

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Pandemic transformations in migrant spaces: Migrant entrepreneurship between super-digitalization and the new precarity

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about new patterns in labour market activities, including greater frequency, intensity and sectoral diversification of technology-mediated online work (super-digitalization). The development of online professional activities, accelerated by the pandemic, has a profound influence on migrant entrepreneurship in many dimensions. While the phenomenon also concerns the native population and is not limited to foreigners, in the case of migrant entrepreneurs it has additional unique meanings and consequences, resulting from a greater significance of mobility for migrants and its restriction during the pandemic. The analysis discusses new phenomena, such as the emergence of pandemic digital nomads and the development of migrant business ventures characterized by a de-ethnicized approach to customers. The theoretical framework for this analysis is the concept of super-digitalization of professional activities as a privilege. Digitalization is not available to everyone, but it affects everyone; it also has consequences for offline migrant entrepreneurs by creating and enhancing new mechanisms of exclusion. The article emphasizes the difference between super-digitalization and digitalization, which result in different outcomes for migrant entrepreneurs. The analysis is based on in-depth interviews with 53 Polish migrant entrepreneurs in the United Kingdom.

KEYWORDS

Covid-19 pandemic, crisis, digital privilege, digital spaces, migrant self-employment, Polish migration

1 | INTRODUCTION

The pandemic has restructured the labour market and migrants have been particularly prone to experience the adverse effects of the changes. The aim of this article is to examine how the transition to online activities has influenced the functioning of migrant entrepreneurship, on the basis of a study of Polish entrepreneurs in the United Kingdom. Entrepreneurs are a unique segment of migrant communities. The percentage of self-employed individuals in ethnic communities tends to be high and there is a growing body of literature focusing on the motivations and causes of migrant

entrepreneurship (Dabić et al., 2020). Migrants' performance in entrepreneurial activities is influenced by both structural opportunities and constraints, as well as by individual resources of minority members, including ethnicity-related resources (R. C. Kloosterman, 2010). Migrants become self-employed, because they are disadvantaged on the labour market or lack of suitable job offers (Volery, 2007; Waldinger et al., 1990). Self-employed migrants also have a unique ability to understand and address the needs of ethnic consumers, providing them with ethnic services or products (Jamal, 2005; Light & Gold, 2000; Volery, 2007). They often take advantage of ethnic social networks and employ co-ethnic workers, who are less

expensive than the local workforce and are also seen as proof of the 'ethnic authenticity' of a business (Anthias & Cederberg, 2009). The researchers also emphasize the growing role of highly qualified migrant entrepreneurs, who are in a very similar position to entrepreneurs originating from the host society, provided they obtain a stable residence status and a university degree recognized in the receiving country (R. Kloosterman & Rath, 2010).

These trends and mechanisms show one more key aspect: migrant entrepreneurs tend to be particularly flexible, resourceful and innovative in dealing with critical situations. Even though not all entrepreneurs are able to adapt successfully during crises, times of socioeconomic hardships constitute an exceptional arena for research on the mechanisms of entrepreneurial persistence (Davidsson & Gordon, 2016; Holland & Shepherd, 2013). The crisis strategies of migrant entrepreneurs are of particular significance for whole nonnative communities. Migrant business owners are pioneers, who respond rapidly to the challenges on the labour market and potentially position themselves at the cutting edge of the pandemic and post-pandemic labour market. They establish directions which may help to shape new unorthodox patterns of professional activities in other segments of the migrant population. Innovativeness as a response to the challenges is a crucial attribute (Schumpeter, 2003), which enhances competitiveness and anchors migrant entrepreneurs in the host labour markets of their choice. Entrepreneurs' individual agency, demonstrating itself in the pioneering and nonstereotypical approaches to economic crises, enables broader transformations: ideas and strategies of migrant entrepreneurs may be taken up by other segments of the migrant populations.

However, not all migrants are capable of responding to crisis through the super-digitalization of their activities. The theoretical framework for this analysis is the concept of super-digitalization of professional activities as a privilege, available to selected individuals and social groups and, at the same time, excluding others. The concept of privilege has been a topic of numerous academic studies, allowing a better understanding of how various people have broader access to certain benefits, which perpetuates their leverage within social hierarchies (Black & Stone, 2005; Case et al., 2012; McIntosh, 2012). This analysis refers to Merton's concept of the Matthew effect, indicating that, for some individuals, certain resources and opportunities multiply while, at the same time, the disadvantages and risks accumulate for others (Merton, 1988). The Matthew effect also underlines the role of privilege, indicating how previous leverage attracts further benefits and additional forms of control and power.

