

Digital Labour and Migration Intention: Evidence from Nepalese Youth in the Gig Economy

Priti Singh K. (Lecturer, Brixton College, Nepal)

Abstract

This study aims to examine the relationship between participation in the gig economy and migration intention for Nepalese youth. This study was conducted using a quantitative and cross-sectional method, in which data were collected through questionnaires from 401 respondents aged between 18 and 35 years in Kathmandu, Pokhara, and Chitwan. The migration intention was taken as the dependent variable, while gig income, income stability, payment accessibility, and social prestige were taken as independent variables. SPSS software was used for data analysis, in which all four variables are negatively related with migration intention as per VIF results at 1% significance level. Income stability, gig income, payment accessibility, and social prestige are the top four predicting variables, in that order, as per beta value, which are -0.31, -0.24, -0.19, and -0.17, respectively. The model explained a moderate level of variance for migration intention ($R^2 = 0.24$), with the model explaining 24% of the variance in migration intention. What the findings of this study tell us is that lower migration intentions are associated with greater predictability of income, payment systems, and social recognition of gig work. The findings of this study tell us that the gig economy is a 'complementary livelihood pathway' and not a 'substitute for migration.' It is not unconditional, with the relationship between such work and migration intention being found in globally connected digital work, and not in locally bounded gig work. This study contributes to migration theory by pointing out the digital pattern of work, which changes conventional migrations in developing economies.

Keywords: *Gig economy, Migration intention, Digital labour, Youth employment, Online freelancing, Nepal*

Introduction

The labour migration has actively influenced Nepal's socio-economy since ages. The foreign employment, especially in Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Malaysia, and some developed countries, has become a default mode of livelihood for the youth of Nepal. The remittance received through foreign employment has provided significant welfare to the family, besides being a significant contribution to foreign exchange earnings by the host countries. It is noteworthy that such welfare comes with a huge social and economic cost in terms of family separation, exploitation, and brain drain (Paudel, 2022; Khanal, 2023)

In recent years, such significant technological advancements in digitization have improved internet connectivity, thereby enhancing alternative forms of labour participation through internet-based labour platforms without physical migration. The alternative labour participation through internet-based platforms such as Upwork, Fiverr, Pathao, Tootle, etc., with the help of mediators on Instagram, enable

individuals to sell their labour or services across countries while they remain in their respective countries with economic gains through cross-border transactions.

This has created new ways of earning income that disconnect the relationship between work and physical mobility, dissolving forms of employment relations in developing economies (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2021). Therefore, the income earned from digital work can be seen as a form of digital remittance—a form of income earned from the global or non-local playing field without the simultaneous migration of the physical self (Khadka & Khadka, 2021; Khanal, 2023).

The gig economy has emerged as the new reality of the future of work with the creation of short-term flexible forms of employment in the economies of the globe. Globally, evidence suggests that the creation of platform-based work has increased significantly in developed and developing economies with the support of employer requirements for flexibility in the labor force and the desire of the labor force to diversify income sources (World Bank, 2019; ILO, 2021). There is an increased volume of literature that highlights the relationship between the gig economy and migration processes.

More specifically, digital platforms facilitate migrant labour directly by reducing entry barriers such as the recognition of qualifications, the use of languages, and the requirement of formal employment contracts, which act as informal migration infrastructures (Altenried, 2019; van Doorn et al., 2021). However, the precariousness of platform labour is closely related to the precariousness of the income, which generates concerns about the sustainability of this type of work in the future (Graham & Anwar 2019) In developing countries, especially in South Asia, the gig economy has the potential to facilitate another, though not extensively researched, purpose of the digital platforms. Nevertheless, with the flexibility of work, the digital labour platforms create an economic opportunity that may, at least in part, address the economic needs that drive physical migration.

The circumstantial and policy studies reveal that with the help of online freelancing and digital service exports, the workers of developing economies are able to gain access to the global labour market as well as foreign sources of earning without the need to step out of their home countries (Kathuria et al., 2019; Mehta & Kumar, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this trend by creating more remote work opportunities as well as the increased usage of digital platforms by the workers who were forced out of their traditional employment sectors (Mehta & Kumar, 2021; ILO, 2021). Nevertheless, the current state of knowledge about the influence of digital jobs on migration-related decision-making is not well understood.

