Trajectories of precariousness of tuk-tuk drivers in Portugal
A case study

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ABSTRACT
In the aftermath of the Great Recession, the gig economy expanded in Portugal as an alternative form of income generation to overcome the accumulation crisis, especially in the tourism sector. One component of this, less well studied than platform labour in the delivery and accommodation sectors, was the introduction of tuk-tuks, or auto-rickshaws for passenger transport, using a hybrid business model combining a face-to-face approach on the streets, the use of internet websites that function as marketplaces, and digital platforms which connect them to the demand and supply of labour for other forms of local transport. Tuk-tuk drivers can experience precariousness, uncertainty, informality and intermittence and generally work as (bogus) independent workers. Drawing on in-depth and follow-up interviews, conducted between 2019 and 2020, this article aims to understand the structure of this service and to analyse the tuk-tuk drivers' occupational trajectories in Portugal. It concludes that these workers are trapped in a

permanent condition of precariousness, with continuous reinforcement of trajectories of vulnerability and suffering.

KEY WORDS
COVID-19 pandemic; digital platform work; gig economy; Portugal; tourism; trajectories; tuk-tuk; vulnerability
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Introduction

The spread of neoliberalism has dramatically reconfigured jobs depriving them of the security of decent work and full employment, recasting them as flexible, while obscuring the increasingly precarious nature of work. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the expansion of the service sector have increased informal, unstable and precarious working conditions, especially in low-paid activities (Antunes, 2018). Changes related to the technology itself and the way the market is organised have also brought new challenges and potential opportunities, including the possibility to accelerate structural trends, as in the case of the expansion of digital platforms, the development of artificial intelligence, robotics and automation. In this sense, technological advances and the increased mobility of capital and workers, through globalisation, outsourcing and flexibilisation, have contributed to growing precarisation and a transformation of the labour market.

The digital transformation has enabled the growth of crowdsourced (or 'gig'), decentralised, freelance and on-demand labour relations, raising issues related to decent employment standards (or their lack) and the legal status of workers including the absence of a fixed contract and a salary, uncertainty regarding the renewal of contracts, income inadequacy or volatility, and lack of access to labour and human rights (Kalleberg, 2009; Benavides & Silva-Penaherrera, 2022). Gig workers experience high levels of atomisation and pervasive monitoring, non-standard forms of employment and intensification of requirements for flexibility. They are also subject to an entrepreneurial ideology. This growth has been driven by a variety of forces, including demographic shifts, changing labour market regulations, macroeconomic fluctuations and technological changes (Abílio, 2017; Doellgast, Lillie & Pulignano, 2018; Slee, 2017; Antunes, 2018; Gandini, 2018; Kalleberg, 2018; Keune & Pedacci, 2019; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020). Digital platform workers represent a growing precarious and vulnerable workforce, who might be considered part of the 'cybertariat' (Huws, 2014). In Portugal, several authors have analysed the socioeconomic effects of technology, the business model of platform work, the challenges for workers' organisation, as well as the geographical transformation of the cities in which the platforms operate, emphasising the need for regulation and social policies (Estanque, Costa, Fonseca & Santos, 2018; Boavida & Moniz, 2019; Sell, 2019; Teles & Caldas, 2019; Tomassoni, 2019; Wood, Graham, Lehdonvirta & Hjorth, 2019; Cant, 2020; Cini & Goldmann, 2020; Kellogg, Valentine, & Christen, 2020; Leonardi & Pirina, 2020, Roque, 2020, 2023;

Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020; Allegretti, Holz & Rodrigues, 2021; Boavida et al., 2021; Perocco, Antunes & Basso, 2021; Roque, Carmo, Assis & Caleiras, J, 2022).

Nevertheless, in the midst of the debate regarding the regulation of digital platforms, mainly focused on couriers and vehicle drivers, the tuk-tuk or auto-rickshaw service used for passenger transportation seems to have been neglected. In 2021, the European Commission drafted a new proposal with widespread political support, approved on 9 November, entitling platform workers to have a contract and access to social benefits. In May 2023, the Portuguese Green Paper on the Future of Work and the governmental Agenda for Decent Work implemented the presumption of an employment contract provided by the Portuguese Law 13/2023, of 3 April, in Article 12 of the Portuguese Labour Code in relation to some platform workers. This made Portugal the first legal system to have such a wide presumption being applied to digital platforms allowing some platform workers to access a contract and labour rights. However, this did *not* include tuk-tuk drivers.

Tuk-tuks (also known as auto-rickshaws) owe their origins to two- or three-wheeled passenger carts, generally pulled by one man with one passenger, which were a popular means of transportation in many parts of nineteenth-century Asia (Khayal, 2019). Tuk-tuks are very popular vehicles in South and Southeast Asia, such as Thailand and Sri Lanka, although they originated in Japan. Initially, they were often used to transport luggage and function as a taxi, but more recently they have been assimilated into the tourism industry.

These evolved to be powered by cyclists and motorcyclists rather than pedestrian humans, and are now typically powered by petrol or electrical engines, albeit still with human drivers. In Europe they are particularly associated with the transportation of tourists.