2 | DIGITAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND THE CONTEXT OF MIGRATION: POLISH MIGRANTS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

In this article, digitalization is defined as the development of online economic and online professional activities, which replace offline work. The pandemic brought more attention to the digitalization of highly skilled jobs and the use of technology to allow individuals to be

more independent from their social environment. This issue is at the centre of attention in digital entrepreneurship studies. A lot of research on digital entrepreneurs has been conducted in recent years (see Zaheer et al., 2019) and the pandemic has only enhanced discussions about the phenomenon (Priyono et al., 2020; Qermane & Mancha, 2020). As innovators, digital entrepreneurs are of key importance in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Industrie 4.0., see e.g., Petrillo et al., 2018). This is a group of entrepreneurs who use the Internet and advanced technologies to offer services and sell products. They also offer digital products. There are many subtypes, forms and nuances within the broadly understood field of 'digital entrepreneurship' (see e.g. Giones & Brem, 2017; Nambisan et al., 2019; Rahrovani, 2020). What is common to all is their reflection of the general trend towards concentrating economic activities in the immaterial space of the Internet. Generally, digital entrepreneurship is a 'subcategory of entrepreneurship in which some or all of what would be physical in a traditional organization has been digitized' (Hull et al., 2007, p. 293, as in: Kraus et al., 2019). The pandemic, due to the limitation of personal contacts, can only perpetuate this trend. At the same time, the role of migrants in developing digital entrepreneurship is underexamined. It may play a special role and have an influence on cross-border mobility.

The pandemic provided a key momentum for digitalization, but also deeply affected international mobility through closing borders, limiting short-term and circular migration, introducing migration restrictions and potentially increasing anti-immigrant attitudes (de Haan, 2020; Gamlen, 2020). In the sphere of labour, the pandemic led to the growing frequency of remote work (Rymaniak et al., 2021). These phenomena have diverse influences on various migrant categories: while low-skilled migrants around the world lose their jobs or have to bear increased health risks, highly skilled migrants in 'white-collar' jobs may be more prone to take advantage of online work. These trends are especially interesting in the context of Polish migration because of its mass character and internal diversification. Polish migration to the United Kingdom after 2004 is broadly studied in the literature (Lassalle & Johnston, 2018; Lulle et al., 2018; McGhee et al., 2017; Rzepnikowska, 2019; Ryan, 2018; Sredanovic, 2020; White, 2016, 2017). The research has shown that migrants' heightened sense of vulnerability is linked to the uncertainties of the political and social climate (Benedi Lahuerta & Iusmen, 2021) and at the same time their diverse reactions to crises depend on various socio-demographic factors (Trąbka & Pustulka, 2020). The significance of the pandemic for Poles in the United Kingdom is a new research topic. Due to researchers' focus on mobility plans, the impact of crises (especially the Covid-19 pandemic) on the remaining migrants' labour market activities remains understudied.

For ethnic minorities and ethnic entrepreneurs in the United Kingdom, the pandemic became yet another level of severe complications. Its significance and the responses to the pandemic in ethnic communities have to be situated against the backdrop of uncertainty, which has been a part of life for EU citizens in the United Kingdom since 2016. The consequences of crises are interlinked and have a nuanced influence on migrants: transformations such as Brexit

or the global financial crisis (and now the Covid-19 pandemic) are unsettling events which disrupt migration projects, but do not necessarily provoke return migration (Kilkey & Ryan, 2021). The importance of crisis and digitalization is exceptional also because migrants and minorities are much more prone to discrimination and marginalization on the labour market, so the new divisions have more impact on these populations. According to the UK statistical data, the 'Other White' ethnic minority (which includes Polish migrants) was more likely to experience a decrease in salary (39%) in the period January–February 2020 to April 2020 than the 'White British' (29%) (Office for National Statistics [ONS, 2020b]). The divisions generated by digitalization (or the scarcity of it in some branches) may lead to deeper economic and social inequalities.

The statistical data show that the Polish community in the United Kingdom is less numerous than several years ago. The number of Polish migrants (UK residents who were born in Poland) decreased in 2020 in comparison with 2015, most probably as a result of Brexit. In this time span, the number of Poles decreased by 84,000, to ca. 746,000 in 2020 (ONS, 2015, 2020a). On the contrary, there is little statistical data about the current number of Polish migrant entrepreneurs in the United Kingdom. Some sources indicate that as of 2014 there were 40,000 Polish company owners and more than 65,000 were registered as self-employed (Boguslawska, 2018, p. 139). These numbers have most probably decreased due to return migration after Brexit.

3 | RESEARCH METHOD

The analysis is based on qualitative research conducted after the outbreak of the pandemic, in 2020 and 2021. The research method was in-depth semistructured interviews with migrant entrepreneurs. The conversations were in Polish (the excerpts below are translated). The research method allows researchers to examine the individual experiences of migrants, their subjective evaluations and perceptions of the crisis. The interviews reveal the microsociological dimension of changes in migrant communities during the pandemic. This description is important to understand the individual behaviours which lead to broader systemic changes.

The interview scenario contained questions about the significance of the Covid-19 crisis, as well as about Brexit. The interviews focused on professional trajectories and entrepreneurial experience of migrants, but the respondents also shared their experiences concerning issues which are interconnected with economic activities: family and private life, legal situation in the host country and social position in the United Kingdom. This broad approach allowed the main areas affected by the Covid-19 crisis to be identified. The interviews were coded (Chametzky, 2016) to identify the key areas of digitalization and manifestations of this process during the pandemic. The main coding categories used in the analysis were online activities and the Covid-19 crisis. However, the analysis and findings are also based on a more comprehensive, in-depth reading, which allows the overall tone or approach of each interview to be grasped. This holistic

analysis enables a better understanding and interpretation of interviewees' approaches beyond and in addition to, the content of illustrative quotes.

