Online job search discouragement: How employment platforms and digital exclusion shape the experience of low-qualified job seekers?

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Abstract

How do people experience the platform-mediated job search process? We explore this question based on a sample of in-depth interviews (n = 20) with low-qualified, unemployed Spanish job seekers. Our main finding shows that the ways they use Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) negatively impact their engagement in online job search activities. Based on our findings, we develop a framework of online job search discouragement revolving around *crafting online profiles*, *applying for jobs*, *reviewing application statuses,* and integrating the tensions these activities carry for the experience and the outcome of the platform-mediated job search.

Keywords

Platform-mediated job search, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), low-qualified job seekers, job search discouragement, digital exclusion.

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Introduction

Employment platforms have become the main outlet to search and find a job across job seekers segments (Backman & Hedenus, 2019; Bonet et al., 2013; Garg & Telang, 2018; Janta & Ladkin, 2013). Prior scholarship has started to examine the implications of the digitalization of job search by focusing on highly-qualified professionals such as knowledge workers, designers, athletes, journalists, and consultants (e.g., Arvidsson et al., 2016; Dumont & Ots, 2020; Pagis & Ailon, 2017; Vallas & Christin, 2018). Indeed, platforms carry new demands and expectations for these digitally savvy job seekers alongside several tensions, including the pressure to curate an online profile and promote oneself to gain visibility and attract recruiters (e.g., Pultz & Sharone, 2020; Sharone, 2017; Sheehan, 2022; Vallas & Cummins, 2015). These new demands and expectations have also transformed the nature of job search advice and its implications for employment outcomes (e.g., Belot et al., 2022; Ben Dhia et al., 2022).

While most job seekers now use the Internet for work and employment purposes, the experience of low-qualified job seekers has largely gone underrecognized. Most digital inclusion programs for low-qualified job seekers focus on writing CVs and persistent talk of upskilling and improving employment prospects (e.g., Futurelearn, 2023; Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition, 2023; Digital Skills and Jobs Platform, 2023), and investigating their experience is critical because inequalities in digital skills lead to exclusion for the most vulnerable groups (e.g., Calderón Gómez, 2021; van Deursen & Helsper, 2015; van Deursen et al., 2017). Indeed, the possession of digital skills and Internet use does not automatically translate into beneficial outcomes (e.g., Ragnedda, 2017; van Deursen et al., 2017; Van Deursen & Helsper, 2018). In this context, low-qualified job seekers use employment platforms but may lack the skills to do so adequately, negatively impacting the outcome of this process. Hence,

overlooking their experiences undermines our understanding of how new technologies shape employment and job search.

We start addressing this gap by presenting findings from an interview-based study with Spanish low-qualified, unemployed job seekers, using employment platforms. Specifically, we ask: How do low-qualified, unemployed, job seekers experience the platform-mediated job search process in different sectors? Our respondents were looking for jobs such as line operators, customer service and retail workers, childcare workers, call centre workers, truck unloaders, cleaners, and janitors. We initially aimed to capture how they engage with the job search process by identifying the platforms they use, the activities they perform, and the outcome of this process. Nevertheless, during interviews they systematically described the challenges involved. Not only did they struggle to understand how platforms worked and what was expected from them, they also applied to dozens of vacancies every week but rarely interacted with recruiters as an outcome of their application.

We argue that the platform-mediated context in which job search unfolds largely shapes the experience of this process in a way that may negatively impacts the engagement of job seekers. Specifically, we find that the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) by low-qualified job seekers is a powerful proxy for job search discouragement. To explain this finding, we develop a framework of online job search discouragement that facilitates the analysis of the subjective platform-mediated job search experience. This framework identifies three activities—*crafting online profiles*, *applying for jobs,* and *reviewing application statuses*—performed by job seekers and connects them with several key tensions. It explains how a limited understanding of ICTs coupled with information and communication asymmetries may turn the online job search process into a black box. This opacity creates anxiety, frustration, and desperation, generating negative experiences which discourage job seekers from using ICTs for job search purposes. This pattern of ICTs use among low-qualified

job seekers increases unequal opportunities across labour markets, resulting in economic exclusion and well-being deficits.

Our framework and findings contribute to scholarship on employment, job search, and digital inequalities. First, we contribute to employment and job search research by shedding new light on the experience of an overlooked segment of job seekers. The framework enables the identification of new tensions and connects these tensions to definitional and operational features of the platforms. It provides a theoretical explanation of the implications of these tensions for the engagement of job seekers, primarily low-qualified segments, in the platform-mediated job search process. Second, we contribute to digital inequalities research by providing empirical evidence showing that these inequalities lead to digital and subsequently economic exclusion in the domain of employment and job search. We also show their negative implications on people well-being. Our framework explains why this process unfolds because it centres on the experience of job seekers and connects existing structural explanations with an analysis of their practices and perceptions. Hence, this article develops new theory about the tangible outcomes of digital inequalities for the most vulnerable groups.