This is particularly important in the context of Nepal, as the unemployment rates, differences in wages, absence of domestic opportunities, along with the strong social norms that emphasize the need to find employment abroad, contribute to the high rates of youth out-migration in the country.

At the same time, the digital labor market of Nepal, especially with reference to information technology, creative services, and online freelancing, has witnessed tremendous growth, reflecting an increased economic viability of these modes of work (Khanal, 2023). The literature with reference to Nepal suggests that digital labor markets facilitate income generation, access to global markets, and personal branding with low capital costs. However, there still exist some barriers for paid participation, including those of regulation and institutions (Maharjan & Gurung, 2020; Khadka & Khadka, 2021; Parajuli, 2021).

In spite of such development, literature on the gig economy of Nepal still lies in scattered form. The existing literature includes freelancer job satisfaction (Khadka & Khadka, 2021), freelancing as an engagement for students (Parajuli, 2021), gig economy-based food delivery and ride-hailing services (Joshi et al., 2022), and regulation and financial infrastructure challenges for the digital labor periphery sector of the economy (Khanal & Khanal, 2023).

Although these studies contribute significantly to the understanding of the pattern of platform utilization and gig work outcomes, they fail to take into consideration the role of employment experiences in traditional jobs in the outcomes of gig work. Most significantly, these studies fail to empirically examine the role of participation in the digital gig economy in the decision-making of Nepalese youth regarding international migration (Paudel, 2022; Khanal, 2023).

In terms of an academic reference point, the decision-making regarding international migration in Nepal has been understood in terms of push-pull factors, with employment opportunities being low in the national economy, thus being the key push factors, and wage differentials and social mobility being the key pull factors in international migration decision-making. The emergence of digital labor has further complicated these factors because it has become possible for individuals to contribute to international labor markets without any change in their geographical location. Recent theories on digital labor and platform capitalism have introduced the concept of “virtual migration,” in which the movement of labor happens without any geographic movement, which has the potential to change the motivations for international migration (Graham & Anwar, 2019; Altenried, 2019).

This can, in turn, dilute conventional push pull factors before abolishing migration aspirations altogether: Similar to a fluid-on-porous structure effect. In this context, this paper aims to empirically examine whether participation in online gig economies affects migration intention among Nepalese youth. The paper is based on primary survey data collected from 401 freelancers, gig workers, and youth in major cities in Nepal. The paper highlights the importance of migration intention as a surrogate measure of migration propensity within an electronically linked urban youth group rather than actual migration consequences.

This study employs descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis to provide empirical evidence to the ongoing debates on digital labor and migration with respect to the

context of developing economies. This study also contributes to the extension of the existing migration frameworks by examining the effect of access to digitally mediated income opportunities on the change in new generation migrants related attitudes among the youth in urban areas (Kathuria et al., 2019; Khadka & Khadka, 2021; Paudel, 2022).

Literature Review

The relationship between labour mobility and economic opportunity has traditionally been conceptually linked with theories of migration, particularly the push-pull theory. This theory suggests that people migrate because of the lack of opportunities in their own countries and are attracted towards better wages and living in another location, far from their own. Structural push factors such as unemployment and low wages, along with poor career advancement opportunities, and pull factors such as wage differentials, which are much higher in international employment compared to local employment, and perceptions of social mobility in international employment have been key factors in the migration of people in Nepal (Paudel, 2022; Khanal, 2023). However, the emergence of digital labour markets is a major shift in this pattern, as it allows individuals to interact with the global labour market without migrating.

The theoretical formulations related to the concept of digital labor and platform capitalism describe this change as the phenomenon of “virtual migration,” which describes the decoupling of the mobility of labor from physical migration and its facilitation through digital forms of work arrangements (Graham & Anwar, 2019; Altenried, 2019). This concept describes the migrant labor in the digital economy as likely to reduce the push factors of migration in the classical sense, with the socio-cultural pull factors of migration remaining relatively untapped and therefore acting as the dual factors of migration.