The sample consists of 53 respondents: 25 women and 28 men. The interviewees were approached through migrant organizations, social media (Facebook, LinkedIn), personal networking and snowball sampling. They resided in England, Scotland and Wales. Interviews were conducted both online (through Zoom) and offline. The respondents had various education levels: 42 interviewees had a university education, nine had high school/technical high school education, two had vocational education. They represented various sectors: gastronomy, accountancy, law, social work, art professions, translation, education, IT services, marketing, retail and wholesale trade and construction.

The aim was to achieve a heterogeneous sample, which would include representations of various migrant experiences on the micro level. Nevertheless, highly skilled migrants constitute the majority of the sample and are overrepresented compared to the overall Polish migrant population in the United Kingdom. Such bias may be the consequence of a higher propensity of highly skilled individuals to establish their own businesses. There are no official statistical data concerning the educational or demographic features of self-employed migrants and, therefore, it is not possible to establish decisively whether the sample reflects the socioeconomic structure of migrant entrepreneurs. The prevalence of highly skilled migrants in the sample makes the findings particularly interesting: such migrants have easier access to sectors prone to digitalization, thus becoming a more privileged group within a somewhat marginalized and often discriminated ethnic minority. The intersection of indicators of privilege and discrimination makes the group under study particularly worthy of attention.

4 | MIGRANT ENTREPRENEURSHIP: FROM DIGITALIZATION TO SUPER-DIGITALIZATION

Digitalization accelerated by the pandemic has a profound influence on migrant entrepreneurship in many dimensions. While the phenomenon also concerns the native population and is not limited to foreigners, in the case of migrants it has additional unique meanings and consequences. They result from a greater significance of mobility for migrants and its restrictions during the pandemic. Information and communication technology plays a key role in perpetuating the transnational social spaces in which migrants live (Nedelcu, 2012; Panagakos Anastasia & Horst, 2006). Migrants often have high digital competences. They use the Internet to communicate with friends and family in the country of origin (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). For many of them, who take advantage of their ethnic social and cultural capital at work, online transnational communication tends to be an important business tool. However, the Covid-19 pandemic brought a new intensity and quality to those activities. They result from a multitude of interconnected aspects, which

constitute a transition from digitalization to super-digitalization. Migration researchers indicate that the comprehensive intensification of a given phenomenon may have even greater significance for the transformations of social reality than just emergence of such phenomenon and its moderate forms (see the notion of 'super-diversity'; Vertovec, 2007). This mechanism is also visible in the case of online activities.

The first change is a greater frequency and intensity of digital activities in migrant entrepreneurship. Prepandemic times were not a technological vacuum, nor was it a time when migrant workers and business owners performed offline activities only. Many forms of transnational activities relied heavily on digital tools even before Covid-19. However, at least for some sectors, in the pre-Covid times they were more often an exception than a rule. The pandemic has played the most significant role in speeding up the digital conversion. Important highly digitized solutions, such as e-learning through special platforms or e-commerce, were present even before the pandemic. The opportunity to work online or run a business online were used also in the prepandemic times by migrants and migrant entrepreneurs. However, the pandemic led to their intensification, marginalizing offline activities in some sectors. The transition to digitalization in the sphere of business was possible due to migrants' own experiences of online work, as well as using the online tools created by other firms. Therefore, individual business owners who had focused on remote work and online activities even before the pandemic had an advantage over other entrepreneurs who were used to the offline mode.

Generally, even before [the pandemic] I have done written translations, remotely, from my home. I work from home all the time, just as before. I also offer oral translations and, in this regard, a lot has definitely changed, of course. During the pandemic, I have not provided such services. Today [March 2021] I have my first job. I will be interpreting, it will be all done remotely, as a video conference. It will be my first job like this since last year. Before, I also worked with translation firms, which commissioned a lot of interpreting. Then, when I transformed my firm, I had my direct customers, I stopped working with these firms. I do more translations than interpreting (I-33, female, translations)

The second dimension includes a growing diversification of digital activities among migrant entrepreneurs. This is particularly significant, since migrant communities in the United Kingdom (including Poles) are increasingly differentiated with regard to the branches and sectors where they are active, as well as their skill level. New online activities emerge in branches which used to be offline. Before the pandemic, online activities were perceived as unsuitable for some professionals and sectors, such as the arts (teaching piano or another instrument), medicine or court proceedings. During the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns, not only did such activities develop, but the individuals representing these specializations

acknowledged their advantages, such as saving time or the costs of commuting.

I work online when it comes to all the prevention activities, workshops in the Polish schools about the transition period for children and teenagers, this whole support is online, we are connecting (...) The only thing is, I do not visit parents. The whole antiviolence, antigang prevention for children and teenagers and parents, I do not do it face to face, just online (...) In a day, three different court cases can proceed, which would not be possible normally, because these cases are in different courts. As for today, we are able to have three court cases and I can appear in three different courts in a single day as an expert and submit evidence. My friends who are lawyers say that there is a lot going on (I-9, female, social worker)

The third major dimension is greater acceptance of digital activities from customers of migrant entrepreneurs, their contractors and other parties. While the transition to online activities within a firm was relatively easy, the more difficult task was to convince customers that online and remote services were of a sufficiently high quality. The prepandemic perceptions of online customer services were negative and seen as demonstrating insufficient customer care. However, the change in customer attitudes to online services is the fundamental transformation brought about by the pandemic. The increasingly positive attitude to online services among customers makes it possible to further reduce offline face-to-face contact and developing a business and customer base without such contact becomes viable. The new patterns of customer communication also give broader opportunities to expand beyond the local market and local customer base in the case of small low-budget microenterprises.