Theoretical framing

The rise of the platform-mediated job search process

ICTs have dramatically transformed employment and job search processes (Backman & Hedenus, 2019; Bonet et al., 2013; Coverdill & Finlay, 2017; Garg & Telang, 2018; Janta & Ladkin, 2013). These transformations are embedded in the rise of platforms as a core player in global labour markets and that reshape how people manage and experience work (e.g., Gandini, 2016; Petriglieri et al., 2019; Stark & Pais, 2020; Vallas & Schor, 2020). Employers and labour

market intermediaries (i.e., employment agencies and freelance head hunters) massively rely on employment platforms to facilitate transactions between job seekers and employers (Bonet et al., 2013; Sharone, 2013). These platforms mediate job search and enable extensive screening involving a large number of candidates (e.g., Coverdill & Finlay, 2017; Gershon, 2017). Additionally, employers and recruiters create digital application systems accessible via their websites, where job seekers register to apply for positions based on job type and qualification level (Marchal et al., 2007).

These transformations profoundly impact how people experience job search. For instance, platforms create new demands for job seekers about the activities to be undertaken to identify and apply for vacancies (e.g., Garg & Telang, 2018; Sharone, 2017). Public job training programs help learning new skills but have limited positive implications for the time spent looking for a job, the employment outcome, and the well-being of the job seeker, specifically tips to improve search and recommendations of new occupations and locations (Ben Dhia et al., 2022). Nevertheless, targeted advice may have a positive impact on the reintegration of long-term unemployed job seekers into the labour market by enabling job seekers to broaden the scope of their search (Belot et al., 2022).

These new demands and the characteristics of platforms carry tensions. Among these tensions is the pressure to gain visibility by displaying personal information and photos generates anxiety, for instance among white collars using LinkedIn (Sharone, 2017). In fact, job seekers may prefer not to share personal information and struggle to render their resumes noticeable to recruiters (e.g., Gershon, 2017; Sheehan, 2021, 2022). The personal branding techniques *en vogue* among highly qualified professionals such as knowledge workers, world-class athletes, freelance journalists, and consultants, reflect the importance of these new demands and the expectations of job seekers (Arvidsson et al., 2016; Dumont & Ots, 2020; Hearn, 2010; Pagis & Ailon, 2017). The results of these strategies are hardly quantifiable, but

the work of content creation and impression management on employment platforms can result in self-blame, loss of self-confidence, and anxiety (Pultz & Sharone, 2020; Sheehan, 2022; Vallas & Cummins, 2015; Van Oort, 2015).

This literature offers great insights into the role played by platforms in shaping the experience of highly-qualified workers engaged in job search but says little about low-qualified job seekers. While platforms were primarily designed for highly-qualified workers (e.g., Gandini et al., 2016; Tifferet & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2018), they are increasingly used across sectors. The recent Covid-19 pandemic allegedly accelerated and broadened their scope to job seekers across qualification levels, making the investigation of the experience of low-qualified job seekers of empirical and theoretical importance for developing a comprehensive understanding of how people navigate the penetration of platforms into job search processes. Recent research focusing on the causes and consequences of digital exclusion provide valuable tools to achieve this aim.

From the digital divide to digital inequalities and exclusion

Digital exclusion research has identified several digital divides reflecting inequalities in ICTs use. Differences in Internet use initially revolved around disparities in Internet access, and were theorized as a first-level digital divide corresponding to technological gaps between those who could and those who could not access ICTs (Attewell, 2001). Disadvantaged groups, for instance, were often unable to access the Internet (van Dijk, 2020), making race, age, sex, and socioeconomic status powerful predictors of systematic inequalities in Internet use (Yates et al., 2020). The development of Internet raised a second level of the digital divide revolving around the unequal distribution of digital skills across the population (Hargittai, 2002). The skills needed to use digital devices—digital skills—became the indicator to evaluate the digital

divide (Hargittai, 2002; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2010; Hargittai and Hinnnat, 2008). The third digital divide, then, centred on the differential offline outcomes resulting from similar Internet use and shaped by inequalities in skills and opportunities to benefit from the content, services, and interactions available online (van Deursen & Helsper, 2015; Ragnedda, 2017). Internet use does not automatically translate into specific outcomes, even when people access the same platforms and content (van Deursen et al., 2017; Van Deursen & Helsper, 2018).

Digital inequalities impact multiple areas of people's offline activities that belong to the economic, cultural, social, and personal fields and that bring benefits to people for going online (Helsper, 2012). Accordingly, those engaging and benefiting from one digital field would still be dominated by those with additional resources who would take more advantage of Internet use. Additionally, Internet use for the economic, cultural, social, or personal fields, can generate benefits in other domains, and digital skills and online activities have important implications for these domains independently of their characteristics (Van Deursen & Helsper, 2018). Finally, while the educational background shapes digital exclusion across domains (e.g., Robinson et al, 2020; Helsper, 2021), digital capital enables a reconversion process between economic, social, and cultural capital, with the economic capital remaining the most basic form of digital exclusion (Calderón Gómez, 2021)

Digital inequalities are significant in education, health, political participation, and social capital (Robinson et al., 2015, 2020), but there is still a dearth of research explaining how digital skills provide tangible but disparate outcomes (Helsper, 2021; Van Deursen & Helsper, 2018; Yates et al., 2020). Filling this gap is important given the unequal distribution of digital skills among people and the impact of digital inequalities on their psychosocial well-being (e.g., Büchi et al., 2018, 2018; Helsper & van Deursen, 2017; Robinson et al., 2020). Digital skills provide specific affordances based on educational backgrounds (Büchi et al., 2016; van Deursen & Helsper, 2015; van Deursen et al., 2017). People with higher levels of

income and education benefit from better access to technology and the Internet, resulting in more advanced digital skills and strategic use of ICTs (e.g., Calderón Gómez, 2021; van Deursen & Helsper, 2015; van Deursen et al., 2017). By contrast, those having limited access to education develop limited digital skills although they show similar levels of Internet access and use (Helsper, 2021).

