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Forging mobilities, becoming ideal workers? Temporary migration and the gig economy

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Forging mobilities, becoming ideal workers? Temporary migration and the gig economy

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the connection between a specific migration trajectory, the Working Holiday Visa Scheme and new forms of precarious, digitally-mediated jobs. Drawing on 20 narrative interviews conducted between 2021 and 2023, it follows working holidaymakers from Chile as they migrate to Germany. The findings reveal how research participants forge mobilities against temporary visa regimes and how these practices in turn shape their subjectivities and their relationship to platform work. I argue that this particular experience of liminality produces an ideal workforce for platform companies requiring a high turnover of hyperflexible, digitally savvy workers. Focussing on one particular and yet understudied visa category contributes to theorisations of the co-constitution of platform labour and immigration regulations.

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Introduction

Service economy jobs such as food delivery and domestic cleaning are increasingly mediated by digital labour platforms. As technology companies, these platforms function according to network logics. This means their ability to raise investor capital and ultimately make a profit depends on market domination. As a result of this winner-takes-it-all logic, the entire platform economy is predicated on fast growth.

This momentum, scholars have argued, can only be maintained through hyperflexible work arrangements that can start today and end tomorrow (van Doorn, Ferrari, and Graham 2023). To fill these jobs, platform companies rely on fragmented and migrantised labour markets, marked by a differentiation of workers along gender, race and immigration status (Altenried 2024; Gebrial, 2024; Orth 2024; Maury 2024). Platform companies eschew regulatory mechanisms for employers resulting in precarious labour conditions for workers. These include job insecurity, lack of social security protections, and low wages (Ravenelle 2019). Therefore, workers often do not stay in these jobs long-term resulting in high turnover rates. To quickly achieve market dominance, companies need large numbers of workers that can start the next day but are

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also unwilling to improve working conditions to retain them over longer periods of time. Thus, companies require a constant supply of new workers with basic digital literacy skills, raising the question where these workers come from (see Orth 2024). In Central and Northern Europe, studies point to temporary migration schemes such as the Working Holiday Visa (WHV). Platform researchers have noted a significant share of working holidaymakers from Chile and Argentina within their gig economy worker samples (see e.g. Altenried 2022; Floros and Bak Jørgensen 2023; Gruszka, Pilling, and Gerold 2024; Niebler and Animento 2023; Orth 2022, 2024; van Doorn 2020). While the salience of this mobility pathway in urban platform economies is well-documented in the platform labour research field, it is not yet well understood why working holidaymakers seem to gravitate to this type of work and how they experience these jobs.

This paper addresses this research gap by tracing the experience of Latin American gig workers who reside in Germany on a WHV. Exploring the working holiday migration trajectory as a newly emergent labour mobility in Europe is not only of academic interest; it also has political implications for the protection of workers in the present and future: as the EU Directive on Platform Labour seeks to ameliorate widely decried precarious working conditions in the gig economy, it is highly relevant to understand how and whether it will help to protect migrant workers. As the largest economy in Europe, Germany provides a good case to explore how different socio-legal statuses shape migrant workers' engagement in and relationship to platform-mediated jobs. Against this background, this study explores how the regulations of the WHV shape gig workers' subjectivities.

WHV visa schemes allow young adults, typically between the ages of 18 and 30, to spend a limited amount of time in a partner country. As WHVs are based on bilateral treaties, the specifics for each partnership vary; what is important is that eligibility is premised first and foremost on an applicant's age and secondly on their citizenship. Put differently, the WHV does not hinge on a candidate's educational or professional qualifications as other visas typically do, nor does it tie migrants to a particular job, education programme or sponsor. At the same time, it allows working holidaymakers to take on any jobs, including full-time work, making the visa exceptionally well-suited as a labour mobility visa (Orth 2024).

Conceptualising the WHV as a category of labour mobility, the paper does not primarily focus on the WHV's cultural significance and the liminality of young adulthood as other studies have done (Kato 2013; Wilson, Fisher, and Moore 2009). Instead, it traces how the particular logic and regulations that underpin the visa shape migrants' engagement with platform work. Since a migrant's legal status has important ramifications for their experience of work, it is important to understand the socio-legal effects of particular regulations. In the case of the German WHV, these regulations are first and foremost related to time and temporariness (Stingl and Orth 2024): while open to any citizen of the twelve partner countries¹, the visa is only available during a relatively short time in a person's life course, between the ages of 18 and 30. In addition, it is a one-off 1-year-visa that is neither extendable nor renewable. As I will argue throughout the paper, this particular experience of liminality produces an ideal workforce for platform companies requiring a high turnover of hyperflexible, digitally savvy workers.