The concept of the gig economy describes the short-term and flexible forms of employment that have increased dramatically in the developed and developing economies of the world. The major literature related to the concept of the gig economy describes the role of digital platforms as not only acting as labor markets but also as infrastructure to facilitate the reorganization of the mobility of labor.

According to Altenried (2019), platforms reduce entry barriers, like the recognition of credentials and the need for formal employment which enables workers scenarios in global labour systems without requiring physical migration. Likewise, van Doorn et al. (2021) note that platform capitalism both enables the selective extraction of labour and reassigns risks to workers, resulting in some combination of precarious and fractured employment conditions. From a global perspective, the gig economy is defined as a planetary labour market that operates globally, through opportunities being simultaneously local to socio-economic structures of which workers remain an intrinsic part (Graham and Anwar 2019). These frames indicate that despite the digital labour extending access to income streams, it creates new sources of inequality and instability.

At the same time, a small but growing body of literature investigates the possibility of the gig economy acting as a partial substitute for physical migration in the context of developing economies. Policy-oriented studies show that, through online freelancing and digital services export, it is possible for people to access incomes generated in another economy without physically migrating, thus reducing the push factors for migration (World Bank, 2019; Kathuria et al., 2019). Abstract: There is empirical evidence from South Asia on digital platforms enabling workers in certain sectors, such as information technology and creative services, to become part of global value chains with lower capital requirements than would have been possible in the absence of digitalization (Kathuria et al., 2019). Mehta and Kumar (2021) extend this by stating that, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, work on digital platforms has become a major source of income for dislocated workers, rather than merely a secondary source of employment.

The extent to which this was the case was contingent on the long-term viability of such opportunities, with income volatility, the absence of social support, and regulation acting as barriers to access as highlighted by many studies (World Bank, 2019). Our study suggests that the evidence from the current study highlights that although digital labour can reduce migration incentives within particular economic and structural contexts, this does not necessarily translate to the replacement of migration as a livelihood strategy.

The Gig Economy, in the context of Nepal The concept of the gig economy has also been a hot issue in Nepal. The main emphasis of the gig economy in the context of Nepal is the source of youth employment when the area of residence is urban or digitally connected. The concept of freelancing and work through the internet has allowed individuals to generate income and access the global market with the development of skills at relatively low skill levels (Khadka & Khadka, 2021; Parajuli, 2021). The platform of social media like Instagram also offers the possibility of entrepreneurial activity by helping individuals to develop their own personal brand, bypassing the constraints of the labour market (Maharjan & Gurung, 2020).

The opportunities available to this industry, however, are limited by certain structural constraints, such as limited access to international payment systems (e.g., PayPal), lack of regulatory clarity, and insufficient institutional support (Khanal & Khanal, 2023). Location-based gig work, such as ride-hailing services and food delivery services, has been studied in recent years. The studies on gig work, such as ride-hailing services and food delivery services, found that gig work is not sustainable despite generating income. These studies found that gig work is sustainable under specific conditions, such as having a stable income stream and accessible payment systems, and is tragedy of the commons that heavily depends on institutional grounds.

Although there is a growing body of literature on digital labor, one significant area that is not addressed is how it affects migration-related decision-making. The literature on gig work in Nepal has largely

focused on outcomes such as earnings, satisfaction, and use of gig work without considering that intention to migrate is an outcome variable (Paudel, 2022; Khanal, 2023).

This, in turn, is quite important as the intention to migrate acts as an important indicator of the migration 'choices' that would be made in the future, encompassing both the economic and socio-cultural dimensions. Further, despite the tremendous importance of understanding the relationship between digital labor and migration intentions in the context of the developing economies that are heavily dependent on migration, the empirical research in this area remains scarce.