Tuk-tuks were brought to Portugal around 2012, as a means of promoting a differentiated type of service within the tourism sector in Portugal. They spread rapidly, but without any form of regulation. In Portugal, the tuk-tuk business model is a hybrid one. The service may be accessed via a face-to-face approach on the streets or through the use of platforms that connect part of the demand and labour supply, controlling the drivers and functioning as a marketplace. It is thus partly a platform-based service but also shares some features with other, more traditional types of informal service.

Taking account of this differentiated context, our research aimed to investigate how Portuguese tuk-tuk drivers perceived their situations, revealed through their occupational experiences and social identities and their visions of the world (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994; Lindlof, 1995:33).

To this end, two research questions were addressed, to measure the extent to which these workers have careers marked by continuous job insecurity. Despite being visible in the social and urban life of our cities, how does this service render these workers invisible as a social and labour reality composed of socio-labour specificities? And to what extent (if at all) have public policies that regulate work on digital platforms addressed and responded to the needs of these workers and their demands?

In sum, the aim was to understand how these workers experience the conditions of precariousness and vulnerability and how the tuk-tuk business model operates, as well as the extent to which this service is based on exploitative and informal practices. This

case study uses the dimensions of coping with precariousness, distribution of resources and income, perceptions regarding their present and future lives, social protection, daily and relational life and the multidimensional impacts resulting from the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic to analyse the trajectories of tuk-tuk drivers. The article is structured into eight sections. After this introduction, which presents the objectives and the problematic, the second section provides the contextual frame, analysing the gig economy in Portugal. Next, we present our methodology. The fourth section describes the tuk-tuk service while the fifth presents six occupational trajectories of drivers in the Portuguese labour market. Our sixth section explores the realm of regulation and organisation. This is followed by a discussion and a final section which presents our conclusions.

The gig economy in Portugal

In the aftermath of the Great Recession, tourism was one of the sectors in which the Portuguese government laid its biggest hopes and investments for economic growth to solve the 2008 financial crisis (Fernandes et al., 2019). From 2014 onwards, the processes of touristification, 'Airbnbisation' and displacement (Richards, 2014) produced a transnational gentrification, deriving from the progressive transformation of residential spaces for tourist use (Gotham, 2005; Cócola-Gant, 2018) and leading to a concomitant transformation in the life and geography of cities with the rise of the 'city-as-an-attraction' (Barata-Salgueiro, Mendes & Guimarães, 2017; Mendes, 2018; Sell, 2019; Salerno, 2022). The emergence of the gig economy was one of the most important new transformations in the labour market associated with this change, mediating and organising work through internet-based platforms, and linking labour demand and supply by means of an on-demand business model. Globalisation and the technological revolution brought changes to the nature and organisation of work, leading to more flexible and fragmented labour markets with an upsurge in alternative or atypical arrangements of labour (Huws, 2019), that differ from full-time regular employment (Kalleberg, Reynolds & Marsden, 2003) and the blurring of boundaries between dependent and independent employment (Vosko, 2006; Conen & Schipperseds, 2019). These were based, above all, on freelance work, allowing people to work at any time and place, through digital platforms and on-demand, where work is structured around temporary employment, contracts, and projects, or 'gigs' (Rosenblat, 2018; Scholz, 2017; Woodcock & Graham, 2020).

These new forms of labour organisation include online web-based platforms, where services are performed remotely via the internet and outsourced to a geographically dispersed crowd (crowdwork) for working activities that imply performing a series of online microtasks; and also physical or location-based applications (apps) which allocate work to individuals in a specific geographical area, typically to perform local, on-demand and off-site work involving service-oriented tasks (Srnicek, 2017; Casilli, 2020). However, this development also creates the conditions for platforms to bypass a vast series of duties connected to employment laws and labour protection, and a

progressive eradication of social protection, and other features of a wage-centred society (Rogers, 2015; Istrate & Harris, 2017; Chicchi, 2020).

According to Huws (2020), the gig economy does not only affect the skills and working conditions of the workers directly managed by online platforms, but also other sectors and services of the wider society. These developments are concentrated in cities, where there is a critical mass not only of consumers (both local residents and tourists) for these services, but also of potential workers, the precarious reserve army.

In Portugal, several types of precariousness characterise a variety of unstable contractual situations in the labour market, which were aggravated in the aftermath of the Great Recession: fixed-term contracts, temporary work in agencies, involuntary part-time contracts, false green receipts,[1] false interns or workers on a trial period. In extreme situations of informality, the worker is not covered, by virtue of legislation or practice, by formal provisions that regulate the exercise of work (Soeiro, 2015; Carmo, Caleiras, Roque & Assis, 2021). The 'uberisation' process marks a departure from the standard employment relationship between the employee and the employer, accommodating many exceptions to the standard capitalist model, whereby the worker becomes an entrepreneur of his or her self and/or an independent contractor (Huws, 2016; Antunes, 2018; Abílio, 2020). This development has revealed some of the serious structural impacts of the temporary nature of contracts and of precarious working conditions, presenting high levels of informality and the predominance of bad or 'bullshit' jobs (Graeber, 2018), along with gaps in coverage by the social protection system (Kalleberg, 2011). Such jobs are particularly prominent in the tourism, mobility, and hospitality sectors, affecting especially female, racialised and migrant workers, with a rapid rise in the aftermath of the Great Recession in Portugal (Carmo, Caleiras, Roque & Assis, 2021). These recent changes in labour markets and work organisation have created greater work pressure, and, for many workers, material conditions, such as pay and job security, have deteriorated (Handel, 2005; Kalleberg, 2009; Greenan, Kalugina & Walkowiak, 2013). This situation has resulted in many workers seeking additional paid activities on top of their main occupations – a development that can be termed necessity-driven pluriactivity. Pluriactivity involves working simultaneously for several employers, in a plurality of relationships and jobs, often assumed as an essential survival strategy or a supplement for low-income families. Pluriactivity is transversal, crossing sectors, occupations and demographic groups, and can assume different configurations, whether predominantly or occasionally (Carmo, Caleiras, Roque & Assis, 2021).