The paper first offers an appraisal of the emerging scholarship on migration and the gig economy. Drawing on the field of youth mobility studies, the literature review also introduces the WHV in more depth. Following this, I present the research design and sample this study draws on. While migration trajectories are of course rarely linear, I show that research participants tend to see a working holiday in Germany as a stepping stone to forge longer migration projects. My findings reveal how the inherent precarity of this newly emerging labour migration pathway affects workers' relationship with work. Diverting from the studies that cite largely material reasons for why migrants take up platform work, the findings show that gig jobs fit particularly well into working holidaymakers' larger life world. Overall, my analysis affirms the need to understand the co-constitution of new forms of labour migration and new forms of work.

Zoning in on immigration status in the platform economy

Digital labour platforms do not formally act as employers but claim to simply 'connect' their users. As freelancers, workers are paid for one 'gig' at a time, not entitled to any social security (including health insurance, accident insurance or unemployment benefits) and managed through a set of technological tools known as algorithmic management. Freelance status and algorithmic management combined result in low wages and overall precarious working conditions. A lot of platform labour literature has studied these mechanisms and detailed the experience and resistance of workers within digitally mediated labour systems. This literature has also noted the overrepresentation of migrants in this type of work (van Doorn, Ferrari, and Graham 2023) and sought to explain why migrants choose gig jobs despite their downsides.

Foregrounding technologically mediated application processes and the lack of formal requirements in platform work, scholars have described these jobs as exceptionally accessible for people without knowledge of the local language, established social networks, and limited options in the labour market (Altenried 2024, 2022; Benevegnù and Kampouri 2021; van Doorn and Vijay 2024). Platform work can provide a stopgap or fallback option for migrants (Floros and Bak Jørgensen 2023; Maury 2020; Newlands 2022; van Doorn 2022), and some scholars even suggest automated onboarding systems requiring no contact with hiring managers limit migrants' exposure to everyday racism and cultural stereotyping (Benevegnù and Kampouri 2021; Bonhomme and Muldoon 2024; van Doorn and Vijay 2024).

While these studies have made important contributions to the specific experience of migrant workers, particularly their motivations to take up platform work, they largely do not differentiate between different groups of migrants or different legal statuses in the country of residence (Orth 2024). Migrants work on all kinds of visas, including those that are not at all, or not primarily, intended to be labour migration visas. As a result, there is what Könönen (2019, 786) calls a 'juridical division of labour', especially in low-paid service work. In other words, for people with non-permanent leave to remain, it is the conditions of their immigration status that primarily shape their labour conditions. Therefore, it is vital to show how different visa categories interact with new forms of digitally mediated labour. This leads to a more nuanced understanding of how new forms of labour regimes are co-regulated and co-constituted by immigration policies.

While any category of immigration could help theorise this connection, the WHV is a particularly interesting case not only because working holidaymakers form a sizeable group of workers in this sector but also because it remains a category of 'hidden' labour mobility. Despite the wealth of research on the WHV as a form of 'guest worker' regime in Australia and Canada (James 2024; Robertson 2014, 2016; Vosko 2023), it remains overlooked in the European context. In Germany specifically, student and au pair visas have been studied as forms of labour mobility (Hess 2009), but there has been no research on the WHV to date (see also Stingl and Orth 2024). This is all the more surprising given Germany has greatly expanded its working holiday schemes over the last decade,² signing agreements with Chile in 2014, Brazil in 2015, Argentina in 2016, and Uruguay in 2017.³

Closing the research gap on the German WHV is both relevant and timely if the Australian and Canadian cases are anything to go by: since their respective governments began to promote WHV schemes to fill labour shortages in the 1990s and 2000s (Chartrand and Vosko 2021; Wright and Clibborn 2020), industries that employ working holidaymakers have been associated with widespread employer abuse and often pay below minimum wage (Howe et al. 2018; James 2024; Vosko 2023; Wright and Clibborn 2020). Working holidaymakers are at great risk of falling through the cracks of labour inspections – however fraught – associated with other visas. The legal and discursive framing of working holidays as simply being 'tourist', 'lifestyle', 'cultural exchange', or 'youth mobility' schemes hides their importance for labour migration (Reilly 2015; Wright, Groutsis, and Kaabel 2022). This study is thus not only relevant to migration scholars but also to policy makers interested in labour protections.

Research design

The findings of this paper emerged from a larger project that traced migratory routes into Berlin's gig economy. To understand the particular migration trajectory of young Chileans better, I pursued a 'follow-the-people' approach (Marcus 1995): I conducted fieldwork with prospective migrants in Chile (September 2022–October 2022) and traced their journeys to Germany (November 2023–May 2023). The analysis draws on 20 biographically focussed interviews with working holidaymakers. Migrants were interviewed at different stages of their journeys: some were interviewed in Chile as they prepared for a working holiday in Germany⁴; some were already in Germany on a WHV at the time of the interview; and some had first arrived in Germany on a WHV and since transitioned out into other visas.⁵ Interviewing people at different points of their journey allowed me to understand working holidaymakers' 'reality checks' and their changing relationship with work over time.