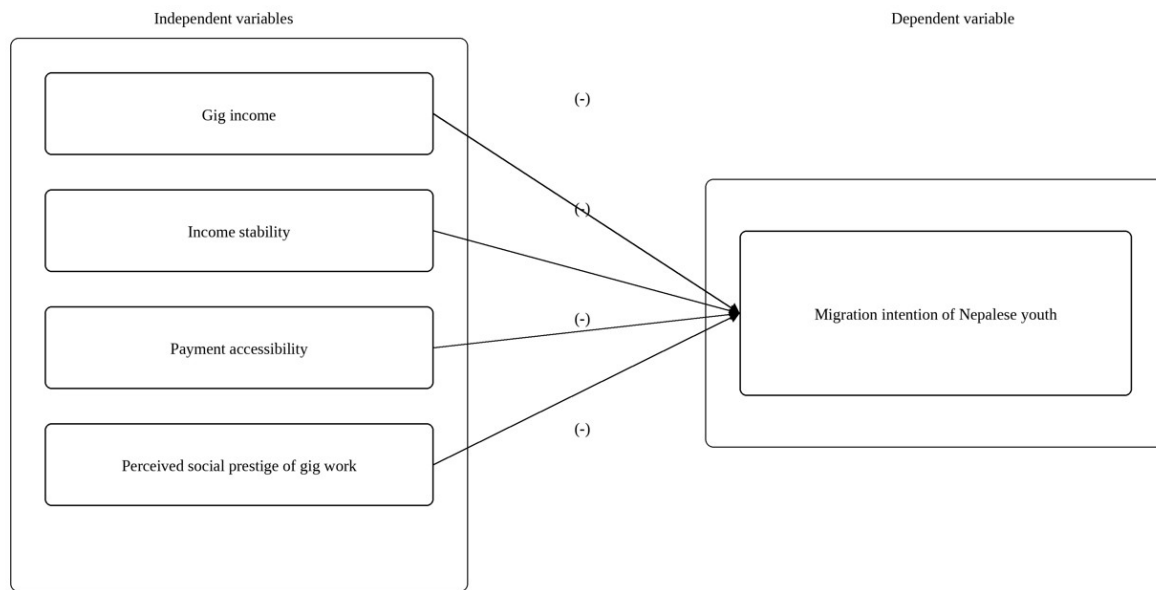
Based on the above theoretical and empirical findings, the present study attempts to conceptualize the migration intentions as being influenced by both the economic and socio-structural dimensions of gig work. The decrease in migration intentions, in turn, may also be attributed to the decrease in income-driven migration factors in the respective regions with the stabilizing income (scholarship) removing the uncertainties and risks associated with the local employment.

Payment accessibility refers to the system's practicality in terms of maintaining digital work, especially in contexts with poor monetary infrastructure. Perceived social prestige was used as a measure for the socio-cultural variable, as it was recognized that migrants are not only motivated by monetary factors but also by social factors. The relationship between these variables and migration intention is primarily mediated through three factors, namely income substitution, risk minimization, and social legitimation of work in the digital space.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is constructed in a manner to illustrate the impact of gig economy participation on the migration intention among Nepali youths. According to the framework, gig income, income stability, payment accessibility, and perceived social status associated with gig work are considered independent variables, whereas migration intention represents the dependent variable. Arrows indicate the negative association between independent variables and migration intention. As such, migration intention declines when the income earned by youths through gig work improves, income stability increases, payment accessibility becomes easier, and social perception of gig work improves. The underlying assumption of this conceptual framework is the notion of the role played by digital labor in reducing pressures experienced traditionally as causes of migration. The assumption is that gig work does not eliminate migration, but complements it as an alternative livelihood strategy.

Hence, the conceptual framework captures the results indicated in the findings.



Source: Developed by author based on literature review specially prior study like Khadka & Khadka, 2021; Parajuli, 2021

With the aforementioned framework, the study proposes the following hypothesis: that higher gig income, higher income stability, better payment accessibility, and higher perceived social prestige of gig work will result in lower migration intention for Nepalese youth. Thus, the following four hypotheses are proposed:

H01: higher gig income relates negatively to migration intention;

H02: lower perceived income stability relates negatively to migration intention

H03: better payment accessibility results in negative relation with migration intention

H04: smaller perceived social prestige of gig work is associated negatively with migration intention.