These literatures highlight several important motivations for this article. First, the scholarship on employment and job search originally focused on the experience of highly skilled workers using employment platforms to search and apply for vacancies. Yet, the Covid 19 pandemic has accelerated the digitalization of job search to people with lower levels of qualifications, calling for studying the experience of low-qualified job seekers. This is critical, second, because structural inequalities may reproduce in the digital realm and shape the outcomes resulting from using employment platforms differently according to skills and use patterns. The scholarship on digital inequalities, however, has yet to investigate the extent of digital inequalities in the field of work and employment beyond a simple description of inequalities in digital skills (Robinson et al., 2015, 2020). This article connects these bodies of scholarships to uncover how digital inequalities shape the experience of the online job search for low-qualified job seekers.

Methods

We use data from a larger mixed-methods project on online job search, including a national survey of Spanish online job seekers (N = 1,103) and 86 semi-structured interviews with job seekers and recruiters. For this article, we collected interview data over two years beginning in April 2020. Spain provides a valuable empirical setting because internet penetration (94% of households in 2021; INE, 2021) and unemployment rates are high. The Internet is widely used

for job search purposes, particularly by young people (OECD, 2019, 2021). In 2021, 20% of Spanish internet users engaged in online job search activities, including 37% of job seekers between the ages of 16 and 29 (Eurostat, 2022).

Sampling criteria

We built a sample of 20 low-qualified job seekers based on five criteria. First, we selected respondents who had the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), the Vocational Education and Training Certificate (GCE), or the Certificate of Higher Education (HNC). Second, they applied for jobs across sectors (e.g., education, housing, hotels, care, restaurants). Third, their age ranged between 20 and 30 or 50 and 59 and had varying levels of experience. Fourth, they were actively searching for a job. Indeed, our exploratory interviews revealed that the claim to be "looking for a job," was often not sustained in practice. Hence, we included job seekers who applied to dozens of vacancies per week on platforms (primarily Infojobs). Finally, we selected respondents from across the country given significant differences in unemployment rates and employment contexts across regions.

Our sample is highly diverse sample by gender, sector, and experience, but calls caution in two respects. First, our sample is small in size because of the exploratory nature of this study. Nevertheless, the reliability of interview data is not based on the number of interviews but on the quality of the content and on a careful sample procedure based on a diversity of experiences, (e.g., Lamont and Swidler, 2014; Langley and Meziani, 2020). Collecting quality content requires the integration of ongoing insights into interview guides to develop them iteratively to include and collect data on new and surprising insights (Small & Calarco, 2022). Second, our sample does not allow us to examine in-depth how specific variables such as gender and/or age might shape online job search experiences. Nevertheless, we found many similarities in the

ways older and younger job seekers use online job search platforms. We attribute this aspect to the training provided by public unemployment agencies and the widespread adoption of social media given that our respondents described using social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp daily. Table 1 presents demographic data for the sample.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Semi-structured interviews

We choose semi-structured interviews because they allow unearthing people's representations of their experiences of the job search process, providing us with an ideal tool to access the richness of people's lived experiences as they view them (Lamont & Swidler, 2014; Langley & Meziani, 2020). Given travel restrictions during the pandemic, we conducted all interviews via Zoom and Google Meet. Interviews lasted 60 minutes and were recorded and fully transcribed. We traduced and anonymized the empirical materials used in this article. During interviews, we asked job seekers to describe their search procedures and platforms and how they created their profiles. We also asked them to describe how platforms worked (i.e., based on algorithmic technologies) and the work performed by recruiters (i.e., selection criteria). Finally, we asked them to describe their job search experience. We accessed respondents' profiles and used this information to structure our guide. For instance, we asked respondents to walk us through their profile, to explain which sections were challenging to create, or to show what they considered to be a "good profile". Individual understandings vary and we contrasted and compared our interviews to increase reliability and to account for interviewing bias. Finally, we asked them to share written presentations of themselves and the vacancies they applied to.

Analytical procedure

We analysed our data by iterating between the analytical notes taken during and after the interviews and the interview data to generate insights that we contrasted with the literature to refine our emerging constructs. We began during data collection, when our initial interviewees emphasized the competitive and arbitrary nature of the online job search process. We asked them how they structured their search and they described how it negatively impacted their well-being. We narrowed data collection on these aspects and the tensions they expressed.

Next, we formally analysed our data guided by the general, empirical, question: How do people experience the online job search process? We identified and grouped their descriptions, specifically, how they searched for jobs online, used different platforms, created online profiles, identified relevant vacancies, communicated with recruiters, or interacted with other job seekers. We identified several tasks, compared individual experiences to unearth similarities, and developed categories to group and longitudinally organize these tasks. From these categories, we constructed the three activities presented in our framework, gradually refining our concrete labels into more analytical and abstract categories, and resulting into *crafting online profiles*, *applying for jobs,* and *reviewing application statuses*.