The gender make-up of the sample was balanced (42% male, 58% female) but their socio-economic background was relatively homogeneous: all but one were university educated, and most had held professional jobs in the fields they had trained in before moving to Europe. Even though the German WHV is formally available to any Chilean national between the ages of 18–30, it comes with financial requirements that inadvertently select for those backgrounds (Orth 2024, 482). Relatedly, all research participants considered themselves *white*⁶ and/or of European descent as socio-economic status and race are highly intertwined in the postcolonial societies of Latin America (Ceron-Anaya, de Santana Pinho, and Ramos-Zayas 2023). Indeed, the high education

levels, socio-economic background and racial makeup of this study's research participants are consistent with other studies on WHV migration (Dewey and Fozdar 2023; Robertson 2014) and Latin American migration to Europe (Bayona-i-Carrasco and Avila-Tàpies 2020, 214).

During the first field phases of the project in Berlin, I had learnt that most of my Latin American research participants were very active in the digital community groups. For the additional periods of field work, I recruited participants through posting calls on these social media groups. Interviews were conducted in English, Spanish, and German, often switching back and forth between languages reflecting the varied language competencies of interviewees.⁷ All research participants have been assigned pseudonyms, and their quotes in this article have been slightly abridged and edited for grammatical correctness and language consistency.

In the following sections, I will draw out my main findings relating to the WHV as a new pathway of labour migration to Germany. I present the findings structured by the two themes of migration trajectory and relationship to platform work. First, I draw on pre-departure interviews with prospective migrants in Chile to explain how people envision their migratory projects and what happens when they brush up against the enforced temporariness of the visa in Germany. I then offer a brief analysis of this particular migration trajectory as insecure and precarious, requiring migrants to constantly negotiate the structural constraints of their temporary status. I then highlight how this shapes migrants' relationship with gig work. My findings reveal that the regulatory framework of the visa – selecting for middle-class people, who need to be young, able-bodied, and unattached, and remain in a state of precarious visa status – provides an ideal workforce for the gig economy.

The German WHV as a stepping stone

A 25 year-old woman I will call Carmen was very excited when I met her a few days before her flight to Germany at a cafe in Santiago, Chile. When I asked her about how she had decided to come to Germany, she recounted how frustrated she had been the last few years. Despite her Master's degree and professional job, she was not able to afford a place of her own and hoped the working holiday would enable her to make a transition into economic independence. Yet, instead of pursuing 'upward' career progression by migrating, she wanted to focus on personal growth and development, improving her yoga practice and her English skills, and rejected notions of professional aspirations:

I can't live with my parents anymore! I want to live alone, work and study, and I think it's more possible in Europe than it's in Chile now [...] But I am also just going to enjoy this year [on the WHV]. I want the 'travel life'. I don't really expect to save money. It's okay if I do it, but I don't feel like I'm obligated. I prefer to take [yoga] classes.

Carmen's story is emblematic for all of my interview partners: their motivations to undertake a working holiday were extremely varied and ranged from aesthetic consumption, identity and culture to emancipation from financial dependence on their families. As Robertson (2021, 73) argues, working holidaymakers' motivations to move thus often oscillate between 'economic desires and lifestyle desires, sojourn and settlement'.

While the motivations to do a working holiday amongst my research participants thus mirror those of other working holidaymakers, they differ in two important ways: my research participants by and large had no prior knowledge of Germany or interest in the country; this was surprising given the importance of imaginaries of faraway places in the literature on lifestyle, youth, and working holiday migration (see e.g. Kawashima 2010; Salazar 2014; Yoon 2015). In addition, potential income opportunities did not feature very prominently either as accounts of economic migration would suggest. Instead, almost every single working holidaymaker I met pre-departure highlighted Germany as a stepping stone towards other destinations. This seemed especially important after experiencing material and political instability during the social uprisings in Chile in 2019 and the ensuing COVID-19 pandemic. Many wanted, as Javier put it, a chance to 'escape the country, to escape from reality'. And this is where my respondents differ from previously studied working holidaymakers from the Global North:

Chileans do not have as many options for international mobility. Many were acutely aware of their position within a global hierarchy of mobility, and knew how hard it was to emigrate to North America, Europe, or Australia. Gloria explained this calculation:

If you don't have a[n EU] passport or get married [to an EU citizen]—you know, these are the only two options—from this reality, [the WHV] is kind of a good way out. And maybe you will get another better visa afterwards if you do the things 'right'.

Unlike working holidaymakers from countries with strong economies and passports, who often pursue the working holiday as a 'rite of passage' (Clarke 2005; Rice 2010; Wilson, Fisher, and Moore 2009), my research participants saw working holidays as a first step towards longer term migration projects if they 'did it right'.