The inconsistency between professional status and the factual reality experienced in cases of 'false' dependent work through 'green receipts' is clear, since many of these workers are, in fact, employed by others, but without enjoying formal employee status, increasing the risk of dismissal and lack of social protection. Continuity is a mere utopia,

1 An independent worker can be a self-employed professional or someone who provides services (e.g. on a freelance basis) or sells goods, either exclusively or in conjunction with a main activity. Self-employed workers must issue green receipts to prove that they have received payment for providing a certain service. However, despite officially being a service provider/independent/self-employed worker, in reality, they are assigned the status of a subordinate worker, dependent on the employer. https://eportugal.gov.pt/guias/trabalhador-independente

as weak employment ties make insecurity permanent, integration into the labour market uncertain and the lack of alternatives restricts the prospects for a better future (Carmo, Caleiras, Roque & Assis, 2023). The lockdowns resulting from the pandemic, the decrease in the number of flights, cruises, occupied rooms, trips on scenic buses and entrances to monuments promoted a decline in activities related to tourism, such as in the mobility, accommodation and catering sectors, which had played very important roles in increasing employment in recent years. Most drivers who were informal and workers and with green receipts, especially migrants, became deprived of access to social security support from the government, while others had to survive from their savings, or from solidarity with their family. The growing number of globally dispersed task-based workers have come to an organic feeling of solidarity with each other (Gray & Suri, 2019; Jack, 2020). According to the interviewees for this study, the community of tuk-tuk drivers in Lisbon revealed a strong sense of community expressed through helping people who were in need, surpassing their material and spatial structures and reinforcing new forms of solidarity. From these cases we can see that these workers live in a constant state of vulnerability, being almost forced to accept informality in order to survive.

Methodology

The research presented here is based on a qualitative analysis of six case studies of the occupational trajectories of tuk-tuk drivers in Portugal extracted from a broader sample of 53 in-depth interviews. It comprised semi-structured interviews and follow-up cases during the context of the Great Recession and the first lockdown of the pandemic. The interviews, conducted between November 2019 and December 2020, covered dimensions of occupational trajectory, social protection, experiences of precariousness and ways of coping with it as well as distribution of resources and income, daily and relational life, social representations of institutions, perceptions of the past, present, and future. The 14 follow-up cases were conducted between March and August 2020, focusing on the effects of the pandemic crisis and its multidimensional impacts. This monitoring resulted in obtaining more detailed and dynamic information, very relevant for the preparation of sociological portraits. These case studies were drawn from a non-probabilistic snowball sample of 53 workers from different sectors and services of the society, such as tourism, digital platforms, construction, cleaning, logistics, agriculture, and others, who were interviewed for the research project EmployALL that aimed to analyse employment crisis and the Welfare State in Portugal: with the aim of minimising the production of social vulnerabilities and inequalities. With the onset of the pandemic and the lockdowns, the methodology had to be adjusted to its constraints. The first interview guideline sought to cover the aftermath of the Great Recession, and its more lasting effects over time, while the second focused on capturing the most immediate impacts of the pandemic on the trajectories of precarious workers. However, the fieldwork was interrupted by the unexpected outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced a change in methodological and procedural terms of information collection, resulting in two distinct temporal moments: before and during the pandemic. The interviews were conducted in person, in the streets and coffee shops

of Lisbon, at the research centre where the researchers worked, but also via telephone, social media and online platforms, such as Zoom, WhatsApp and Skype. At the time of the interviews, all workers were employed in the tuk-tuk service and living in the Lisbon region. According to our interviewees, this is an activity often carried out by migrants, and younger workers, aged between 25 and 35. The sociodemographic characteristics of our sample comprised four women and two men, aged between 22 and 47 years old. These were the persons who offered the most availability for being interviewed. Although our respondents often described it as an occupation dominated by male workers, in fact, there are large numbers of women working in this sector. Although there are high levels of moral and sexual harassment, as discussed later, it is visible on the streets that there are a greater number of women working in this service, carried out only during the day, as it offers more security than other services, such as couriers. Most of them had a college degree and did not have any prior experience in this service. The data were organised through qualitative analysis techniques (Bardin, 2018). A flexible coding scheme using MaxQda qualitative software was used for analysing the interviews, based on the operationalisation of the central concepts of the case study (Schreier, 2012; Carmo, Caleiras, Roque & Assis, 2021).