Finally, we identified recurrent challenges and analysed the resulting tensions in the interactions between job seekers and platforms (i.e., struggling to understand which information was expected on each section of a platform and feeling "technologically stupid"). We listed and connected these tensions to the features of the platforms (i.e., the visibility of other applications; the open-ended nature of the process). We used the literature on employment platforms to refine our conceptualization of these tensions (e.g., Pultz & Sharone, 2020; Sharone, 2017; Vallas & Christin, 2018). From there, we built analytical categories reflecting

how these tensions shaped job seekers' experience, namely *limited understanding, information asymmetry,* and *communication asymmetry*. We articulated them into a framework to theorize their impact on job seekers' experience as "online job search discouragement" and articulating platform-mediated activities, tensions, and implications for job seekers.

Findings

The platform-mediated job search process revolves around *crafting online profiles, applying for jobs*, and *reviewing application statuses*. This section examines each activity independently by unearthing its challenges and tensions and by analysing their implications for the job seekers' engagement.

Crafting online profiles

The platform-mediated job search process starts with creating, selecting, and organizing content to craft a profile. Our respondents unanimously find these tasks as challenging because of their limited knowledge and skills in the use of job search platforms as well as their discomfort about posting personal *and* professional information.

Crafting a profile requires understanding what content is expected and where to post. However, this understanding is not straightforward. Berta, a 19-year-old looking for a job in call centres, explains: "I only use Infojobs … I find it very difficult to understand [how the] Internet [works], the apps. It's not 'my thing'. I'm not very good at it." Yet, Berta uses Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp daily. She elaborates: "[I struggle] to search for the app online, to sign in, to create a profile, etc. I'm very clumsy with doing all that … so it's very taxing to me." In the same vein, Julia, a 24-year-old looking for work as a babysitter, describes

her struggle with the pressing expectation to engage in self-promotion by sharing content and gaining attention:

> I don't get along well with LinkedIn...I tried to use it, to create a good profile, but I [feel that] I'm not as good at it as other platforms…I just don't understand it well…I must publish stuff…like I must promote myself on the platform, I must attract followers, but I'm struggling with it…much more than I struggle with other platforms [such as Infojobs] to be honest.

Julia's discomfort with exposure emerges from the request to display both private and professional information to complete a profile. Likewise, Pep, a 22-year-old truck unloader, finds "embarrassing" to have a profile including information about his job experience and a description of his personal traits. He also shares with us his struggle to build a network because of his limited online social connections. Beyond the cases of Julia and Pep, we find that 18 of our respondents distinguish personal from professional connections and express embarrassment with their overlaps on the platform. Deborah, a 26-year-old with experience as a waitress, construction worker, and NGO street recruiter, nicely summarizes this point:

> Yes, that's right, it works as a social network and there's this ad that always pops up and says, "Add your contacts!" But why? Why? Why should I add people…I don't get it. Maybe it works if you add companies, but what is it…a social network or an online employment platform pretending to be a social network? If I'm looking for work, why should I want my friends in my network?

Beyond the confusion about the implicit purpose of the platforms, the quotes from Berta, Julia, and Deborah illustrate a shared belief among our respondents: they have limited technological knowledge and skills to use ICTs. This aspect appears when they craft online profiles as they struggle to identify and provide relevant information. When asked how she fills out her Infojobs profile, Sofia, a 24-year-old with experience as a waitress and cleaner, explains: "[Employment] websites require a user manual [to be filled out]…they ask for many things…and for a lot of information that is not relevant."

Additionally, while keywords are critical for recruiters and candidates alike to match vacancies and profiles, only four of our 20 respondents were aware of their existence and role. Beatriz, a 43-year-old with experience working at call centres and information desks, about keywords, explains to us when we ask if she uses keywords:

> To be honest I didn't know that companies use this type of… [pause while searching for the right word]…keywords! Yes, now I remember…we've been told about keywords during a job search training…they told us that many times those who do the first cut are not HR people, but the computer…if the computer detects that the CV has all the criteria, all these keywords, the "robot" selects the CV…But I didn't do it this way. I didn't use keywords.

The quote also reveals the opaque nature of the platforms. This generates self-doubts about the need to create content for their profiles and engage in self-promotion given their limited confidence in their digital skills to craft attractive profiles. For instance, we ask Delfina, a 42-year-old with experience as a waitress, kitchen assistant, and care worker, to show us how she describes her working skills in her Infojobs profile. While expect her to list the skills she views

as most valuable for recruiters, she prefers to focus on the challenging nature of content creation. Frustrated, she explains:

> I struggle to write. I struggle to express myself. I struggle…I'm afraid I will do it wrong…It takes me a lot of effort because the demand is huge…you must work on the presentation, on the CV, and all that so that it [the application] can be…attractive…[you must make sure] that the first thing they [recruiters] see catches their attention.

We do not use this data in this study but our interviews with recruiters reveal that many job seekers fail to fill out their profiles and simply upload their CVs instead. This is important because more than half of the recruiters explain being unable to access CVs given the extra fees required to view them.