As the WHV was often seen as a first step, migrants foregrounded practical aspects such as how much time, money and effort it would take to get this first visa. WHV agreements always depend on bilateral negotiations between two governments. Therefore, WHV schemes vary quite substantially in what they require of an applicant in terms of savings, language skills, and eligible age ranges. Research participants carefully weighed their different options with Naomi's approach being illustrative of many similar accounts in my sample:

I had an Excel [sheet] with all the possible countries that Chile has a working holiday visa agreement with, with different fields: what is the age limit? Do I need to know the language to get into the country? ... And that's how I went about eliminating candidates.

Naomi chose Germany because the application is cheap compared to other destinations and does not require language proficiency test scores. In addition, candidates can apply at any point in the year, and there is no annual ceiling or quota on the number of visas issued.

Research participants conceptualised these differences in the administrative processes as a hierarchy between different destination countries. At the top of this hierarchy were English-speaking countries which research participants saw as the most desirable destinations but also as the most difficult visas to obtain.⁸ By comparison to places that required language test scores or more substantial amounts of savings in their bank account, the German WHV was seen as the 'fastest' amongst all WHV schemes and thus a perfect stepping stone.

This was seen as a big advantage when the particular temporal horizons that govern the visa were interrupted by COVID-19-induced travel restrictions as Naomi reflected:

In 2020, I was 28 and this visa is only until you're 30. So I started to get very anxious and the fear of 'maybe I'm not going to make it' [set in]. [...] And then, because of the pandemic, the main question was: which [WHV schemes] are open, because most of them were closed.

Many migrants felt their time was 'running out' as their 30th birthdays, the usual cut-off age for WHV, approached. This anxiety was amplified by COVID-19-induced travel restrictions during the years of fieldwork (2021–2023).

To summarise, the findings of this study suggest that Latin Americans share some characteristics with other groups of working holidaymakers in terms of having heterogeneous motivations for their trip but also add some new dimensions when compared with more 'easy-go-lucky' backpackers. First, working holidaymakers pragmatically chose Germany because of low administrative hurdles within the application process. Second, Covid-19 related restrictions further added to a time squeeze, which heightened this pragmatism. Thus, the German WHV emerged as an ideal stepping stone either to save enough money to apply for more long-term visas in other countries or to make longer-term plans for staying in Germany.

Forging mobilities beyond temporary status

When I spoke to them before they left Chile, research participants often did not give too much thought about what they would do when their 12 months in Germany ended. However, the German WHV is not designed to be a future-facing visa: there is no way to extend the visa or reapply for it, and migrants are supposed to return home after one year. Those who wanted to stay in Germany began to perceive their transient, temporary legal status as a problem for wanting to stay long-term (for a more detailed analysis of this process, see Stingl and Orth 2024). To navigate these structural constraints, migrants managed to find various bottom-up practices to forge longer-term mobility projects. Common options included applying for a German language study visa, available for up to two years, enrolling at a university if they had managed to improve their English or German enough to apply, or applying for a freelancer visa. The proximity of different countries where WHVs have in recent years become available means Europe lends itself particularly well to this stepwise migration strategy. Germany's geographic location at the centre of Europe in particular means that crossing back and forth between different legal jurisdictions is comparatively cheap. For example, research participants left the Schengen Zone using visa-on-arrival opportunities with nearby countries that are not part of the Schengen agreement, such as the United Kingdom or Bulgaria to re-apply for WHV elsewhere. Carlo, for example, specifically planned to do a WHV in Austria to be able to continue being in a German-speaking country while improving his German and waiting on the long process of getting his professional degree accredited in Germany. Others aspired to use their WHV in Europe to improve their English skills and save up enough money to meet both language and saving requirements of countries like Australia and New Zealand.

While many working holidaymakers thus regarded the ability to change over to other temporary visas as a practical opportunity to achieve particular goals, it is important

to emphasise that these bottom-up solutions can lead to increasingly precarious circumstances. The outcomes of this process are highly stratified by migrants' prior social positions. At the highest end were those with ancestral claims to EU citizenship,⁹ which allowed them to remain in Germany or take advantage of 'onward mobility' in other EU countries (Neuhauser, França, and Cortés 2023). At the lower end were those who had aged out of WHV age limits and had neither the language skills to apply for admission to a local university nor existing qualifications in professions that would have allowed them to change over to a work visa. With few other options, migrants in this situation often opted for a language learner visa and took German classes. As this visa does not allow for documented work, migrants are forced to live off of their savings or continue to work informally putting them at high risk for exploitation.