In the office, we have transited to remote work, work from home, literally overnight. We worked a lot, we had projects, we designed a lot. But the biggest change, a quite positive change, good for our business and opening up new opportunities—was remote work with customers, that is through Zoom. If we had proposed in January [2020], or last year [2019], to have an online meeting—we would have been perceived as not having time for the customer, to meet him face to face, to invite him over to our office. Currently, it is perceived as innovative and as an expression of customer care. That we care for their mental and physical health. Because not everyone... We have clients who are doctors, they prefer online meetings. They say—we would like to, if we can, meet using the Internet. If we offer this—they are over the moon. (I-19, female, interior design + production)

Even during the periodic liberalization of the restrictions, between lockdowns, some customers definitely preferred to continue

online communication instead of face-to-face meetings. The freedom of online contact, minimizing risk and time efficiency were treated as overriding advantages of this form of communication. It may be an indication of a future disproportion between online and offline work.

Nevertheless, the pandemic and the associated transformations of work have revealed new divisions and conflicts between employers and employees, reflected in the attitudes towards digitized remote work. Distrust towards remote work among migrant entrepreneurs, especially owners of larger businesses, reveals the expectations regarding management, supervision and patterns of team-building in a multicultural environment. For such workplaces, offline work and frequent face-to-face interactions within a team seem to be treated as a significant factor in creating cohesion, a sense of community and solidarity within a group. Entrepreneurs tend to prioritize multinational workers' integration within a firm over minimizing health risks, choosing offline work even during partial lockdowns. The narrative below concerns a Polish entrepreneur who hires Poles, Romanians, Ukrainians and other nationalities:

They [employees] lose the interpersonal bonds, we try in a way strengthen them all the time, in order to keep the team together, but it is much more difficult. So an employee is much more prone to the activities of HR headhunters, it is easier to lose an employee, because he does not have a bond with the team, so he does not care who he works for. That's the first thing. Second, conflicts arise, because a written text is often misunderstood. When people discuss a problem over the [web] chat, suddenly there is a problem that one is too critical, while in personal contacts, that would not happen. Because the intention of the speaker would be clear. Here [during online work] such conflicts appear, fortunately they are not very frequent, but they are present. So, generally, I support work in the office. The change in our [firm] policy that before the pandemic we had a possibility to work remotely one or two days a month, this is what our employees were allowed to do. And now, after the first lockdown wave, when they came back to the office, it was negotiated that they can work remotely two days a week. So the whole pandemic imposed the policy of online work, imposed a change in our work policy. (I-30, IT services)

The advantage of my work is that I can do it from any place on earth, now in the time of the pandemic. And I know, it is contrary to what I said before, that I am not an advocate of remote work. But I have a little bit of distrust towards my employees, who would work remotely. Everyone has their advantages and disadvantages, my disadvantage is less trust about their diligence. (I-30, IT services)

Freelance self-employed individuals appreciate the freedom and family time resulting from remote work; on the contrary, business

owners who employ dependent workers articulate other considerations. The narratives show contrasting views of people looking at digitalization, either from the perspective of individual well-being (workers) or business productivity (entrepreneurs). Digitalization in the longer term may lead to lower work efficiency, nonproductivity and lower attachment to a particular workplace and co-workers. In terms of lifestyle choices, this may lead to more independence and diminishing willingness to remain in the same job for a longer time.

5 | CONSEQUENCES OF SUPER-DIGITALIZATION

The consequences of super-digitalization are examined in the sphere of economic activities and in the area of private life, including its cultural and social aspects. New dimensions of privilege permeate the various interconnected forms of capital: economic, social and cultural. They are visible in such areas as mechanisms of mobility, financial management, combining work and private life and relations within households. In the case of migrants, they have a special meaning, as the migrant lifestyle is very much connected with transnational networks, unique ways of consumption deferment and other saving strategies. This analysis emphasizes the proliferation and mutually conditioning effects of online activities in various spheres of migrants' lives and additional transformations originating from the interplay of these factors (see also Vertovec, 2007, p. 1025). The crisis and super-digitalization as a defence mechanism have led to new structures of social advantage and disadvantage within migrant entrepreneurship.