Chief among the reason for failing to complete online profiles is the proliferation of job search platforms. Our respondents systematically complain that each platform requires creating a custom profile and reproducing their information according to specific requirements. Beatriz, for instance, is very eloquent on the implications of having to replicate her profile "again and again" for each platform. Further, she describes this operation as a source of anxiety:

> It undermines you psychologically. It affects you psychologically, and it affects you emotionally as well because you…must dedicate time… you must register on one website, then you must register on another website again, and again … It's not like you could sign up and you're ready to go.

Consequently, our respondents frequently give up on profile creation or provide the minimum information because they are exhausted, reflecting a limited understanding of platforms and of recruiters' common practice to reject incomplete profiles.

Applying for jobs

Broader patterns of ICTs use shape the use of employment platforms. This is particularly true because of most job seekers use mobile devices and real-time communication (e.g., SNS, notifications) to access platforms. Indeed, 17 of our respondents use their phone as a primary device to access platforms, which they do multiple times each day. Resulting, they are constantly notified on their phone about the publications of new vacancies matching their interests. Some, like Marta, complain about receiving too many phone notifications. She conveys well how this feature of platforms invades her everyday routine by saying with a mixed feeling of frustration and exhaustion:

> I wake up sending CVs, I go to bed sending CVs…I'm 35 and I consider myself a responsible person, willing to work and educated. I'm studying…Anyway…what do you think? I'm worthless? Sometimes you start thinking about it…and you also see that many people are in the same situation.

Echoing all our respondents, Marta has not been interviewed yet by any recruiter. She barely understands the situation and blames herself although she sends dozens of CVs daily, with negative implications for her sense of self-worth. Likewise, Stefania's job search routine starts from bed early in the morning when she accesses the Internet via her mobile phone to review ongoing applications and apply to new vacancies. Like those respondents who express a feeling

of being connected "24/7," Marta and Stefania's descriptions reflect the intense nature of the application process and its consequential exhaustion. This situation is particularly acute for those 17 respondents who describe receiving notifications about vacancies day and night.

Our respondents also believe that being among the first who apply to a vacancy matters. This is because of the hyper-competitiveness of the job market, which is rendered visible by the design of the platform. Berta, for instance, conveys well this aspect by explaining how hyper-competitiveness shapes the way she applies to vacancies:

> Sometimes there are many vacancies you could apply to, and you sign in, you try to see if you're lucky, to see whether you're among the first, so at least they [the recruiters] see your CV early…Because if you're number 5,000…you won't make it, but if you are among the first [there is a chance.]…Thus, I sign in quickly, and I'm always [applying immediately] from my phone.

ICTs allow to access and apply to a larger number of vacancies. However, the visibility given to the volume of applicants evidences the highly competitive nature of this process and triggers additional pressure. For instance, expressing a mix of anger and desperation, José Luis believes that the volume of applicants jeopardizes the visibility of his application:

> Take Infojobs, for instance. You apply to any type of vacancy and there are at least between 700 and 1,000 people who applied to the posting…I've applied for a vacancy with 2,500 candidates…I know they will never call me…no doubt. Why should they call me? But I sent it anyway, just in case I'm lucky.

Likewise, Berta describes how this aspect negatively influences her motivation to prepare and send new applications:

> [When I see the number] Thus…I do not invest so much time and effort in crafting a nice CV anymore. What are my chances among 5,000 people? It makes sense, no? Why should they call me if they only look for one person [out of 5,000]? That's bizarre…Each time I'm less and less motivated to search for a job. Each time they ask for previous experience, and I send my CV…out of 5,000 people you can be sure that at least 3,000 will have experience…Without experience, they won't call me ever.

The dearth of offline interaction with employers or recruiters reinforces the belief that online job search platforms are useless. This belief is associated with the procedural change from physically handing a CV to a potential employer to exclusively using online applications. For instance, Gerard, a 35-year-old desperately searching for a job at a call centre, describes online applications as "very weird". For this reason, he explains that he keeps visiting the offices of potential employers against their explicit recommendation to do so published alongside the vacancy. Likewise, Delfina views online applications more uncertain than walk-ins:

> It's hard to explain…you don't have the confidence that they will call you [when applying online]…but if you go there personally you can see first-hand if you make a good impression. You can speak about your experience. You can explain things. You have more opportunities [than when applying online].

Additionally, our respondents believe that the information they provide about themselves on platforms cannot provide recruiters with the "right" perceptions of their skills and abilities. This belief is not a characteristic of older job seekers but is shared across respondents. Berta, for instance, explains: "On a website, they can't see how I *really* am [emphasis added]. They just see words…So they can't see if I'm worth the job…on the phone, on the screen, they can't see shit". Her emphasis on "really" reflects the belief that the information provided by the online profile offer recruiters a biased view of her skills and personality.

The belief that online job search platforms do not enable coherent self-presentation prompts four of our respondents to strive identify interlocutors offline. The setup of the application process complicates their task. For instance, Roger, who looks for delivery work, describes the hopeless nature of his efforts to contact and physically meet employers:

> I've tried to contact the person in charge, but I've never been successful. I've never found a direct contact. I've never found a number, an email address, or nothing…because for these vacancies you only upload your CV. You can search if you want to, but they will never provide you with a number, or with an email address, or with the name of whom to contact!