A research participant I call Mariela, for example, had been in Germany for six years at the time of our interview, having first arrived on a WHV and then transitioned through various short-term visas, including several years on a language learning visa. During the interview, she was visibly shaken as she recounted all the visas and jobs she had been through since arriving in Berlin:

I feel super tired. Sometimes I get a bit depressed because this situation has been going on for so long and I don't know if I'll get the next visa. [...] I set myself a deadline for this year to find a steady job; if I don't find that, then I have to consider going back because it's no longer healthy for me. I have no security for existential topics: my housing situation, work and visa, everything is complicated and even after ten years is still unstable, and then it's already too much, too long. (Mariela, 36 years, from Chile)

While working holiday visas thus do not easily fit within a dichotomy of lifestyle vs precarious labour visa, Mariela's frustration highlight that they remain an inherently temporary pathway with detrimental effects. Transitioning through different visa categories is a common experience for migrants but their agency in forging longer-term mobility against and beyond this temporariness can take a toll on an individual's well-being (McIlwaine 2015; Robertson 2014; Robertson 2021; Vosko 2022, 2023; Wright, Groutsis, and Kaabel 2022). As most of my research participants were still at the beginning of their migration trajectory, many had not fully experienced the downsides of this state of limbo. Yet, those who had already pieced together several temporary visas mirror some of the effects that prolonged states of limbo described for young Argentines on temporary visas in Australia and Latin Americans in the UK (Dewey and Fozdar 2023; Neuhauser, França, and Cortés 2023). As they navigate structural barriers as active agents aspiring to different possible futures, they produce 'differentiated journeys' (Martins Junior 2020, 2024; Stingl and Orth 2024). In the next section, I explore how this transient status affects migrants' relationship to work.

Precarious work 'for now'?

Most of the research participants in this study engaged in either domestic cleaning work mediated by an app or grocery delivery work from an inner city warehouse to private customers on a pushbike. Platform jobs often require long working hours and often offer no benefits such as social security payments, health insurance or accident insurance. This is especially true for the cleaning app that many Latin Americans

use, which has been shown to often pay below minimum wage (Dimitriadis and Coletto 2024; Gruszka, Pillinger, and Gerold 2024) and remained largely unregulated at the time of my research (see also Koutsimpogiorgos, Frenken, and Herrmann 2023; Niebler and Animento 2023).

In the literature, it is generally assumed that migrants take on these jobs despite their drawbacks because they are desperate for any kind of work. Yet, my findings show that workers engage in platform work not simply because they need money as fast as possible but also because some of these negative aspects are mediated by the temporariness of their legal status:

First, the limited duration of delivery platform company contracts or the freelancer status of domestic work platforms made no difference to working holidaymakers since immigration regulations trump labour contracts. In other words, being on a permanent employment contract does not necessarily grant someone the right to stay in a country, and platform companies do not sponsor work visas. Therefore, many working holidaymakers do not care at all whether they have a stable contract or not. Relatively, most working holidaymakers had savings from previous professional careers in Chile or were able to continue to work remotely in these jobs to supplement their gig work income. As a result, research participants neither cared for long-term job prospects nor did they have to live off of their gig income alone.

Second, the WHV pathway exclusively admits young, able-bodied, single adults without dependents. As a consequence of this 'biopolitics of the WHV' (Robertson 2014, 2016), most working holidaymakers were in good health and pension schemes or employer co-payment for health insurance plans were not a priority. On the contrary, given their age, thinking about their pension seemed ludicrous to my research participants and given the unpredictability of their visa status, many considered it futile to plan for a future, let alone old age, in Germany. Similarly, most research participants, having been in Germany for at most a few weeks or months before they began working, were entirely unaware of the taxes they had to pay or the lack of occupational insurance.

Third, the stipulation to have a travel health insurance plan to be able to get a WHV shielded migrants from the 'true' cost of working as a freelancer. Germany mandates health insurance for everyone residing in the country, usually co-paid by the employer and paid in full by the worker in freelance work. Platform companies externalise this 'hidden' cost to all of their workers. Since the WHV application stipulates mandatory travel health insurance for the duration of the visa as a precondition to entering the country anyway, most working holidaymakers are at first unaware how expensive health insurance for freelancers is in Germany. While employees receive co-payments from their employer in Germany, freelancers have to shoulder the cost of government-mandated health insurance on their own which can easily add up to several hundred euros a month. When migrants remain in the country for more than a year, they become ineligible for travel health insurance policies that tend to cost a fraction of the mandatory German public health insurance. Once they are legally required to get much more expensive German insurance, their takehome pay decreases significantly. These examples highlight that the short time frame of the visa and its enforced temporariness shape migrants' experience of the material conditions under which platform work happens,

prompting Mariela to conclude:

This working holiday visa is perfect for these jobs, Deliveroo, Helpling, and all these platforms. [These] jobs in the grey area, between legal and illegal. [...] As a migrant, you have no information, you arrive, you need a job where you don't need [the local] language, and you have energy. And then, when you realise that there are problems, that it's not so legal, then you leave because your visa expires. [...] If you've been here for a while, you notice that, then you change jobs. [...] Once you have more German [language skills], you understand more [and] you realise it's exploitation. (Mariela, 36 years, from Chile)

In sum, the negative aspects of platform work, such as unreliable pay, low net wages, and lack of social security and health insurance are detrimental to workers in the long-run, but often not immediately palpable. For working holidaymakers, the widely decried precarity of platform work is often only noticeable in case an accident occurs or once they transition to other visas and see the additional costs for health insurance significantly diminish their wages. Those who have been doing these jobs for a while see this clearly but during the period of the working holiday, the temporariness of the visa mitigates some of these problems. This is not only true in a material sense but also for the way the WHV is seen as a liminal space and constructed as an adventure and a short-term phase in a longer migration journey.