Portraits of tuk-tuk drivers

We now present six examples of occupational trajectories which illustrate the formation and reproduction of tuk-tuk drivers under digital platform capitalism (Baglioni, Campling, Coe & Smith, 2022). These portraits result from interviews conducted with tuk-tuk drivers in Portugal during 2019 and 2020.

Case One concerns a 47-year-old woman, single and a mother of a grown-up young adult who was living abroad. She was born in Africa and came to Porto as a child. Her father was an accountant, and her mother was a housekeeper. When she was just 15 years old, she decided to leave school and entered the labour market working as a barmaid, a cleaner and a waitress at several bars, discos, restaurants, and hotels, in Portugal and abroad. Her trajectory illustrates very clearly a desperate search for a career and a contract which was always marked by the seal of precariousness. In 2019, with the promise of her first contract, she applied for a tuk-tuk driver position. This gave her an apparent feeling of autonomy and liberty to manage her own tours and to engage actively with the customers and led her to believe that this could be her biggest opportunity for building a promising career and achieving stability. With the arrival of the pandemic she got sacked and was unable to access any social benefits because she had not made the requisite payments to social security. Later on, some workers in her situation were able to benefit from an extraordinary fund set up to support workers' income from the state, but she was still not eligible for this. The pandemic was a period of great struggle for her, during which she had to ration the food for herself and her dog, surviving from her savings and donations from her friends and family. When the restrictions were raised, she decided to go and live in France with her mother to start a new life.

Case Two concerns a 24-year-old female, who was single. Her father was a chef, while her mother was a secondary school teacher. She entered the labour market while

she completed her degree in performing arts, working as a waitress with her father in Brazil. Informality and precariousness were a constant in her occupational trajectory, experienced in the hospitality, arts, and entertainment sectors. In 2019, the tuk-tuk service became a very attractive opportunity for earning money, offering a kind of work that seemed independent and creative while engaging with the tourists. Nevertheless, the company completely ignored her ideas, and subjected her to moral and sexual harassment. Furthermore, she ended up dismissing herself without any access to social benefits in reaction to the promise of a contract that never arrived, constant changes in working conditions, and errors regarding payments. She survived from her savings and with the help of her parents.

Case Three concerns a 40-year-old woman who was born into a family of farmers. She obtained a degree in design but started working at the age of 21 in the hospitality and cleaning sectors in Portugal and abroad, mostly working informally and without a contract. Tuk-tuk driving caught her attention, presenting itself as a service on the rise where she could apply her savings and build a promising career. After working as an independent worker for a company to gain some experience, she applied for a loan from the bank and bought an electric vehicle to start working her own business. Nevertheless, the pandemic hindered her plans, and she was not considered eligible to receive social benefits, surviving with the help of her husband.

The subject of Case Four was a 32-year-old female, who was single and a migrant worker from Brazil. Her mother was a lawyer, and her father was a trade unionist. She had completed a degree in International Relations. Although she had worked as a manager in the construction and restaurant sectors, as an entrepreneur and a freelancer in cultural events and participated in international student programmes, she decided to move to Portugal to look for new professional opportunities and academic development. When she first arrived, the tuk-tuk service allowed her to earn an easy income, even without a contract, and was flexible enough to enable her to combine it with attending classes for her master's course. However with the onset of the pandemic most tourism activities stopped, especially in the tuk-tuk service, and she was left without any access to social benefits. When the restrictions were raised, she decided to return to Brazil.

Case Five concerns a 41-year-old man who was attending a master's course and had a degree in cinema. He was living with his mother and his girlfriend. His mother was a nurse, and his deceased father had been an engineer. Since the age of 23 he has been working as a freelancer in advertising and cinema post-production. In his view, the artistic way of living of a digital freelancer was very similar to that of a tuk-tuk driver, with the absence of a contract and no access to social benefits. He also worked as a receptionist for Airbnb, and a manager in restaurants, hotels and bars. In 2017, he decided to apply for a tuk-tuk driver position, as a step towards fulfilling his dream of owning a touring van and travelling around the world. When the pandemic arrived, he was dismissed, suspending his plans and his master's course. His relationship also came to an end, leaving him dependent financially on his mother, with whom he was living. After the restrictions eased up, he returned to the tuk-tuk service and now has his own touring van.

Case Six, probably the most peculiar one, concerns a 22-year-old man, the son of as a computer technician and a secondary school teacher, who is in a long-distance

relationship with a woman he met on the internet. He finished secondary school and chose informality as a way of life. According to his anti-capitalist beliefs, he finds it to be more liberating and detached from the mundanity of everyday life. He has worked in the fast-food industry, agriculture, and in street art performances all across Europe. In 2019, while doing casual work, he decided to move into the tuk-tuk service, making an active choice to work informally, being paid in cash in hand for his daily tasks. When the pandemic hit the tourism sector, he found himself in a very uncomfortable situation and had no other alternative than to survive with his parents' support. This case is an example of a worker who now regrets the years he worked informally, without making any provision for the future, who now states that he truly values the security that social protection offers.

In sum, these six portraits reveal that, in most cases, informality can lead to situations of extreme labour precariousness. Even before they entered the tuk-tuk service these interviewees' trajectories were already strongly marked by the accelerated multiplication of transitions, fragmentations, instability, informality, and insecurity in the labour market and by the accumulation of multiple vulnerabilities.