Using correlation and regression analysis, these hypotheses are empirically tested, exploring the link between the gig economy and migration-related attitudes of urban youth. Gig income is the economic benefits of digital work, which is expected to influence migration intentions by reducing income-related push factors. Income stability is the consistency of earnings, which is an important aspect of economic livelihood decisions. Payment accessibility is the structural ease of receiving earnings, especially international remittances, which is crucial for the sustainability of the gig economy as a domestic employment form. Perceived social prestige is the socio-cultural acceptance of the gig economy, which is expected to influence migration intentions by affecting social acceptance and status-related aspects. The framework is based on the assumption that as gig income increases, income stability improves,

payment accessibility is better, and social prestige associated with gig work is more prominent, the migration intention is less. These assumptions are tested using correlation and regression analysis.

Research Methodology

This research will employ a quantitative cross-sectional study to examine the association of involvement in the online gig economy with migration intention among Nepalese youth. The quantitative method is appropriate for this study because the aim of the research is to quantify economic, structural, and socio-cultural variables that impact migration-related decision-making processes as well as to verify associations statistically between variables. Hence, quantitative survey-based research designs have been successfully used to examine digital labor participation, freelancing outcomes, and employment intentions in Nepal and other similar developing countries with informal poll work environments.

The data collection process for this quantitative research has taken place once, and this indicates the cross-sectional nature of the quantitative research approach employed in this study. Although our quantitative research approach has enabled us to achieve the examination of established relationships between variables, our quantitative approach does not allow us to establish cause-effect relationships as well as behavioral perseverance.

The target group is the Nepalese youth between the ages of 18 and 35 years. This is the active population that is involved in gig work and international migration. This group includes a large number of foreign employment applicants, international students, and gig workers in Nepal. In addition, the study includes online freelancing, gig work such as ride-hailing and online food delivery services, and youth who are planning to work in the gig economy. In terms of geography, the study is limited to Kathmandu Valley, Pokhara, and Chitwan. These are the most digitally connected and active cities in Nepal. This attention to the electronic employment market increases the applicability of the results. However, it is limited in the generalization of the results.

In the absence of an exhaustive sampling frame of gig workers in Nepal, the study utilized non-probability sampling methods by relying on the combination of both purposive and convenience sampling methods. The study participants were contacted via online platforms of freelance workers, social media, and online work platforms. The method is appropriate in the context of informal economy studies; however, it is likely that the study is subject to self-selection bias. Therefore, the findings of the study should not be generalized beyond the population of urban, connected youth in Nepal.

A total of 401 valid data points were obtained, which is deemed appropriate for multiple regression analysis, as it is well beyond the recommended threshold of at least 10 to 20 data points per independent variable, as recommended by various studies. With four independent variables, the study has the

statistical power needed to establish the significance of the relationships between the variables while increasing the precision of the regression estimates (25).

A structured questionnaire, keeping in view the purpose and intention of this study and previous literature on gig work, digital labor, and migration intention, has been used as a tool for primary data collection. Demographic factors, gig work type and duration, income earned from gig work on a monthly basis, income stability, access to receive income, social prestige, and migration intention were measured using the questionnaire. Migration intention has been measured as a composite dimension with multiple Likert-scale items related to the intention of the respondent to migrate, the pressure felt to search for foreign employment, and the belief that migration is essential for progress. All the responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Reliability analysis based on Cronbach's alpha has been used to check the reliability of the data. Results with alpha values higher than 0.70 are acceptable. However, even though reliability is an important aspect, without using factor analysis, it is not possible to prove the validity of the data, which is recognized as a limitation of the study.

The variable for the outcome is migration intention, with the independent variables being gig income, income stability, payment accessibility, and social prestige associated with gig work. Gig income was measured as self-reported income earned on a monthly basis, while the other variables were measured using multi-item Likert scales. Although demographic factors were also collected, such as age, gender, and education, these were not specified as control variables in the regression equation because, in this study, we are mainly concerned with factors related to the gig economy. This, in a way, was a limitation, especially for any other researcher, as it was indicated that demographic factors are required for the assessment of the results.