Platform jobs as part of 'the adventure'

As outlined, working holidaymakers form a fairly homogenous group of migrants (see also Spyridis and Went 2024). In the case of Latinx migrants, this means not only being of similar age and class background and subject to the same visa regulations and problems but also sharing Spanish as a common native language. Given this very specific community, there are a lot of vibrant online groups dedicated to WHV that serve as an important resource throughout the migration trajectory. Before people were leaving, new users frequently asked for reassurance about doing the WHV without speaking a language other than Spanish or being worried about missing their family and friends.

When research participants often found themselves without any prior connections in Berlin and urgently needed to find housing and work, the online groups served as sources of information and reassurance. Similarly to the backpacker hostels, pubs, bars, and cafes in Australia that provided an important infrastructure to facilitate WHV journeys in the early 2000s (Clarke 2005), it is now online groups for working holidaymakers on Facebook and WhatsApp that provide this type of mutual aid (see also James 2024).

These online communities produce certain forms of knowledge and 'common sense' reasonings that research participants often drew on when explaining a decision they had made during their journey. Not only did these affect prospective migrants' choices regarding destination countries and cities, but also their perception of what kind of work was suitable during a WHV. Working holidaymakers who have been in Germany for a while already advise new arrivals to take on platform jobs, framing them as an 'ideal job' for someone on a WHV. With the WHV frames as a 'once-in-a-lifetime' chance, working holidaymakers discursively construct platform jobs part of this 'adventure' as Javier explained:

The jobs you can apply for on a working holiday are jobs that are not really done in the country where you are from because you have the possibility to study, to work in something else; [but] here you can live that experience

Similarly, Mariela emphasised that: 'With the working-holiday, I had already heard that people with a bachelor degree, middle class [people], just have to clean; and that it's not so terrible'. This transformation from a job that is simply 'not really done in the country you are from' to something that is not also possible but even part of the 'experience' was very common among interviewees.

Research participants tended to position themselves in relation to their former professional selves rather than the present of the menial jobs they did. For example, working holidaymakers thought of themselves as platform customers ordering deliveries in their home countries rather than as delivery workers. Like cleaning people's homes, food delivery work is overwhelmingly carried out by racialised migrants in Chile who experience overt and continued racial abuse by customers (Bonhomme and Muldoon 2024). Hence, my interview question of whether research participants, who often praised gig work as an ideal job for working holidaymakers, would consider doing the same job back home was met with exasperation. Even though most identified with the label of being a 'migrant worker' in Germany, the comparison between themselves as migrants in Germany carrying out underpaid, precarious work and migrants from Venezuela, Peru, or Bolivia carrying the same type of work out in their home countries always seemed ludicrous to them.

Naomi, for example, sarcastically recounted an interaction with a client worried about her lack of occupational insurance: '[He thought] that I was like, a "poor woman from Latin America", surviving in crimes and not able to pay the rent and whatever'. Naomi stressed her distance from being 'a poor woman from Latin America', an identity that she felt was not further from the truth. Given her successful career back in Chile, she had accrued substantial savings, continued to work remotely in her old job when she needed money and thus lived comfortably supplementing her gig work income. Therefore, she was able to view cleaning work as something she only does 'for now' even though she took steps to register herself as a business owner to take her cleaning work off the platform.

Despite their willingness to engage in casual jobs in Germany, most firmly rejected the option to engage in platform work in the country of origin. Often this question led to a long explanation as to why platform work was acceptable in the new context of Germany: the exchange rates were better, it was less dangerous than in their home countries, and preferable over other jobs available to them without knowing German. Often this notion includes incorporating platform work into the lifestyle and personal development aspirations working holidaymakers pursue as the following quote by Naomi illustrates:

After the pandemic lockdowns I realised I can barely move, I need movement in my life. So when I came here, I wanted no more of this [computer work]. Now, I'm walking, moving and, well, cleaning all day. It's like going to the gym sometimes. (Naomi, 31 years, from Chile)

In her comparison of cleaning work to a gym session, Naomi frames the physical demands of manual labour as a healthy lifestyle, and even as something she has consciously chosen over her previous white-collar professional work.

This attachment to participants' class positions in their home countries is also enabled by the working holidays' temporariness (see Stingl and Orth 2024). As Roberston has argued, in the liminal space of the working holiday adventure middle-class identities become 'multiply constructed, and not just as a signifier of socioeconomic status or class positioning' (Robertson 2021, 62).

