Wolt's* platform. Unlike the convoluted mobility of Lucas within the European Union or the 'to-the-point' migration of Maruf, Thomas's de-tours eventually spanned 8 years and were conditioned by an infrastructural involution of the regulatory and the social dimensions of the migration infrastructure. As highlighted, Thomas's social network was integral to his mobility both from Argentina to Italy and from Italy to Denmark. His migration process is, at the same time, filled with stuckness and waiting time in the attempt to navigate the bureaucracy and receive his Italian citizenship but also smooth movement once he received his dual citizenship. This, in combination with his informal social networks across Argentina, Italy and Denmark made him able to move seamlessly inside the European Union and eventually find his way to Denmark.

Hence, through multiple de-tours, waiting time, returns but also seamless movements transnationally, Thomas ended up navigating the streets of Copenhagen as a gig worker, which was not what he had envisioned when he first decided to migrate to Denmark. '*Wolt* likes to tell you that you are 'your own boss'. That is the biggest lie in the world', Thomas proclaimed. And he continued:

This just means that you are working alone most of the time. Of course, you have to sometimes coordinate with the restaurants. The restaurants try to do their best and you do your best, but you are still separate entities: You have nothing to do with each other. Of course, you create some kind of good chemistry with someone in some of the places just by seeing them often. But most of the time, you are on your own.

Thomas contrasted these experiences of gig work through *Wolt's* platform to his former work as a restaurant and bar owner, a tour guide and a travel agent working in a large office, stressing the lack of social interaction. As *Wolt* courier, Thomas said: 'you just jump on your bike – or whatever vehicle you want to use – and you only say hi, hello,

goodbye, when you drop off the food. Sometimes that is the only human interaction that I have along the day'. Creating a social life through work in Denmark often just collided with Thomas' need to generate an income. 'You can make some friends', Thomas continued, 'but then you are just missing the opportunity to make money, doesn't make sense to just be chatting along'. These reflections on his experiences with gig work sound like the end of a frustrating downward social spiral characterising Thomas's everyday life. Even so and 'fortunately', he said, 'over here [in Denmark], all in all, you can save money and go back to Argentina'. Yet, visiting his family in Argentina to some extent confirms his transnational life: 'I mean of course I may share some habits and culture [from Argentina]', Thomas uttered, 'but after a while, I get fed up and I come back here [to Copenhagen]'. Thus, gig work gets interweaved into Thomas' transnational life characterised by his ways of belonging that are somehow conditioned by ways of being constantly on the move. Paradoxically, having gig work as the main source of income locally in Copenhagen is part and parcel of his transnational life that is characterised by presence and absence simultaneously in Thomas' attempt to maintain and create social and emotional relations both *within* and *across* Denmark, Italy and Argentina.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have explored how platform-mediated gig work is entangled in migrants' transnational migration processes that condition their everyday lives. With the concepts of migration infrastructure and simultaneity, developed within critical migration studies, we have analysed the three figures of migrant gig workers through the stories of Lucas, Maruf and Thomas. Doing so, we have demonstrated (i) how platform-mediated gig work is in different ways entangled with the migration process creating both de-tours, smoothness and stuckness, as well as (ii) how migrants performing platform-mediated gig work in Copenhagen are simultaneously able to establish different ways of belonging and being between the sending and receiving societies. Thus, we have shown how platform-mediated gig work is not a straight-forward way for migrants to enter the national institutionalised labour market in the receiving society, nor do gig platforms create a more flexible and seamless migration processes. Through the analysis of the figures of three migrant gig workers, we have challenged these assumptions in several different ways.

Platform-mediated gig work is not the only reason for why people go abroad. Our analysis shows how platform-mediated gig work is just one form temporary work out of other forms of temporary work that make the migrants mobile transnationally and locally. For instance, it was other temporary forms of work that lead Lucas to become a gig worker for *Wolt*, which also enabled him to start up a small car detailing business. Similarly, Maruf depended on multiple forms of work besides gig work, so he had an opportunity to *stay* in Denmark in the first place. It was work within hospitality that brought Thomas to Copenhagen, to which platform-mediated gig work became an alternative way of earning an income only when the hospitality industry in Denmark shrunk due to pandemic.

Furthermore, approaching gig platforms as 'arrival infrastructures' in receiving societies eclipses the fact that the arrival of migrants in the receiving society is more



often than not conditioned by a variety of different actors and logics. Rather, platform-mediated gig work and companies such as *Wolt* are in different ways entangled with or related to other activities such as other work, informal migrant networks etc. that move the migrant. Drawing on the concept of migration infrastructure, we have shown how gig platforms affect migrants' constant struggles to respond to the migration infrastructure constituted through the intertwining of the commercial, regulatory, social, and/or technological dimensions during their migration process, as migrants are often not able to plan the migration process. The migrations of Lucas, Maruf and Thomas showed how the production of transnational, national and local mobilities occurs through stuckness, de-tours and smoothness. Both Lucas and Thomas experienced stuckness and de-tours, but in different ways. Lucas moved smoothly across national territories and regulatory borders of Czech Republic, Sweden and Denmark by taking up temporary undocumented work, yet experienced stuckness when he enrolled in the Danish state bureaucracy seeking to become a documented worker. Contrarily, Thomas experienced stuckness and de-tours when he applied for Italian citizenship in Italy. But different from Lucas, Thomas experienced a smooth migration from Italy to Denmark, as an EU citizen, registering as a worker in Denmark. Moving inside the borders of the European Union, the stuckness and smoothness in these two examples depended on the help from other actors. Whereas Thomas had a social network of other Argentinian migrants, Lucas was on his own. And highly different from both Lucas and Thomas, Maruf moved smoothly from Bangladesh to Denmark through the state designed migration schemes for international students.

Finally, platform-mediated gig work is entangled with the conditions that enable Lucas, Maruf and Thomas to live transnational lives, highlighting how the migration process is constant, open-ended, and encompasses both the de-tours and stuckness but also smooth movements between the sending and receiving societies. This we have shown by analysing how different forms of ways of belonging and ways of being simultaneously enable the three migrants to live in transnational spaces. To become mobile, they engage in online-offline informal transnational migrant communities that are either defined by nationality or their contingent position as 'low-skilled' workers in search for temporary work. Through these communities, they create social relations and exchange knowledge about accommodations and work opportunities along their journey and during their stay in the receiving society. They maintain contact with their family in the sending societies through social media, phone calls or by receiving or sending remittances. They are, in other words, simultaneously engaged in Denmark and Romania, Bangladesh and Argentina, respectively. The proliferation of gig platforms in the last decade would not have been possible without these transnational lives.

## Notes

1. In addition to these four dimensions, Xiang and Lindquist add a fifth, the *humanitarian* dimension. Which refers to national and international humanitarian programmes that sometimes in close collaborations with states shape migration through policy intervention. In this article, the humanitarian dimension is left out because it was nowhere to be found in the empirical material.
2. The interviews were recorded and conducted in English. They lasted one to one and a half hours.

3. If non-EU citizens have the financial means and fulfil the criteria for being enrolled in a BA, MA or PhD programme certificated by the Danish state, then the application process is straightforward. At the time of interview, non-EU citizens having just finalised a BA or MA degree certified by the Danish state could stay in Denmark for three years. Such visa is described here by the Danish Government here: <https://www.nyidanmark.dk/da/Du-vil-ansøge/Studie/Studie---jobsøgningsophold/Study---3-years-job-seeking>.

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