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Migration, Mobilities, and Changing Political Landscapes

“I Had a Friend...”: The Role of Social Networks in Immigrants’ Gig Work Choices

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Why do immigrants engage in gig work? Existing research across platform studies, labour sociology, and migration studies has concluded that financial instability and structural labor market barriers leave migrants with few options. The low-threshold gig economy—accessible at almost any time—offers a viable choice as they navigate prolonged challenges, such as the lack of local experience, unrecognized qualifications, language barriers, and limited networks. While migrants’ motivations for gig work are well explored, how they are introduced to it remains understudied. This gap is particularly notable given the extensive scholarship on ethnic capital, which facilitates initial labour market integration but can also constrain long-term mobility by reinforcing ethnic niches. How do ethnic networks shape migrants’ entry into and, if possible, out of gig work

Drawing on 20 in-depth interviews with Mandarin- and Cantonese-speaking gig workers in Metro Vancouver, this study examines how migrants learn about gig opportunities and what shapes their decisions to enter gig work at one or more platform(s). Despite differences in life stage and socioeconomic background, a recurring theme emerged: Personal networks, often referred to as “a friend,” played a crucial role in fostering interest and trust in gig work, even when migrants were already aware of the specific platform options. These networks also influenced transitions from ethnic-language platforms (Fantuan, KABU) to popular, English-language platforms (UberEats, DoorDash). The “friend” was frequently described as a migrant peer who showed the participant how it was possible to navigate linguistic and cultural barriers when working at non-ethnic platforms.

By highlighting the social mechanisms that channel migrants into and out of ethnic gig work, this study contributes to debates on immigrant economic integration and highlight opportunities for policymakers and community organizations to broaden employment pathways for recent immigrants beyond the ethnic enclave and gig economies toward more sustainable careers in Canada.