Experiences of downward social mobility are thus understood as a rite of passage to endure rather than a labour problem to organise against. This was evident in the way many interview partners spoke about potential occupational hazards or and workplace surveillance. They kept these at an ironic distance by joking about gamifying delivery algorithms in courier jobs or developing 'obsessions' with particular cleaning products, as Naomi did:

I actually joked with a friend about how I feel like a 'sommelier of wine' but of cleaning products, going from home to home. Sometimes people have these crazy gadgets and devices for cleaning things. ... It's really funny because I have never thought about this stuff until now that I have to actually use it. (Naomi, 31 years, from Chile)

Noemi's choice of framing her new-found knowledge playfully as becoming a 'sommelier of cleaning products' not only reaffirms her social position as someone who has never had to use cleaning products before because she has always lived with a maid in Chile; it also incorporates the reality of engaging menial work into a middle-class practice of knowing and sampling wines. As scholars of race and class in Latin America have shown, 'embodied forms of cultural capital' (Ceron-Anaya, de Santana Pinho, and Ramos-Zayas 2023, 188) such as these are important practices Latinx migrants engage in to mediate 'feminised onward precarity' in Europe (Gutiérrez Garza AP 2024; McIlwaine 2020).

As the examples highlight, the way the WHV is framed as a cultural experience rather than a labour visa matters not only for its regulated temporariness but also for how migrants experience and relate to jobs. The notion of adventure leads many working holidaymakers to frame the downsides of their jobs as a challenge to overcome for personal growth rather than a problem with labour conditions. In the literature working holidaymakers have often been noted to neither strive for 'upward' career progression nor do they view a career break during their working holiday as a 'downward' slope towards long-term precarity (Kato 2013; Kawashima 2010, 2021; Marchetti et al. 2022; Yoon 2015). Rather, they understand menial labour as a detour, or a 'sideways move' into independent adulthood (Marchetti et al. 2022, 15), and thus continue to identify with their previous professional careers. In the case of my research participants, the construction of the working holiday as a mere stepping stone allowed them to keep their present jobs at an ironic distance.

However, as with individual strategies to overcome the WHV's regulated temporariness, the way migrants engaged with casual work in a detached way did not last beyond the working holiday. Those who had moved on to other visas were much more critical of working conditions than those still within the liminality of the WHV.

To summarise this study's overall findings, research participants' motivations to pursue a working holiday resembled those of other working holidaymakers, ranging from lifestyle to political and material reasons. Yet, the centrality of administrative rationalities and timeframes were a remarkable factor that provides a novel perspective to the working holiday literature. These rationalities are inherently shaped by temporal aspects both



before and during research participants' migration trajectories. The visa is not only regulated by time as a one-off, non-extendable legal status that comes at an age cap; this regulated temporariness also intersected with the restrictions imposed both by the COVID-19 pandemic.

To forge these migration trajectories against restrictive migration policies, working holidaymakers use the WHV in Germany as a first step to forging longer-term mobility projects in and beyond Europe. While this is emblematic of the autonomy of migratory movements, it also led to precarity and uncertain futures for my research participants. Research participants' individual agency in creatively piecing together visas within a system not geared towards permanent labour migration, remains limited and often comes at great material and psychological costs.

Their precarious immigration status also shaped how they perceived or did not perceive the precariousness of platform work. Some of the material precariousness inherent in gig economy jobs did not fully unfold during the first 12 months of the visa. In addition, the WHV's discursive construction as an adventure and a liminal space shaped how migrants perceived these jobs. Rather than critiquing labour conditions or complaining about their jobs, they saw them as part of the adventure, as something that was not related to their own identity as professionals. Contrary to the widely held assumption in platform labour studies that migrants carry out platform work because they have no other options, these findings suggest that material reasons alone do not sufficiently explain why working holidaymakers form such a large group in the platform economy; cultural factors like the discursive framing of platform work as 'part of the adventure' and working holidaymakers' class sensibilities need to be factored in.

Working holidays between coming of age and becoming ideal workers?

As governments increasingly promote temporary visa schemes that force migrants to apply for ever new short-term visas instead of having clear avenues for long-term settlement, migrants have to cope with increasingly precarious and uncertain futures (Robertson 2021, 39). In paying attention to the importance of how these newly emerging different legal positions influence migrants' engagement with work, this study has found that the 'temporal border regime' (Maury, Hakala, and Näre 2024, 3782) renders working on platforms acceptable despite their drawbacks as many of the negative aspects of gig jobs only become apparent to workers over time (see also Stingl and Orth, 2024). This study thus mirrors findings on temporariness as an important factor for understanding labour relations in sectors such as the fast food economy (Tham and Fudge 2019) as well as student migration workers engaging in platform work (Maury 2020; Newlands 2022). In carving out space for themselves, young LatinX working holidaymakers challenge linear notions of migration and what it means to be a precarious worker (see Stingl and Orth 2024). Yet, in exercising this agency, forging mobilities through a hostile immigration system, working holidaymakers, inadvertently become ideal workers in the gig economy:

Working holidaymakers are young, able-bodied and unattached as per the requirements of their visas; they tend to be highly educated, and, unlike some other groups of migrants, they have the basic digital and language skills needed to fill these jobs (see Orth 2024); they arrive in Germany with enough savings to see them through their first months in

the country and do not have to make a living wage immediately; and their class position and the social construction of the working holiday as a liminal space mean that many do not perceive menial work as downward social mobility.