5.1 | Economic dimension of super-digitalization: pandemic digital nomads as privileged migrants

The pandemic established new types of migrant privilege connected with the ability of some individuals to work or run a business online in the 'host' country while staying in their country of origin. The Covid-19 crisis enabled new forms of geographic arbitrage, which refers to migrants, strategies of 'relocating day-to-day expenses to low-cost locations' (Girling, 2021; Hayes, 2014, p. 1953). Geographic arbitrage takes advantage of the cross-country variations in livelihood costs. In particular, this concerns combining high salaries with a low-cost life due to these two aspects being realized in different countries. Paradoxically, the new mechanisms of geographic arbitrage mirror some trends which have so far occurred in low-skilled groups. The traditionally popular strategy in the case of low-skilled migrants is circulation, which includes working abroad and spending money in the country of origin. In such cases, the migration of individuals did not transform into family or settlement migration, as the family remained in the country of origin, where the money was also spent. Circulation is no longer a necessary condition to take advantage of reduced living costs. Currently, this type of arbitrage is becoming a domain of highly skilled individuals who run their own firms and can

work remotely. Some migrant entrepreneurs become digital nomads, who do not have to reside where their enterprise is located. In comparison with 'regular' digital nomads who tend to combine online work and foreign travel for pleasure (Nash et al., 2018; Reichenberger, 2017), the pandemic digital nomads are different. They do not travel for leisure and do not seek the tourist experience. They travel to be in a low-cost location and attempt to stay longer in a single place.

For such migrant entrepreneurs, return migration to Poland and running a firm in the United Kingdom is a cost reduction strategy. As the narratives demonstrate, this includes not paying rent in the United Kingdom or avoiding high living costs. Earning an income in the United Kingdom and spending it on their life in Poland allows migrants to cut spending and generate savings. This strategy became particularly beneficial in 2021, when the value of the British pound suddenly rose in relation to the Polish zloty in foreign exchanges.

First, we do not perform, there are no concerts. Financially, I managed to get by, and even succeeded. It is better than it ever was, because I went to Poland for several weeks, I did not pay rent. I taught online, remotely, so I earned money practically all this time. There was financial assistance from the government. I did not have to travel that much, so the money stayed in my pocket. When it comes to teaching, everything remains as it was (I-29, female, pianist)

I am connecting from Poland, I came to Poland for Christmas and I just did not leave, because I did not see a necessity, and in the current situation, where returning to England would be difficult because of the tests, the self-isolation... I decided that it does not matter whether I work from here or there, it is the same work at the computer, it does not matter whether I am in the office or not. My business partner is there, he manages the physical part, the commodities in the magazine, he manages it all. So there is no difference for me whether I am there on the spot, or here, working from Poland. And so I have been in Poland for over three months (I-32, male, transport; interviewed in March 2021)

In the first narrative, the context of cost reduction is very strong. In the second narrative, the long-term stay in the country of origin is constructed as something more spontaneous. It was not planned, but happened because of the restrictions on international travel. The respondent wanted to avoid the costs of travelling to England, both personal (self-isolation) as well as financial (costs of compulsory coronavirus tests for the whole family). Therefore, he and his family prolonged his stay. Running a British business from Poland has another significant advantage, namely, the costs of childcare. In Poland migrant parents can count on the participation of grandparents in childcare. This is also an economic cost which may encourage running the business from another country.

Family issues become increasingly important in shaping migration decisions. More than in pre-pandemic times, they become a decisive factor in making the choice between remaining in the country of immigration or returning (even temporarily) to the country of origin. Of course, this is not identical across all life phases and stages of family life. In the case of families with children of school age, the freedom to make such decisions is limited: during the periods of fewer restrictions, schools are promptly re-opened, so children should remain in the country where the school is located. In the case of migrants who do not have children or have very small children, family and private life factors are prioritized. This includes the desire to spend time with elderly parents or the possibility of obtaining additional help with childcare from grandparents. When the work is performed remotely, these arguments gain additional validity, because they are not restricted by the necessity to remain abroad due to professional duties. 'Traditional' digital nomads take leisure and travel into account in their mobility decisions, while the pandemic digital nomads focus on family factors and the opportunities of tightening or renewing private and family bonds.

I came [to the UK] eleven years ago, and all my stays in Poland would be for a week or two. And they were never holidays, it was usually one meeting after another, so in the end I came back more tired than relaxed. Now there is a possibility to work from anywhere I want, from any place. So I thought that it may be a good opportunity to return home for two or three months, catch up with my parents and brother and on this occasion have a go, see whether I can enter that market being there, if there is any interest among the people I know. Because this is the easiest way to start this kind of market penetration. It is bound to be possible to enter that market from England. But as I say, it is a combination of personal and business reasons. If there is this opportunity, then why not, when my parents are still here, I can kill two birds with one stone (I-36, male, forex)

The growing acceptance of digitalized activities is multidimensional and includes various institutions. It concerns various dimensions of business conduct, which facilitates geographic arbitrage. The legal aspect of super-digitalization encompasses the state's more positive approach to online services and broadening opportunities for remote contact with public institutions. This is a continuation of a trend which was already present for years. The United Kingdom was very open to online services even before the pandemic: respondents have mentioned registering as self-employed online and the issuing of settled or presettled status also takes place online. However, the pandemic brought even more digitalization in this regard, especially concerning court cases, which can now be dealt with online. Interactions with official institutions sometimes lead to discriminatory outcomes (Fox et al., 2015) and such ethnic bias may be prompted during offline contact by various ethnicities, accents or patterns of personal

interaction. The additional value of new digitized solutions for migrant communities may be the minimization of personal prejudice.