When asked why they try contacting the recruiter even though job postings explicitly stated not to do so, our respondents express hopes to gather additional information about the vacancy and the application process. They believe that making personal contact with recruiters prior to sending their online application increases the chance for the latter to be reviewed.

Overall, this section shows that employment platforms and the intensive use of ICTs disrupt previous understandings of the job search process. This raises a situation of information asymmetry between job seekers and recruiters mediated by platforms. This might be

particularly true for low-qualified positions traditionally posted offline given that previous successful experiences in securing jobs were offline and through personal networks.

Reviewing application statuses

Job seekers also dedicate a significant amount of time to reviewing their application statuses. The information asymmetry at stake during the application process turn to a "communication asymmetry" as most do not receive any information about the statutes of their application from recruiters. For instance, when searching for a job as a nanny, Julia decides to pay a subscription fee to inquiry about the status of her application. However, her messages remain unanswered:

> On Sitly [name of the platform] you must pay a monthly fee of 10 euros [to contact employers]. Last time I decided to subscribe to Sitly, but then you write [on the chat] …and they never get back to you! So maybe you have sent 20 messages to 20 different parents, but they never write back…So, I don't know if this is because the platform isn't working well, or if they don't read them, or they [the messages] don't reach them, or whatever!

This dearth of communication from recruiters about the applications' statuses raises uncertainty. This uncertainty fosters frustration about the employment situations that constrain making plans, such as moving to a different city, buying a car, or changing appartement. For instance, Natalia, a 30-year-old with experience as a line operator, describes that this situation growths the perception that her "life is on hold". Unable to envision her professional and personal future, she resigns herself to this situation:

This is very frustrating…You sign up. No one calls you or you're still in the process…No one calls you, so you say…What's going to happen? What will life bring me? This is a highly uncertain future. That's how it goes unfortunately.

The misleading information provided to job seekers as recruiters review their applications also contributes to creating hopes to secure a job. Most are misleading. Marco, a 41-year-old looking for work as a desk information clerk, calls these hopes regarding the likelihood of securing a job "false expectation":

Another frustrating aspect [of this process] and that happens to me a lot…for instance with Infojobs…is that you apply to a vacancy, then your status appears as "selected," and you assume that they will call or contact you at some point for an interview. But it ends here. You remain in the pool of pre-selected candidates, but the call never comes. This is even more frustrating than if they tell you, "No…[you're] out of the process" …because [appearing as selected] it creates false expectations.

Misleading signals regarding the statutes of the applications weaken engagement. Marco explains this consequence by saying that some "days are better than others". In fact, he experiences "motivational cycles" when trying to emotionally manage the process:

The truth is that, depending on the period, when you apply a lot and you have little success, very few vacancies, and so on...it creates a lot of insecurity, to be honest. Depending on the kinds of opportunities to which you apply, sometimes

they make you feel…if it happens when you're a little insecure, with a little low

self-esteem, they make you feel useless.

The open-ended nature of the process adds complexity and fosters self-doubt for respondents already living a situation of radical uncertainty. Too often, vacancies remain open over time and applications are "under process" for months explain 16 respondents. For instance, Deborah expresses feelings of low self-worth when describing the lack of news from recruiters while insisting on the volume of applications sent:

I send a lot—a lot—of applications... and nothing, or they don't look at you. They

don't look at your application and it expires, or they don't answer you…or it

expires and directly he says no, or he says you've passed the pre-selection period

and there it stays, literally...the harsh sting of indifference.

Likewise, Sofia, a 24-year-old looking for work as a waitress, has been unsuccessfully applying for jobs for two years. Struggling to provide us with a clear number for the applications she has sent lately, Sofia feels overwhelmed by the contrast between the high volume of applications and the absence of tangible outcomes:

I don't know how many applications I've sent so far…but it's like you send them

nowhere, nobody answers, or you never know anything…At least if you won't be

waiting or in doubt when you see a job advertisement and you like it, you build

expectations and you start to find a way to get the job anyway. You send the

resume, but you don't know anything anymore. Damn, I wanted to apply for this,

and no…And I've been in this situation for quite a while.

The lack of communication about the statuses of the applications raises a feeling of being ineffective and impotent. Sofia describes it as "being powerless," which is even more acute when the employers close the vacancy to post it again soon after. This situation is described recurrently by 17 of our respondents. For instance, Julia explains that vacancies may be posted with very small modifications:

> [I apply to] 15, 20 vacancies [each week] …but then because you always search for the same type of job, you always find the same vacancies…Instead of the original vacancy, it came out with fewer working hours for instance, or in a slightly different sector.

The dearth of online interactions with recruiters, misleading information, and the open-ended nature of the application process are powerful sources of tension raising communication asymmetry. Job seekers are financially vulnerable, and uncertainty about their professional and personal futures exacerbates feelings of frustration and desperation associated with crafting online profiles and submitting job applications.