Platform companies benefit from this arrangement because the true costs of reproducing a hyperflexible labour force required for their business model remain not only hidden but are also shouldered entirely by the workers. The externalisation of labour risks associated with platform work, such as traffic accidents or sick leave is widely publicised. My argument here is that forging migratory pathways into urban platform work should be considered another dimension of this externalisation both in the sense of social reproduction and in terms of occupational hazards: when migrants fail to obtain the next visa and work permit, they shoulder the costs. They have to find a new way to work in Germany legally or relocate elsewhere. If they fail in obtaining a new visa or find work-arounds like staying in the country on tourist or language learner visas, they risk deportation or sanctions for working on visas that officially do not permit paid work. Recently, the European Commission has revealed plans to greatly expand youth mobility schemes, specifically to address post-pandemic labour shortages (EU Commission 2022). With this expansion of working holiday visa schemes across Europe in the coming years, platform companies will be able to draw on an ever increasing number of young, unattached, able-bodied people that, for visa reasons, do not even want the labour protections enshrined in the new EU Directive on Platform Labour: standard employment contracts require work permits, and hence limit both the types of platforms they can work for as well as well as the ways they can work under semi-compliant conditions on non-labour visas. Efforts to improve working conditions in the platform economy need to take this into account if they want to be successful.

That being said, working holidaymakers' experience and the way they relate to platform work likely differ substantially from other groups within the sector, such as undocumented migrants or EU citizens (see e.g. Andersen and Spanger 2024; Dimitriadis and Coletto 2024). While the findings of this study should therefore not be construed as representative of migrants' experiences overall, it highlights the need to hone in on specific visa categories to understand the co-constitution of labour and migration regimes. Future research should strive to better understand how other forms of temporary status, such as humanitarian visas, or the lack of legal status interact with the temporariness and transient nature of gig work.

Notes

1. These are: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, HongKong, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Uruguay, South Korea, and Taiwan.
2. Over the same time, the absolute numbers of au pair, working holiday, and volunteer visas issued by Germany have nearly doubled: in 2013, 8,378 visas were issued in this category. By 2022, the number had risen to 14, 682. This is my own calculation based on statistical data provided through a freedom of information request by the German Foreign Office. Interestingly, the government was unable to provide disaggregated data for the three types of visa as they are not recorded separately. Thus it is only possible to point to correlation between the new agreements and overall growth of youth mobility visas issued.

3. It is worth noting that these countries have particular histories of colonialism, immigration, and white supremacy (Ceron-Anaya, de Santana Pinho, and Ramos-Zayas 2023). Whether, and if so, how these have played a role in the signing of WHV agreements as scholars have explored for other schemes (Chartrand and Vosko 2021; Helleiner 2017), would be an interesting avenue for future research.
4. Of the seven individuals I first interviewed in Chile, three individuals agreed to be interviewed again once they had arrived in Germany.
5. The sample of WHV migrants in Germany includes Argentinians as well.
6. Processes of racialisation are, of course, highly context-dependent. Research participants acknowledged that their *whiteness* at home did not translate into what *whiteness* means in Germany as has been described for other Latin Americans in Europe (Gutiérrez Garza, 2024). Exploring the malleability of *whiteness* over the course of the migratory journey unfortunately goes beyond the scope of the empirical data collected for this project.
7. I would like to acknowledge the help of Lara Massò who helped me decipher slang and underlying meanings in interview material when my own Spanish skills fell short.
8. To give an example, New Zealand is considered a very difficult country to get a WHV for: New Zealand allocates visas through a lottery system that one can enter only on specific dates once or twice a year, and the number of visas issued is capped at an annual maximum of 940 for Chileans and 1000 for Argentines, respectively. In addition, one must prove the equivalent of NZ\$ 4200 in funds and pay NZ\$ 420 for the application process (New Zealand immigration, [no date](#)).
9. Owing to large-scale European emigration to Latin America's Southern Cone in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, many Chileans and Argentinians of European descent are eligible for EU passports (Mateos and Durand 2012).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Statement of informed consent

All research participants gave informed consent for this study. Their names and circumstances have been changed to safeguard their anonymity. All data was processed in accordance with EU data protection requirements (GDPR).

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