Limitations of potential geographic arbitrage arise from employers' attitudes, rather than from the policies of official state institutions. Obviously, not only entrepreneurial activities, but also the work of employees may be performed remotely. In this context the issue of distrust towards employees has additional significance. The employer's approach shapes the opportunities of becoming a pandemic digital nomad. One respondent, who considered transition to online work from Poland, indicated that his partner was obliged to go to her office once a week, even though her work was conducted online. This respondent (previously self-employed, but remaining in dependent employment during the interview) planned to work online from Poland in 2 years' time; however, he recognized the necessity of achieving a high level of trust from his current employer and strengthening his position within the company. This demonstrates that in the case of migrants on work contracts decisions to work from another country cannot be made as fast as in the case of migrant entrepreneurs. They require more time and the employer's consent, even if the work counts as highly skilled and can be carried out remotely.

5.2 | Super-digitalization in migrants' private lives: pandemic structures of privilege and disadvantage

Privilege connected with super-digitalization opens up new chances in the context of free time and private life. Restricted travel and the necessity (or opportunity) to work online influences not only cross-border mobility. It also affects travel within the United Kingdom and gives the possibility to reduce commuting costs and business travel. This is perceived as a positive development which allows entrepreneurs a more relaxed lifestyle with increased time for leisure and self-realization.

[The pandemic] is definitely significant, I see many positive things. Because before it happened, I travelled all the time, I lived out of a suitcase, I used to come home on Friday evening, and on Sunday I left home. So I didn't have much time at home, travelling all the time, at the airport, in hotels, in London. So for me, the pandemic enabled me to work remotely. I give lectures online, and do translations online. It enabled me to live at home a bit. It gave me more time, because the time which I lost on commuting I can use for sports, walking, reading books just for pleasure. I have to read, but I cannot always read for pleasure. With regard to my earnings, I do earn money, but I do not spend that much (I-12, female, translation)

The pandemic and online work also facilitated the consumption of digital culture. Instead of visiting cinemas and bookshops, attending concerts and theatres, individuals use streaming services,

e-books and online platforms. These new patterns of leisure affect migrants and migrant firms. Migrants have more direct access to national/ethnic culture. The result is a decreasing demand for the services of ethnic intermediaries, diminishing customer interest in initiatives such as Polish concerts, cultural events and material 'ethnic' culture (e.g., books). Emerging patterns of digital consumption are reflected in new migrant businesses: one respondent established an e-learning enterprise during the Covid-19 pandemic. This example demonstrates that the immobility associated with the coronavirus crisis was a positive experience for some migrants, who used the additional time and savings to implement business innovations and develop new ideas. New migrant firms focus on digital consumers. This constitutes a change from the previous forms of Polish migrant entrepreneurship, where 'geographic and cultural proximity' factors were found to be important in recognizing business opportunities, accessing markets and resources (Lassalle & Johnston, 2018). The recipients of new migrant services are required to have adequate digital skills, whereas the consumers' ethnicity, country of origin or residence and migrant status are less important. In this sense, super-digitalization leads to a de-ethnicized approach to potential customers.

It is not the same any more. Geography does not play a role [in attracting customers]. So when I am looking at the customers who register for new events, it is difficult to say whether they are from the UK. Judging by the hours of transaction, they may be from other continents, they just understand English. (...) Working from home turned out to be a blessing almost. The amount of free time, and generally the slowing down, very much fostered productivity. (...) With regard to the business, because our business is 100% based on online technologies, the pandemic does not matter, maybe it even helps in this venture (I-51, male, e-learning)

The opportunities to benefit from super-digitalization and immobility are affected by the family situation, such as taking care of small children in the case of female entrepreneurs. Childcare obligations are defined as a major hardship during lockdowns. In such cases, immobility becomes a hindrance. Online schooling leads to passing the duties of daily childcare from school teachers to parents, particularly mothers. It enforces the reorganization of the rhythm of the day and modifies the working arrangements. Online and remote work leads to an accumulation of obligations, which encompass both the home duties as well as the digitalized work in one's own enterprise.

[The pandemic] affected my personal life more than my professional life, because as we all know the schools were closed, I had to combine work and childcare, educate my child, because the child has online classes. And I had to work at the same time. I often changed the rhythm of the day, I worked in the evenings, I had to make up for what I

did not do in the daytime, because it is very difficult to combine it all. The child has questions each and every moment, or wants to eat sweets. Each and every moment, I had to stop my work, explain maths, or other issues. In this regard—yes, a lot has changed, the influence of the pandemic was huge (I-33, female, translation)

This quote shows how the simultaneous transition to online activities in various professions sets up new divisions, opportunities and challenges for migrants' work. It is noteworthy that the narrative about combining business activities and new pandemic childcare obligations comes from a woman. The new forms of privilege and exclusion are often parallel to the existing structures of advantage and oppression based on gender, class or age (Case et al., 2012, p. 4). Online schooling may enforce the asymmetries between male and female digital entrepreneurs through an uneven burden of childcare obligations. In migrant cultures with more traditional perceptions of gender roles, the gendered patterns of childcare may be particularly strong.

