

The Labour Consequences of Covid-19: Migrant Workers in Tourism & Hospitality

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Purpose

This paper examines the consequence of Covid-19 for the migrants and the tourism industry following the emergence of the new business models and operational practices, in the following three areas; i) Covid-19 and post-Covid-19 labour shortages; ii) the development of migrant gig jobs, and; iii) future trends.

Design/methodology/approach

Covid-19 posed challenges for labour retention and has given rise to new outsourced and precarious forms of employment. The growth of various tourism-related apps and establishments, such as “ghost kitchens” or pop-up restaurants, has transformed the landscape of tourism work and opportunities. This short paper provides an overview of the labour consequences of Covid-19, focusing on migrant tourism workers.

Findings

Despite growing attention towards promoting sustainable, just and decent employment, global trends and changing industrial relations in the sector have led to heightened levels of precariousness and uncertainty in migrants’ work.

Originality/value

The paper contributes to the literature on tourism employment by examining the forms of new business models and operational practices that affect migrant labour.

Key words

Tourism Work; Migrant Workers; Covid-19; Platform work; Gig Workers; Precarity

Introduction

Repeated business closures and subsequent reopenings of tourism establishments during the global pandemic resulted in job losses and a volatile labour market. As the tourism industry experienced a rapid recovery, the increased demands have compelled many workers to leave their jobs voluntarily (Kwok, 2022). Furthermore, technological advancements and innovation have transformed the landscape of tourism work, giving rise to new employment venues, such as “ghost kitchens” and other

precarious forms of employment. Doubtless work practices and worker experiences have set a different course since the events of the pandemic (Ladkin *et al.*, 2023). This paper focuses specifically on the consequences of Covid-19 for a significant portion of the workforce: migrants working in the global tourism industry, considering the emergence of new business models and operational practices in three key areas: i) Covid-19 and post-Covid-19 labour shortages, ii) the development of gig jobs for migrants, and iii) future trends.

Covid-19 and post-Covid-19 labour shortages

The global health crisis exposed the dark side of tourism employment, particularly regarding the lack of policies and risk management. In early 2020, European tourism workers rushed to return to their homes before border closures, highlighting inadequate leadership, management planning, and poor internal communication (Stergiou and Farnaki, 2021). Others, even further away from their countries, were trapped at sea, immobile, and unable to return home. Migrant workers faced precarious situations, with layoffs, visa overstays, reduced salaries, and exclusion from national pandemic responses, including those on legal contracts (Baum *et al.*, 2022). Staff retention became a challenge as post-Covid recovery exceeded expectations, resulting in labour shortages in the tourism and hospitality industry (for example, in Germany; Sullivan, 2021, in the UK; Evans, 2021; in the USA; Chen and Chen 2021). Brexit compounded staffing issues in the UK (David, 2022). Reduced labour mobility intensified labour shortages as the recruitment of migrant workers for low-paying jobs declined (Kwok, 2022).

Migrant Gig Workers

The Covid-19 outbreak led to technological innovations and the rise of platform/gig jobs, particularly in the tourism and hospitality sectors. The contactless delivery process meant that businesses connecting restaurants and diners, such as Uber Eats, Deliveroo, Food Panda, Grab, Glovo or Bolt, were working during the pandemic, thus providing continuous employment opportunities (Li *et al.*, 2023). Migrant labour played a vital role in the platform business model's viability as the steady influx of investment capital (van Doorn and Vijay, 2021; Iazzolino and Varesio, 2023). As suggested by Baum and Giddy (2021), we are already witnessing the normalisation of gig and platform work in tourism.

Specialised customer apps tailored for tourists provided opportunities for sector-specific jobs, including tour guides provided by platforms, such as *Guru Walks* or *Free Walking Tours*. Even "local" tours, such as the initially fee-free *Free Walking Tours* in Berlin, have relied on employing a foreign workforce: English-speaking mobile cosmopolitans who are guests in global cities; Berlin or Copenhagen (Nilsson and Zillinger, 2020). Additionally, the rise of food services via apps led to significant changes in food production, including the emergence of "ghost kitchens" (Ashton *et al.* 2022). Often staffed by migrant workers, these underused real estate venues exclusively prepare food for delivery platforms, for example, in Green Gurus in Berlin-Kreuzberg (Altenried, 2021) or Karma Kitchen in London (Bradshaw, 2019). The working conditions in the ghost kitchens within western countries bear a resemblance to those found in sweatshops in developing nations (Giousmpasoglou *et al.*, 2023).