Data analysis was done using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were used for describing the respondents, while Pearson correlation was used for establishing the nature and extent of the relationship between variables, as well as the direction and magnitude of the relationship. Multiple regression analysis was used for establishing the extent of the relationship between gig income, income stability, payment accessibility, social prestige, and migration intention. Statistical significance was determined at 5 percent.

The association of gig economy participation on migration intention is estimated through the following multiple linear regression model:

$$MI_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1(GI_i) + \beta_2(IS_i) + \beta_3(PA_i) + \beta_4(SP_i) + \epsilon$$

where MI_i represents migratory intention, GI_i denotes gig income, IS_i stands for income stability, PA_i represents payment accessibility, and SP_i denotes perceived social prestige. β_0 , β_1 , β_2 , β_3 , and β_4 are the

regression coefficients, and ε_i is the error term. The structure of the model has been specified for testing the association, not for testing the causation.

Although, it has been ensured that ethical concerns were maintained throughout the research process. It was voluntary, all participants were asked for their consent, and it was ensured that there was anonymity and confidentiality. No PII was collected, and it was used for scholarly purposes only.

Results

In this section, we report the findings based on the collected data from 401 participants. The demographic features, descriptive analysis, reliability analysis, correlation analysis, and regression analysis were arranged according to the study goals and hypotheses.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 401)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	237	59.1
	Female	164	40.9
Age Group	18–24	148	36.9
	25–30	187	46.6
	31–35	66	16.6
Education	High School	56	14.0
	Bachelor	205	51.1
	Master	140	34.9
Location	Kathmandu	210	52.4
	Pokhara	96	23.9
	Chitwan	95	23.7

Source: SPSS

The sample is mildly male-dominated with 59.1%, but the figure is still significant with 40.9% representing females. The majority belong to the 25-30 years old group, accounting for 46.6%, followed by 36.9% belonging to the 18-24 years old group, suggesting that gig work is prevalent in this age group at their initial career life stage. Nepal is a relatively educated society with 86% having at least their bachelors degree, implying that this type of gig work is mostly preferred by educated individuals. From a geographical point of view, most of the sample were from Kathmandu, accounting for 52.4%, since this type of gig work is mostly available in this city due to existing digital infrastructure.

Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Migration Intention	2.68	0.81
Gig Income	—	—
Income Stability	3.21	0.74
Payment Accessibility	3.05	0.77
Social Prestige	2.98	0.80

Source: SPSS

Table 2 indicates the results of the study in terms of descriptive statistics (Since gig income is a categorical variable, mean and standard deviation are not presented). The frequency table below illustrates the income levels, along with their frequency, presented separately. The average migration intention ($M = 2.68$) indicates that the level of interest for migrating, on average, is moderate. Income stability ($M = 3.21$) has the highest mean for the results of the independent variable, implying that the perceptions towards the predictability of income are relatively positive. The presence of payment accessibility ($M = 3.05$) and social prestige ($M = 2.98$) is moderate, implying that the support for gig work, in terms of structure and social culture, is present but not as much as it could be. The results indicate that, although gig work offers certain advantages, it offers only a certain level of stability and social prestige, which could be used as factors for migrating.

Reliability Analysis

Table 3

Reliability Statistics of Measurement Scales

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Migration Intention	5	0.82
Income Stability	3	0.78
Payment Accessibility	3	0.79
Social Prestige	3	0.74

Source: SPSS

All the constructs show satisfactory internal consistency, as the values of Cronbach's Alpha are higher than the recommended 0.70 threshold. The highest reliability coefficient, 0.82, was found in the migration intention construct, proving that the scales are reliable for subsequent statistical analysis.