Discussion

This article advances that the platform-mediated context in which job searching unfolds largely shapes the experience of unemployment. By investigating the experiences of unemployed, low-qualified job seekers, we unearth the existence of a unidirectional process shaped by a lack of understanding of employment platforms and strong information and communication asymmetries. Figure 1 synthesizes the job search activities into a framework of online job

search discouragement that facilitates the analysis of low-qualified job seekers' experiences of the online job search process. It captures the dynamics structuring their subjective experiences to explain how this process may become an opaque, frustrating, and eminently individual endeavour. It advances that one particularly important effect of this process is the relationship between the platform-mediated experience and job search discouragement.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

This framework of online job search discouragement is important for several reasons. First, it enables theorizing the activities involved by the encounter between job seekers and employment platforms. Second, it highlights that the performance of these activities in the platform-mediated context raises key tensions that reflect three interrelated dimensions at the heart of the experience of low-qualified job seekers. The framework integrates the task of crafting a profile and unearths the existence of a limited understanding of employment platforms. It also integrates the activity of "applying" and shows how it is shaped by the information asymmetry characteristics of most platforms. Finally, it integrates the activity of reviewing. The description and analysis of these activities emphasize the importance of exploring the subjective perspectives and experiences of job seekers because they shape how they approach and engage in online job search.

Implications for research on employment and job search

This framework shows that while ICTs broaden access to vacancies across labour markets and geographic locations, the platform-mediated job search process raises new tensions preventing their effective utilization and fostering job search discouragement, ultimately increasing

vulnerability and exclusion from the labour market. First, while previous research has shown the emergence of a sense of discouragement from job seekers engaged in offline processes, we extend these studies by examining how job search discouragement unfolds when this process is platform mediated. Specifically, we reveal the pressures on job seekers and their effects at the individual levels, including self-blame, loss of self-confidence, fear of exposure, and anxiety (e.g., McKowen, 2022; Newman, 1999; Pultz & Sharone, 2020; Van Oort, 2015). Our findings, indeed, concur with the pressure posed by the demand to display personal information while making their profiles visible, already described for highly-qualified workers (e.g., Sharone, 2017; Vallas & Christin, 2018). Nevertheless, we have also identified additional foundational aspects at the heart of the activities low-qualified job seekers perform and causing tension. These aspects include the lack of offline interaction, the open-ended nature of the process, and the pervasive use employment platforms in ways that are similar with broader patterns of ICTs use. These findings also extend previous studies of the job search process by linking these foundational aspects with some of the key characteristics of the employment platform, the social interactions taking place on these platforms, and the two types of information asymmetries we theorize. For instance, while prior research suggests that tailored training for helping job seekers to use employment platforms has limited outcomes, and does not influence well-being (e.g., Belot et al., 2022; Ben Dhia et al., 2022), we complement this finding by uncovering and empirically illustrating the negative impact on the engagement of low-qualified job seekers lacking an understanding of the platforms. Hence, our framework is useful to identify and connect key aspects of these platforms (i.e., customized application material, competitive visibility) with their implications for job seekers' engagement.

Second, we do not stop in identifying and empirically evidencing these effects but articulate them into a framework to reveal their implications for platform-mediated job search process. Our framework connects these effects to three main dimensions, showing that their

convergence can lead to what we call "online job search discouragement". Although we developed this framework based on our findings with low-qualified workers, we believe that some of its implications may apply to workers with higher levels of qualification. For instance, the pervasive nature of the use of ICTs has been well demonstrated across educational segments and may thus be observable among highly qualified workers, with similar impacts. In addition, the activities we theorize apply to virtually any platform-mediated job search process. Nevertheless, we believe that some effects are specific to low-qualified workers, such as the limited understanding of how platforms work and the struggles to handle the dearth of online interactions. The main reason lies in the dynamics of face-to-face recruitment which they have been used to. In addition, low-qualified workers are not expected to curate a personal brand, nor do the employment platforms they use allow them to do so. Hence, while previous research suggested that the structure of labour market institutions has job seekers with similar qualification levels experiencing the process in different ways (Sharone, 2017), our findings ask: To which extent are platforms reconfiguring low and high-qualified job seekers' experiences in similar but also diverging ways?

Implications for research on digital inequality

We contribute to the scholarship investigating how digital inequalities are a factor of exclusion in two ways. First, by analysing the role of digital skills in the context of the platform-mediated job search we address calls for a stronger focus on the outcomes of digital inequalities (e.g., Robinson et al., 2020; Van Deursen & Helsper, 2018). Alongside education, political participation, health, and social connection, work and employment are central aspects of the life of most adult Internet users. This is a domain where to observe digital inequalities and their implication for economic exclusion and well-being. We offer a framework of online job search

discouragement in which digital exclusion scholars can connect actual online practices and their impact on the experience of job seekers to the outcomes of digital inequalities. By theorizing the activities of low-qualified job seekers and by identifying the tensions they raise, our framework explains how the online job search process impacts well-being. This is important given that psychosocial well-being represents a tangible outcome of ICT use that remains largely overlooked by digital inequality scholars (Helsper & van Deursen, 2017; Robinson et al., 2020).