From a migrant's perspective, gig jobs are attractive due to their immediate accessibility. Migrants can quickly sign up and start earning in a new city without social or material capital. For instance, Glovo in Poland offers food couriers daily wages, with their first earnings within 24 hours of registration (Glovo, 2023). Van Doorn and Vijay (2021) point out that in any other type of informal employment, migrants would not be able to start making money in that way. However, in their study of the food delivery platform Relay in New York City, they describe the foreign-born “disposable objects”, with low pay and little protection. Compared to native workers, migrants employed in gig jobs typically experience lower job quality and satisfaction, often driven to these positions due to a lack of alternative employment options (Kowalik, *et al.*, 2022).

Slogans like "Be your own boss in any city of the world" (GuruWalk) or "be an independent professional" (Glovo Poland) attract workers, who are branded as "peers" and offered flexible jobs that align with their personal lifestyles (Minoia and Jokela, 2022). Despite this kind of branding, these gig workers are subjected to constant monitoring through *gamification*, turning their labour into a game-like series of tasks with scores, extra points, and customer feedback (Lata *et al.*, 2022). This intensifies labour processes and contributes to exploitative practices. The gig economy raises concerns about labour protection, as platform workers are classified as independent contractors, lacking the rights of recognised employees. Workers themselves feel unfairly treated, leading to protests and lawsuits primarily focused on pay grievances (Bessa *et al.*, 2022). This can be particularly problematic in new immigration destinations: insufficient infrastructure drives migrants towards gig economy jobs with no contracts and long hours (Kowalik *et al.*, 2022).

Looking into the future

Automation in the tourism industry is likely to further impact on tourism employment by reducing the number of vacancies. Various food delivery companies have already implemented robots and their customers have a choice of how they want their food to be delivered (McFarland, 2022). Pizza vending machines, such as those used by Flaven Five or Pizza Automat 24/7 Frische Pizzen in remote Alpine areas of Switzerland or Germany, pose a threat to employment in rural areas (Ganter, 2023). The full impact of artificial intelligence and robots on tourism and hospitality employment remains to be seen. While some traditional hospitality establishments are in decline, new innovative products, such as pop-up restaurants (opened for one night or a few weeks), which offer short-term jobs requiring specific skills, have been introduced. Self-employment is also becoming popular among migrant workers, but limited mobility and discrimination are seen as problematic outcomes of this trend (Oskam *et al.*, 2022).

Conclusions

The Covid-19 pandemic was initially seen as an opportunity to reshape tourism towards inclusivity, sustainability, and resilience: to “*pause and reorientate*” (Rastegar *et al.*, 2021) and “*build back better*” (Dempster and Zimmer, 2020). However, an examination of post-pandemic trends in tourism employment reveals the persistent precariousness that amplifies historical practices (Baum *et al.*, 2022). Evidence shows that migrant workers have long faced exploitation, poor working conditions, and human rights violations. The pandemic's impact on tourism, coupled with the challenges of the

gig economy, advertised as flexible and empowering, has further exacerbated the precariousness experienced by migrant workers.

While most studies have focused on male workers, there is a gap in understanding the experiences of migrant women in gig jobs. Adopting an intersectional approach that considers the interplay of age, gender, and other demographic factors could provide valuable insights into employment quality for individuals and worker groups. Additionally, there is a lack of empirical research on the emerging phenomenon of ghost kitchens. While some European companies, such as Deliveroo and Uber have taken steps to improve working conditions, no such improvements are occurring in other regions, such as Thailand (Leenoi, 2023). Policymakers worldwide face the urgent task of regulating platform work. On the other hand, signs of labour activism have been reported (Iazzolino and Varesio, 2023); food delivery workers in Italy employ tactics to bypass platform rules, showcasing their agency, entrepreneurship, and labour activism. Whether this is an isolated case or an emerging trend of activism among exploited workers with a power to influence policymaking remains to be seen.

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