Regulation and organising

Tuk-tuks offer a differentiated type of service within the tourism sector, where the customer can experience a guided tour to the most sought-after attractions and historical sites in a more cost-effective and user-friendly way than with taxi or Uber drivers. Tuk-tuk companies do not offer any training courses. The driver goes for a ride with a person from the company to see if he or she can operate the vehicle and then must survive alone. Most of these workers need to keep constantly updated on the historical aspects of the cities and villages in which they operate and also plan the routes they make. This activity is relatively skilled, requiring a knowledge of foreign languages and specific historical and cultural knowledge of the cities. After a trial period, there is the promise of a labour contract to keep the driver working hard and competing for something which, in most cases, is utopian.

> *I received the payment in cash. Without a contract … It took two months to experiment with [green] receipts, from the end of the trial we would have a real contract, and we could discount to social security … Five days from the end of January, they said: We never told you were going to have a contract, you heard everything wrong! [Case Two, 24 years old]*

In this service, drivers can operate inside or outside the platforms, which can be a marketplace, or the service can be offered through a platform offering tours. Most drivers work through green receipts, that is, they are self-employed individuals, entrepreneurs, operating on their own, with their own vehicle, offering a private service. In other cases, they can still be employed through green receipts and work for a company, they can work through a platform, as in the case of Bolt tuk-tuks,[2] or they can

2 https://bolt.eu/pt-pt/blog/tuk-tuk-bolt/

be engaged through a written or verbal rental agreement with a company, hoping to get a contract in the near future. In some cases, such as Uber drivers, they rent their own accounts. This is a service built on two different component parts: tours, which is the main base; and transfers, as a driver explained.

> *Basically, the tour is that route where we explain the city, and the transfer is from one point to another, it's a … it can be like a taxi, but it's not. [Case Five, 41 years old]*

Tuk-tuk drivers are highly dependent on the tourism sector. Their business model is hybrid, that is, the drivers can negotiate in person with the customers on the streets, they can also use on-demand services via their smartphones using platforms such as Bolt, or they can advertise their services in a marketplace selling tours to hotels, restaurants, flights, tourist entertainment companies and maritime-tourist operators or individual tourists. The platform acts as a facilitator of the relationship between customers and workers (Risak & Warter, 2015). If the service is hired through a tour company or via a ride-hailing platform, the price of the ride is stipulated by the company. If the tour is hired in the streets with the driver, it can be negotiated within the range of prices provided by the company.

> *Here a while ago I was contacted by a company, which is number one in the ranking of restaurants too! Okay, they are platforms for tourism that also help to attract customers. A person who has a good ranking on these platforms gets many more customers. [Case Six, 22 years old]*

Despite the high levels of precariousness and exploitation, some of these drivers mentioned that their remuneration tends to be higher than in other jobs, albeit highly dependent on tourists. Most transactions take place in an informal cash-based economy. All the interviewees claimed to regularly negotiate their fares with prospective customers, having a price range established by the company, which they considered to be very low; otherwise, they would risk losing the only customers they might get in a day.

> *It is a very complicated situation. I have been earning around 20 to 30 euros a day, and I work almost 26 days a month. I get cash daily. I have a bank account with zeros … 10% of what I earn goes into this envelope [in the pocket of my trousers]. My annual income is much lower than the average for sure. [Case Six, 22 years old]*

Those who do not own a vehicle must pay commissions to their employers, while others are responsible for the payments for the vehicles, gasoline or charging, not to mention the internet connection and the smartphone. In some cases, there are special vehicles which require that workers wear a uniform, paid from their own pocket. For safety concerns, these vehicles can only take four people at a time; children under 6 years old and pregnant ladies are not allowed.

> *The hat gave me a lot of allergies, and I was always full of dandruff, and I even said: 'The hat makes me itch, no, it stinks already, we sweat!'. They answered, 'Oh! Then buy another one!' We were promised a winter coat. Nothing appeared. They gave us shirts smaller than our sizes. So, I had to buy a 60 euro coat to be*

> *warm outside and black shoes … My parents also helped me. But I said: 'If I came from a place where I didn't have that opportunity or privilege, how would I work?' I only had one pair of black pants, and I couldn't always wear the same ones, so I had to buy two more pairs. [Case Two, 24 years old]*

Tuk-tuk tours can be scheduled or requested in person; depending on each customer's wishes, they are operated by private companies in marketplaces or requested through an app. When the customer uses the app, the pickup location is defined by them, but the destination will depend on the route that will be defined at the beginning of the service. The cost of this service is 90 euros per hour of tour. If it is necessary to extend the tour after 60 minutes, the value will be calculated per minute (1.50 euros for each additional minute). If the customer does not show up within the defined period and does not cancel the trip, they will be charged a fee of 15 euros for scheduled travel requests.[3]

In the absence of direct face-to-face supervision, the management of work is either attempted through direct control, via apps and sensors, or through indirect control which ensures motivation and commitment, using ranking and reputation systems in the cases of hiring this service through an app or via a tour website (Krzywdzinski & Gerber, 2021). The management of workers relies on competition, individualism and entrepreneurialism, as opposed to teamwork and collaboration. The lack of transparency and accountability on the platform's side is visible throughout daily interactions drivers have with their customers, whose negative ratings or formal complaints can lead to sanctions and dismissals without any access to social protection. Collective bargaining is not allowed among tuk-tuk drivers and they tend to engage in unbridled competition negotiating fares between themselves and customers, selling their services above the minimum value established by the companies. In view of the high turnover in the profession, such empowerment of the driver allows them to find additional arguments to stay in the game (Warhurst & Thompson, 1998).