6 | LIMITATIONS OF SUPER-DIGITALIZATION: OFFLINE ENTREPRENEURS AND THE NEW PRECARIETY

Digitalization is not available to everyone, but it affects everyone: it also has consequences for offline entrepreneurs by creating and enhancing new mechanisms of exclusion. Their explanation requires taking into account the emerging challenges and differentiation patterns which go beyond the well-described divisions between highly skilled migrants in prestigious branches and low-skilled migrants in less profitable sectors. Precarization of work takes new forms: it is shaped by the limitations of digitalization in some ethnic enterprises, which may occur regardless of migrants' education and skill levels. Precarious self-employment is not a new concept. This notion has been used not only with regard to traditional employment, but also in entrepreneurship studies, including migrant entrepreneurship research. Many aspects may contribute towards the disadvantageous position of some individuals who run their own businesses: low profits from entrepreneurial activities combined with the time-consuming character of engagements or the forced character of self-employment (Glavin et al., 2019). The concept of precarious work concerns work which is unstable, low-paid and lacking guarantees of adequate social protection (Standing, 2011). The crisis caused by the pandemic accelerates the development of new precarity among migrants, including migrant entrepreneurs. This precarity is connected with offline work and the inability to perform key tasks remotely. Under the new precarity, business is performed in the circumstances of increasing multiple threats—both economic (diminishing customer base) and health-related (danger of infection). Some offline entrepreneurs do not have the status of essential

workers, which in addition undermines their position and the perception of their work.

The new inequalities are caused by the uneven intensity of digitalization and not the complete lack of it. What is significant is how much a migrant entrepreneur has to change their business performance: whether digitalization is a minor adaptation activity or whether it requires a significant amount of work and a radical remodelling of a business. In the cases of certain branches which are particularly popular among migrant entrepreneurs (gastronomy, construction, hospitality), digitalization cannot encompass the key tasks and activities. Some migrant entrepreneurs have digitalized selected parts of their activities, such as enabling online restaurant orders through the Internet. However, when the major part of business activities can only be conducted offline, the firms cannot meaningfully profit from digital opportunities. Partial digitalization serves as an attempt to minimize the loss, as in the gastronomy sector, which of course cannot be easily digitized.

I know that there are restrictions, one has to sanitize, socially distance, one has to monitor everything, I know all the restrictions and I follow them somehow. But this is impossible, my business would be a long time... If I did not admit a guest who does not want to scan the Covid application, or who does not want to leave their name, surname, and telephone number, I would not be in business any more. (...) If I followed the rules as the government wants, concerning personal data, or that I can ask guests who do not leave their data to leave is absurd. This is how it looks (I-14, female, gastronomy)

Not all digital entrepreneurs are able to profit from the pandemic. There are many definitions and nuances of digital entrepreneurship. Some entrepreneurs use digital platforms to offer their services, but have work which still requires being physically present (platform workers, such as taxi drivers). The divisions between 'digital entrepreneurs', semidigital 'platform workers' within the gig economy and 'offline entrepreneurs' are vague. Access to online tools is not necessarily a sign of social advancement or of high-quality jobs. This type of work, partly mediated by online tools, is also typical for the gig economy. Migrants constitute a considerable share of platform workers, whose economic activities are based on orders placed on online platforms. Due to the lack of stability and unpredictable income prone to fluctuations, this study can be defined as precarious. Self-employed migrants are also present among platform workers, which demonstrates that various forms of migrant activities on the host labour markets are difficult to define within a simple division of ambitious, prestigious 'digital work' and precarious 'offline work'.

Just like the business owners working online, offline entrepreneurs also develop strategies of resilience and persistence, but the digital dimension of these activities is far less important. The growing digitalization of entrepreneurship and intrusive character of the IT environment also makes it difficult to implement the informal

strategies of cost reduction and loss minimization, such as activities in the grey zone. Other crucial methods and approaches play a key role: (i) learning how to avoid legal restrictions and (ii) using complementary employment in addition to one's own business. The most innovative and potentially profitable strategies, such as the search for new markets or moving to low-cost locations, are far less available to them than to the (super)digitized entrepreneurs.

7 | CONCLUSION: AREAS OF SUPER-DIGITALIZATION AS DIMENSIONS OF DIGITAL PRIVILEGE

In the industrialized economy individuals' presence in the workplace translated directly into the material effects of work. In the knowledge-based economy and times of widespread availability of IT infrastructure at private homes spending time at the office and the efficiency of work are not necessarily correlated and remote work may be even more effective. The obligation for workers to be present at the workplace in the prepandemic times is to some extent a derivative of those former economic circumstances. At the same time, the process of differentiation of migrant communities occurs. Migrants' activities on the host labour markets are changing: while the *gastarbeiter* model of unskilled short-term mobility prevailed 50 years ago, highly skilled migrants currently participate in key sectors of the knowledge economy and pursue activities associated with information processing. They can be successfully performed online and remotely. The Covid-19 pandemic provided an opportunity to work remotely from another country, especially in the case of

migrants who are highly skilled and independent, developing their own business activities in prestigious branches such as translation, the arts and financial services. The crisis has emphasized the difference between privileged migrants and foreigners who work in unskilled sectors. Migrant entrepreneurs deserve special attention when studying these processes. Self-employed individuals are more independent and capable of shaping the social environment of their activities, by choosing the workplace more freely than employees, for example. They are at the forefront of the digitalization of economic activities.