Second, we address calls to critically examine how digital platforms shape work and employment (e.g., Robinson et al., 2020; Stark & Pais, 2020; Vallas & Schor, 2020). Technological advances carry new disparities and social problems (e.g., Helsper, 2021; Robinson et al., 2020), specifically in their relationship with the development of the platform economy (e.g., Gregory & Sadowski, 2021; Rahman & Thelen, 2019; Stark & Pais, 2020). Offline (and online) interactions with recruiters and prospective employers decrease while identifying and applying for jobs is increasingly platform mediated. Hence, by showing that digital employment platforms can contribute to exclusion from the labour market of low-qualified job seekers, we broaden the dominant research focus on the precarious work of platform workers (e.g., Gregory & Sadowski, 2021; Petriglieri et al., 2019). We show that exclusion from the job search process is particularly salient for job seekers with lower qualifications. Next, we unearth the tensions shaping this process and their causes by revealing the opaque demands of employment platforms, the information asymmetry, and the visibility given to applications and other applicants. We also suggest that the context of high uncertainty creates a greater risk of negative implications for low-qualified job seekers. While we argue for the importance of taking into account the social, cultural, and economic context to study the outcomes of digital inequalities scholars (Helsper, 2019; Robinson et al., 2015), we also

encourage combining existing structural explanations with a greater focus on people's experiences to bring individual context back in.

Implications for practice

Building inclusive labour markets is central for public policies but these policies have yet to fully integrate the digitalization of the job search process and its consequences for job seekers. Our findings can help policymakers and educators to achieve this goal, more specifically to identify training needs and design programs. Job seekers have a limited understanding of the functioning of platforms and the role of algorithms, believing that there is actual human action in this process. Taking this aspect seriously is important because it shapes their experience. For instance, integrating information about platforms' modes of operation during training would be key to retain participation as job seekers gain awareness about their functioning. Yet, interventions and policies still seem to focus on technical skills such as uploading and creating CVs rather than understanding and navigating online systems. Likewise, another important aspect would be to bring more transparency about the nature and downsides of platform-mediated job search, specifically the high accessibility and visibility of vacancies creating competition and job search-related 'burnout'. Indeed, the belief that applying to dozens, even hundreds, of vacancies, leads to concrete employment results has a devastating effect on self-confidence, raising anxiety and disengagement. Finally, job seekers access platforms via mobile digital technologies and in ways similar to their use of social networking sites. Their high level of penetration into everyday lives through notifications and constant updating contrasts with the limited, almost inexistent, positive results our respondents experienced. Many describe reviewing dozens of adverts and outstanding applications even before getting out of bed, and how this negatively affects their well-being. These findings lead us to propose

a framework of job search discouragement leading to subsequent economic exclusion and vulnerability and that will help policymakers and educators, but also recruiters and employers, to understand job seekers' experience.

Limitations and paths for future research

First, our sample focuses on low-qualified, unemployed, job seekers. We think that the activities included in our framework are highly likely to be performed by job seekers with higher qualifications, although their experiences of negative outcomes would differ, calling for testing this framework using samples of job seekers with different qualification levels. Similarly, because our respondents were in highly uncertain financial situations, their online job search experiences may have been fundamentally different than those of employed job seekers. One implication could be a stronger negative perception of the tensions fostering their gradual disengagement. Second, our sample was relatively small and heterogeneous in terms of age, gender, and sectors. We purposely built a heterogeneous sample because the job search process became completely digitalized across sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic, independent of factors such as age and gender. This sample calls for further investigation of these activities across a wider population and countries. Nevertheless, we believe that our framework provides a useful tool for investigating inequalities in the digitalization of job search qualitatively or quantitatively because it enables to uncover concrete experiences of job seekers and critically examine the implications for outcomes of the online job search process.

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Annexe

Table 1: Overview of the characteristics of our respondents

Respondent	Age (years)	Work experience	Previous jobs
Julia	24	Low	Babysitter, monitor for youth recreational activities
Pep	22	Low	Truck unloader, call centre, monitor for youth recreational activities
Roger	18	Low	Waitress
Lidia	50	High	Cleaner, waitress
Francesca	54	High	Cleaner
Julio	57	High	Technical assistant
Tomas	54	High	Gasoline refueler
Beatriz	43	High	Customer service (call centre), information desk clerk
Stefania	33	High	Customer service (call centre), cleaner
Delfina	42	High	Waitress
Natalia	30	High	Line operator
Ingrid	26	Low	Waitress
Sofia	24	Low	Cleaner, waitress
Deborah	26	Low	Waitress, construction worker, NGO street recruiter
Jose Luis	34	High	Customer service (call centre), dishwasher
Marco	41	High	Hotel front desk clerk
Berta	19	Low	Customer service (call centre)
Gerard	35	High	Butcher, customer service (call centre)
Jessica	37	High	Babysitter, cleaner, waitress, janitor
Marta	35	High	Waitress

Figure 1: Framework of online job search discouragement

| CRAFTING | ⇔ | APPLYING | ⇔ | REVIEWING |

KEY TENSIONS →

CRAFTING
- ❖ Understanding the platform(s)
- ❖ Creating resume materials
- ❖ Displaying private information
- ❖ Customizing application material

APPLYING
- ❖ Pervasive use of ICTs
- ❖ Competitive visibility
- ❖ Dearth of offline interactions

REVIEWING
- ❖ Dearth of online interactions
- ❖ Misleading information sharing
- ❖ Open-ended process

LIMITED UNDERSTANDING ↔ INFORMATION ASYMMETRY ↔ COMMUNICATION ASYMMETRY

ONLINE JOB SEARCH DISCOURAGEMENT