> *But there is competition, for example, when a boat arrives. I'm not really into going there, but, once in a while, I go there, and it's a very tight environment, because it's all on top of each other … when you are already talking to a client, and another driver comes and tries to steal the client! … At the time we couldn't negotiate, 'For four people it's 80 euros. I'm really sorry, I can't lower the price', but I had colleagues from my own company saying, 'Ah, but look, did you know that my car is cheaper? I'll make you 40'! From the same company! They wouldn't even let my clients say no. Before they even decided, they came, and ruined the arrangement. [Case Five, 41 years old]*

These games of power, envisioned by Burawoy (1979), assume the contours of a pitched war. In a service where legal regulations are scarce, norms of informal competition are negotiated by the actors involved, determining the working conditions and survival of workers. This scenario of extreme precariousness and harsh games of

3 https://bolt.eu/pt-pt/blog/tuk-tuk-bolt/

power between drivers throws them into a competitive spiral, also leading to situations of hostility towards fellow drivers, revealing a lack of solidarity and cooperation.

When they see others much more loaded with people, they also think,

> *'Okay, these vehicles have people, while mine is empty', because they barely know if it's on the way back or not. In the beginning, these other colleagues, tuk-tuk drivers, they slandered us several times, because they were, well, I don't know, afraid that the car was going to steal customers. They tried to hit me three times. Drivers, tuk-tuk drivers! [Case Two, 24 years old]*

Another issue affecting the daily lives of tuk-tuk drivers is harassment at work, which raises issues related to labour relations and increasingly refined mechanisms of pressure, manifested through the physical and psychological violence exerted on individuals. Situations of sexual harassment comprise episodes of violence at work carried out, above all, against women. These are episodes of psychological violence in a stigmatised work, where being female, being a migrant and/or being a racialised person represent weakened conditions providing easy opportunities for the exercise of this type of harassment.

> *Then, they talk to us every day as if we were stupid. My boss, there's one who doesn't know how to speak, he only knows how to scream … It's not just because I'm a woman and because I'm young, that I'm naive or stupid, or whatever! [Case Two, 24 years old]*

Another female tuk-tuk driver also mentioned the issue of moral harassment manifested not just in coercive control and lack of recognition, but also in the constant pressure to attract clients.

> *In the beginning, the treatment was more or less, and the environment was even good, but I felt more and more pressure about the work I was doing … It was neither recognised nor paid, and this is violent! [Case One, 47 years old]*

It should also be noted that these workers were completely lacking in protection, whether in employment or unemployment, despite facing challenging health and safety conditions. For example, being exposed to any weather conditions, physical aggression and robberies, while driving with an insurance policy, that, in the case of an accident or illness, only covers the vehicle, not the driver.

> *I had a colleague, who got sick due to the lack of working conditions, and at the end of the month they took the money from the days she received. I remember two weeks before, she was cold every day and then she got aggravated pneumonia … We told the bosses that the cars were in terrible condition, we didn't have windshield wipers, there was no place to hold things, if it was raining and we were on a tour, they recommended: 'Park and wait for the rain to stop!' … I'm in a car that doesn't have any kind of protection … [Case Two, 24 years old]*

Several drivers highlighted that, especially in the low season, there could be days without a single customer or income; they are not paid for their idle hours, considered

as unproductive time. The worker only receives payment for the gigs he/she takes (Moore & Newsome, 2018; Abílio, 2020). This situation can also lead to an excessive internet connection, being constantly logged in, to achieve a decent income, requiring more than eight hours of work per day (Roque, Carmo, Assis & Caleiras, 2022). Even those who are in a business relationship with the hotels or tour platform operators have no guarantee of work on a daily basis. Technological and algorithmic forms of platform management allow for the collection metrics, optimisation mechanisms and performance ratings to obtain data from customers and users to establish decisions about the allocation of tasks and worker retention (Gandini, 2018; Wood, Graham, Lehdonvirta & Hjorth, 2019; Kellogg, Valentine, & Christen, 2020; Newlands, 2021; Roque, Carmo, Assis & Caleiras, 2022). There are forms of control and exploitation, manifested in the need to be permanently connected to one or more apps, to receive constant telephone calls and to be geolocated through a GPS control system placed under the seat or on the cell phone. Also, the driver's performance is subjected to a rating evaluation by the customers. These drivers can cross countless jobs, in different sectors and in different contractual situations, ending up trapped in the gig economy web. Being a tuk-tuk driver is not a safe, but an intermittent and unstable occupation, meaning that work or future plans cannot be guaranteed.