Correlation Analysis

Table 4

Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Gig Income	—				
2. Income Stability	.53**	—			
3. Payment Accessibility	.41**	.38**	—		
4. Social Prestige	.32**	.29**	.27**	—	
5. Migration Intention	-.29**	-.31**	-.24**	-.27**	—

Note: $p < .01$ (2-tailed)

Source: SPSS

The findings reveal that all independent variables have a significant negative correlation with migration intention at the 1% level of significance. Gig income has a moderate negative relationship with migration intention, with a value of $r = -0.29$, supporting hypothesis 1. Income stability has the highest negative correlation with migration intention, with a value of $r = -0.31$, supporting hypothesis 2, which implies that the predictability of earnings is a crucial factor in determining migration attitudes. Payment accessibility has a negative correlation with migration intention, with a value of $r = -0.24$, supporting hypothesis 3, while hypothesis 4 is supported by the negative correlation between social prestige and migration intention, with a value of $r = -0.27$.

Regression Analysis

Table 5

Model Summary

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error
1	0.49	0.24	0.22	0.61

Source: SPSS

The model predicts 24% of the variance in migration intention ($R^2 = 0.24$), which indicates a moderate explanatory power of the model. This shows that the role of the gig economy is important, although migration intention is affected by other variables as well.

Table 6
ANOVA Results

Model	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Regression	41.29	4	10.32	27.62	.000
Residual	130.11	396	0.33		
Total	171.40	400			

Source: SPSS

The regression model is statistically significant ($F = 27.62$, $p < .001$), indicating that the independent variables collectively explain variation in migration intention.

Table 7
Regression Coefficients

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	Sig.
Constant	3.87	0.18	—	21.50	.000
Gig Income	-0.002	0.001	-0.24	-4.98	.000
Income Stability	-0.27	0.05	-0.31	-5.40	.000
Payment Accessibility	-0.21	0.06	-0.19	-3.50	.001
Social Prestige	-0.18	0.07	-0.17	-2.71	.007

Source: SPSS

Based on the regression analysis, it is clear that the independent variables are statistically significant predictors of migration intention, with income stability having the most significant effect on migration intention, followed by gig income, as shown by the regression coefficients of -0.31 and -0.24, respectively. These findings suggest that the predictability of income, as well as the actual level of income, play an important role in determining migration-related attitudes.

Therefore, the hypotheses of this study, namely, the effect of payment accessibility, the effect of social prestige, the effect of gig income, and the effect of income stability, on migration intention, are

confirmed by the regression analysis, as shown by the regression coefficients of -0.19, -0.17, -0.24, and -0.31, respectively.

The negative signs of the regression coefficients of the independent variables indicate that the independent variables, namely, gig income, income stability, payment accessibility, and social prestige, are negatively related to migration intention, with the level of these independent variables having a direct effect on the level of migration intention, with the findings of this study suggesting that these independent variables, namely, gig income, income stability, payment accessibility, and social prestige, play an important role in determining migration intention, with

Discussion

The present study examined the factors related to the economic, structural, and socio-cultural aspects of gig economy participation and migration intention in the case of Nepalese youth. However, the results of the study must be viewed with caution in the context of the cross-sectional nature of the study.

The demographic characteristics of the respondents indicate that the gig economy is more prominent in the lives of younger, educated, and urban Nepalese youth. These findings are consistent with previous studies that have indicated that educated youth are the primary participants in online gig economy work (Khadka & Khadka, 2021; Parajuli, 2021). In addition, the lower percentage of respondents engaging in formal foreign employment practices, such as applying for a No Objection Certificate, may indicate that digitally connected Nepalese youth are more focused on short-term gig economy work. However, this may not indicate that migration intention is low; instead, it may indicate that migration intention is shifting.

Moreover, these correlation results also show that there is a significant negative relationship between gig income and migration intention. This suggests that an increased dependence on digital income is correlated with low migration intention. This is consistent with regional results that suggest access to non-local or globally sourced income streams could help alleviate traditional economic migration drivers (Kathuria et al., 2019; Mehta & Kumar, 2021). However, it must also be noted that these results suggest migration intention is still a multifaceted construct driven by both economic and non-economic drivers.