The pandemic and crisis generated new ways of responding to difficulties and new strategies of coping on the host labour markets. Access to digitalization constitutes an increasingly significant axis of socioeconomic divisions. Migrants' transnational lives and business strategies also provide broader opportunities in the era of remote work. While the significance of digitalization for labour activities is generally acknowledged by research, its unique effects on migrant work and migrant entrepreneurship in particular are not that widely discussed. This paper addressed this study gap and indicated how online business activities affect digital transition in other spheres of migrants' lives. As the table below demonstrates, the consequences of super-digitalization go beyond the labour market activities of migrants. Super-digitalization does not only denote 'quantitative changes', but encapsulates the growing complexity of migrants' transition to online activities (see Vertovec, 2007 for his explanation of superdiversity). The categories described in Table 1 are open and do not exclude the possibility of other aspects of migrant lives being modified by super-digitalization.

TABLE 1 Areas of super-digitalization as dimensions of privilege

Dimension	Change	Significance for migrants and migration
Economic	Remote and online work	Privilege of defining one's own work space. Place of work and place of residence are increasingly disparate. Return migration as a cost reduction strategy. Emergence of pandemic digital nomads. Privileged access to global human capital for super-digitized entrepreneurs: employment of contractors from other countries, even by microentrepreneurs.
Cultural	Changing balance of work and private life	Expanded spatial outreach as a privilege of super-digitized enterprises. Digital activities beyond ethnic niches. De-ethnicization of the customer profile of super-digitized migrant enterprises.
	Digital cultural consumption	Migrants have more direct access to national/ethnic culture => decreasing demand for services of ethnic intermediaries.
Family	Remote and online schooling; differentiated sense of control over digital work/digital public education	Privilege of more autonomous decision making: overarching influence of family factors on migration decisions (return/remain); nonlabour factors more crucial than work-related factors.
Social	Differentiated availability of super-digitalization for various social groups	Exacerbating inequalities within migrant communities (privileged highly skilled remote jobs/low skilled offline workers), enhancing divisions between 'digital entrepreneurs', semidigital 'platform workers' within the gig economy, 'offline entrepreneurs'.
Legal	Digital infrastructures enabling online interactions with state and public representatives	Opportunity to overcome some uncertainties and obstacles associated with migrant status: for example, reducing additional lengthy bureaucratic procedures or prejudice connected with perception of ethnicity in face-to-face contacts.

Note: Own elaboration on the basis of the qualitative empirical study of Polish migrant entrepreneurs.

While the study concerned Polish migrants in the United Kingdom, the findings have a more universal significance, identifying processes which may appear in various migrant spaces and communities. The analysis sheds light on the heterogeneity of every migrant group, divisions occurring within migrant communities and uneven access to the new forms of privilege. On the one hand, migrant entrepreneurs experience super-digitalization: all aspects and areas of business performance are infiltrated by the Internet and digital tools. The super-digitalization of entrepreneurial tasks and ventures challenges the current significance of mobility and cross-border activities. For some entrepreneurs who experienced this process, the place of work and the place of residence are no longer the same. It is less often required that both are situated in a single location. It has a special meaning for those migrants who are still attached to the country of origin. Remote work where all activities are fully online facilitates geo-arbitrage: return migration for reducing the cost of living, while retaining the business venture in the country of emigration. Remote work may change some patterns of labour mobility, establishing a distinction between 'labour migration' and 'work abroad'. The particular social significance of the pandemic within the Polish migrant group may stem especially from the fact that this community has experienced the effects of Brexit in parallel with the coronavirus crisis. The Brexit context is also important here, especially in the case of potential newcomers, that is individuals who consider making a decision to migrate. The trend towards staying in a single country and managing a firm remotely, may be enforced by the legal difficulties and bureaucratic procedures which act as a discouragement from obtaining a permanent residence permit. On the other hand, limited digitalization opportunities shape the experiences of the new precarity. It encompasses the necessity to work offline in the circumstances of health risks and legal restrictions imposed by the states during lockdowns and it is even made worse by the decreasing interest of clients and customers. Moreover, some branches which work fully offline (especially the construction sector) experience a loss of workers, who return to the country of origin. In the field of migrant entrepreneurship, we can observe the effect of accumulated advantage (Merton, 1988). Those migrants who work mainly offline, lose their income and are threatened by additional sanctions for not following the restrictions. Those migrants who can work fully online are additionally rewarded by the opportunity to apply various strategies of profit maximization, such as working from the country of origin.

There are many definitions and nuances of digital entrepreneurship, which may be more or less profitable for various groups. For the businesses which can only implement partial digitalization, the use of online tools remains a marginal activity, which may prevent them from a total loss of income, but has a very limited developmental potential. Such businesses adapt to the pandemic situation, but do not take business advantage of the new circumstances. This concerns especially those entrepreneurs who use digital platforms to offer their services, but have work which still requires being physically present (platform workers). At the same time, other (super-digitized) entrepreneurs performing highly skilled tasks can work fully online.

Although digitalization of some tasks within a business does not does not make a given enterprise a 'pandemic winner', super-digitalization of all tasks and work of an enterprise allows some migrant entrepreneurs to take advantage of new privileges and opportunities to generate substantial profit during the pandemic.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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