> *Everyone is running away to tuk-tuks, because there you have freedom, you don't have schedules, I mean, you have money in your pocket every day! This month alone I earned 2,000 euros … We manage to earn wages that we would never get in another job in our lives! … These new platforms, as my grandmother says, are all glued up together with spit, everything was done like that, little legislation. There is money, there is no control, you do it, and then what? … How can I make plans? What plans? I never managed to plan anything in my life. [Case One, 47 years old]*

Although labour regulation regarding tuk-tuks[4] has been in preparation since 2017, little has been done for these workers, who remain invisible and, from a social point of view, tend to be neglected by labour regulation policies. To embark on any activity in this service it is necessary to register a licence with the National Register of Tourist Entertainment Agents and obtain insurance for the vehicle. The lack of proper national regulation leads to a situation where Tuk-tuks are seen as a menace in relation to other forms of individual transportation, such as taxis, although they are designed for very well-defined tourist routes, especially since the aftermath of the Great Recession in the Lisbon district.[5] In 2015, the president of the Lisbon municipality determined that steps should be taken with a view to placing signs prohibiting access and consequent circulation of tourist light vehicles, such as motorcycles, quadricycles, tricycles or mopeds for tourist entertainment and including mini tuk-tuk cars, in the areas where

4 https://www.publico.pt/2017/07/11/local/noticia/regulamento-dos-tuktuks-de-lisboa-so-devera-entrar-em-vigor-no-proximo-mandato-1778786

5 https://ionline.sapo.pt/artigo/606390/tuk-tuks-a-regulacao-que-tarda-em-chegar?seccao=Portugal_i

they cause the most disturbance.[6] The same document also provided for the creation of 116 parking places for tourist services that do not use heavy vehicles. Only 51 remain in operation in a service where drivers grow exponentially and are appreciated neither by the police nor the locals, as mentioned by the interviewees. The disappearance of these parking places has been quick and silent and without any warning or justification from the local authority. In fact, the Porto City Council will limit the circulation of tuk-tuks and excursion buses in the historical centre, also limiting double-decker buses and ending the circulation of the tourist train in 2026.[7] In Sintra, protests from local residents and businesses have been taking place and the Sintra Business Association launched an initiative that includes banners on windows and balconies and posters in the windows of shops, restaurants and cafes, demanding that the City Council take measures against mass tourism and traffic chaos.[8]

As in the case of couriers, these workers do not have a physical space where they can park their vehicles while they wait for a tour, socialise, have their meals, or even use the toilet. As one interviewee mentioned, the tuk-tuk service needs to be more regulated. Drivers need to have proper parking places, since they feel insecure, unprotected and are always escaping the police to avoid physical aggressions[9] and tickets, paid from their own pockets. As in the case of other digital and platform workers, regulation would also provide contract tuk-tuk drivers with stability and access to social security benefits, in employment and employment situations, a meeting point to have access to rest and means to address their physiological needs, and also fixed fares.

> *Our work should be much more regulated. There is not enough parking for everyone, there are many of us, and there is also a need to look for customers. We have some inspections, monthly, to see if we have a contract, to see if we have insurance … In relation to the City Council, we have always had this issue of parking, which is crucial for us. We are always running away from the police, and it is ridiculous, for a person to be on the street exposed and running away from the police! There are colleagues of mine who are fined a lot. [Case Three, 40 years old]*

The lack of systematic data collection requires the re-evaluation of the legal framework applicable to public and tourist transport and the preparation of a recommendation report to be delivered to the government to change the existing legislation for taxis so that it also includes other forms of Individual and Paid Transportation of Passengers in Uncharacterised Vehicles from an Electronic Platform (TVDE) and is extended to cover Tuk-tuks. In fact, the lack of legislation for this

6 https://observador.pt/2015/11/20/restricoes-aos-tuk-tuk-lisboa-ja-vigor/; https://www.am-lisboa.pt/documentos/1424256942W6xHN0jx1Uk83QQ2.pdf

7 https://rr.sapo.pt/noticia/pais/2024/07/22/porto-vai-limitar-tuk-tuks-e-autocarros-de-excursoes/387256/

8 https://rr.sapo.pt/noticia/pais/2024/07/20/habitantes-de-sintra-protestam-contra-turismo-de-massas-e-caos-no-transito/387068/

9 https://www.jn.pt/3749617930/agente-da-policia-municipal-filmado-a-dar-duas-cabecadas-a-motorista-de-tuk-tuk/

service has led to several cases of violent conflict between tuk-tuk and taxi drivers, with the latter complaining that Tuk-tuks are not subjected to the same rules that constrain them.

The activity of a tuk-tuk driver can be a very atomised and competitive one, besides lacking regulation. In Portugal, unionisation rates have been decreasing, mainly due to labour issues relating to informality, the atomisation of the worker, flexibility and high rates of turnover (Roque, 2020). It seems likely that the continuous substitution of workers in the platform economy is an impediment to solidarity among workers. According to our interviewees, most drivers expressed scepticism regarding the role and action of trade unions. Their view was that unions do not reveal a greater interest in representing them, leading to low levels of unionisation. Nevertheless, there has been a growing tendency for platform workers to organise through digital platforms and social media apps (Maffie, 2020). Tuk-tuk drivers are not an exception. They organise and communicate with each other using Facebook and WhatsApp groups and some are involved in the National Association of Touristic Animation Drivers and Touristic Animators (ANCAT). Created in September 2017, this is the only Portuguese association involved with these workers' issues, trying to fill the gap left by the unions, defending and informing workers about the interests of tourist animation vehicle drivers and tourist animators, engaging in frequent dialogue with the government, and promoting training courses related to this service.