In terms of income stability being the most significant predictor of migration intention, this suggests that income stability is more important than other economic drivers. In the Nepalese context, foreign employment is often considered an income source that provides stability despite the risks involved. In this regard, it appears that gig income has the highest impact on migration intention when it provides income stability. This is consistent with existing literature that suggests income stability is an important limitation of platform work (Altenried, 2019; ILO, 2021). This also aligns with existing research

conducted in Nepal that suggests income stability is an important driver of freelancer satisfaction (Khadka & Khadka, 2021).

The accessibility of payment also has a significant negative relationship with migration intention. This is particularly important in the context of Nepal, as constraints on international payment systems and foreign currency transactions are still significant. Earlier studies on this issue identified this as one of the critical challenges to sustaining digital labor (Parajuli, 2021; Khanal & Khanal, 2023). The findings in this study indicate that improving payment systems can improve the viability of gig work as a livelihood strategy, thereby reducing the need to physically migrate.

Besides economic and structural factors, socio-cultural factors such as social prestige are also important. In the case of Nepal, migration has been linked with social mobility and prestige. However, the negative relationship between the social prestige of gig work and migration intention indicates that an improvement in the social validity of digital work may reduce migration intention. This is consistent with the sociological view that migration decisions are influenced by factors other than rational calculations, such as social identity and status.

The analysis also points to the heterogeneity in different forms of gig work. Individuals in online freelancing and creative digital work have lower migration intentions than individuals in location-based gig work such as ride-hailing and food delivery. This is an important theoretical distinction, as online freelancing connects workers with the global market, representing a form of ‘virtual mobility’ that is independent of geographic constraints (Graham & Anwar, 2019). In contrast, location-based gig work is subject to local economic conditions with limited differentiation from traditional employment, rendering it of little influence on migration intentions. Gender differences were also noted in the study, with women showing significantly lower migration intentions compared with men, which may be explained by various socio-cultural constraints, as well as differences in perceptions of risk when engaging in foreign employment. On the other hand, the rise of digital gig work may provide women with socially acceptable employment options, although this is purely speculative at this point of analysis and is recommended as an area of qualitative exploration.

Overall, this study has extended the conventional push-pull migration models by taking into consideration the impact of digital labor on migration. While gig economy participation can act as a partial replacement for some economic pull-push factors, it cannot act as a complete replacement. The limited explanatory power of this model suggests that migration is influenced by a wide range of factors. As suggested by theories on digital labor and platform capitalism, online labor may act as a parallel rather than a replacement to physical migration.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the socio-cultural, economic, and structural aspects of the Nepalese youth migration intention of the online gig economy. The findings revealed that the gig economy was negatively correlated with the migration intention, especially when the individual is experiencing stable income, accessible payment, and positive social perceptions of the digital economy. One of the aspects that were included in this study was the stability of the income, which was the most powerful predictor that not only the amount of the income was essential, but the stability of the income was even more important.

Theoretically, the study contributes to migration theory by indicating that certain traditional economic push factors have been diminished (though only in part) because of digital labor; however, not all factors related to broader migration motivations are eliminated. This is in keeping with some emerging conceptualizations of “virtual migration,” in which people are part of global labor markets without physical migration. However, the results also suggest that the extent and reach of gig work are conditional and one-sided. Not all gig work types are created equal; legitimate forms of contract work related to global markets, such as freelancing, may be more effective in modulating migration intention than the same forms of work in local markets.

However, despite all these positives, there are some limitations associated with this study. First, this study is based on a cross-sectional study that cannot be used to make causal inferences. Additionally, this study is based on non-probability sampling, which is limited to metropolitan and digitally literate individuals. Finally, this study’s low explanatory power suggests that migration intention is influenced by various aspects such as social networks, long-term career aspirations, and global wage differentials that were not captured by this study.

Overall, this study suggests that there is a potential for interlinking the gig economy with international migration. The gig economy is not a replacement for international migration, at least not in terms of common perceptions. Nevertheless, this study suggests that it is a complementary alternative that reorders migratory aspirations depending on various factors. The study suggests that future studies should explore this issue more using longitudinal studies on how the gig economy is associated with migration in various economies in the global south.

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