Discussion

In relation to the research questions addressed in this article, the analysis of these portraits has enabled us to demonstrate that tuk-tuk drivers experience trajectories of constant instability, precariousness and fear of dismissal. They exist in a condition of 'liquid fear', that is, insecurity regarding the present and uncertainty about the future (Bauman, 2007) obliging them to live in the here and now (Carmo, Caleiras, Roque & Assis, 2021). Typically, before entering the digital world of work these individuals had held a range of previous jobs, mostly precarious, surviving through informality. These individuals had perceived tuk-tuk work as a way of escaping unemployment and integrating themselves into the labour market, without realising the real dangers this could bring in the near future, especially the eventuality of not being able to access basic labour rights. Most had already experienced the loss of jobs, especially after the 2008 crisis, and could no longer work in their traditional occupations, being absorbed into these new types of labour. When the pandemic struck, most had been considered ineligible for receiving any governmental support. Some had been obliged to return to their parents' houses and/or to survive with the help of their families, friends or professional networks. This situation had served as a warning, making them aware of the need to value the role of social contributions and the need for a signed contract. Although the gig economy can lead workers to benefit from job opportunities that they might not be able to access otherwise, on a flexible-schedule basis, allowing them to match work with the performance of other activities and to balance their income, it had been revealed as having clear downsides. Most tuk-tuk drivers had felt obliged to

engage in pluriactivity to compensate for low income, carrying out additional precarious and informal tasks. From our interviewees, we can conclude that in this service pluriactivity is also more frequent among women, migrants and older workers to balance their income or to carry out care work. As previously mentioned, in some cases, this is not their main activity. Women seemed particularly likely to suffer from the impacts of higher turnover, especially in activities related to the hospitality and cleaning sectors, and to be exposed to risks of harassment.

Our analysis of precarious working conditions of tuk-tuk drivers reflects a process of erosion of wage patterns, full-time, and standardised working conditions and access to statutory protection rights. Often, digital and platform drivers earn below the minimum wage, having to support all the costs related to the activity, such as the vehicle and its maintenance, gas and internet access (Figueroa et al., 2021). Most transactions take place in an informal cash-based economy; this volatile workforce does not receive a fixed monthly salary, but a payment corresponding to the on-demand tasks performed, on a 'pay-as-you-go' basis that provides no compensation for the idle periods when looking for a task/gig (Irani & Silberman, 2013; De Stefano, 2016; Abílio, 2017). Despite these disadvantages, these drivers cannot be regarded as unskilled, having medium or high levels of education. Precariousness can thus be seen to affect social groups that were previously protected from job insecurity and fluctuation, reinforcing the idea that the working class is still, or has become even more, heterogeneous, differentiated, and fragmented (Antunes, 2018).

Digitalisation has blurred the labour market dualisation between standard and precarious workers (Schwander, 2019), contributing to the development of a situation in which labour protection and employment regulation are not assumed by default (De Stefano, 2016). In fact, they have been building trajectories of precariousness from the very start of their incursion into the labour market, often experiencing situations of accumulated vulnerabilities. The findings of this article contribute to the emerging debate on precarious labour relations and regulation in the gig economy, shedding light on the central role that factors external to the labour process and institutional context play in shaping the structuring of labour antagonism, in a still poorly institutionalised service characterised by transnational homogenous challenges.

Conclusions

This case study has revealed that most tuk-tuk drivers experience situations of flexible, low-paid and intermittent working conditions, facing a life of exploitation and oppression in work. Freelance professionals are increasingly seeking diversified and fragmented paths that align with their individual professional values, life circumstances, and personal motivations. Nevertheless, most are obliged to be independent workers as a result of the flexibilisation of the labour market (Kalleberg, 2000; Blaising, Kotturi, Kulkarni & Dabbish, 2021). The permanent condition of being trapped in precariousness, with continuous reinforcement of trajectories of vulnerability and suffering, affects not only their present experiences but also their futures. These are situations that most workers cannot change, especially in a scenario of labour market

segmentation, deregulation of employment protection and lack of health and safety policies. Tuk-tuk drivers are a striking example of workers who struggle for a contract in a service that renders them invisible, even though they are very present in Portuguese cities and villages and make a significant contribution to the country's tourism sector. In order to make a living, they are compelled to enter lower-level positions and industries where their skills are not valued. Due to the inadequacy of public policy responses to the specificities of this service, they find themselves without any alternatives than to accept informality and insecurity.

These findings raise important considerations for policymakers. The core claims of a regular contract and specific regulations need to be addressed. If these keep on being disregarded in debates on the legislation, companies will keep on circumventing the majority of labour laws passed in general, perpetuating situations of (bogus) self-employment and informality (Moore & Newsome, 2018). These workers need to be given visibility. Governments and unions need to approach these workers and recognise their labour specificities, distinct from those of other drivers and couriers, ensuring that their rights to social dialogue and collective bargaining are enshrined in the European legislation along with those of other platform workers.

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