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PROMISES AND PERILS OF PLATFORM WORK AVAILABILITY AND FLEXIBILITY: A CASE STUDY OF DELIVERY RIDERS AND 'TAXI' DRIVERS IN POLAND

Platforms such as Uber, Bolt, Wolt, or Glovo, are often depicted as villains – the employers disguised as intermediaries who aim to exploit their workers. Even when researchers admit that platform workers often view platform work positively, they interpret these views as study participants' failure to recognize their objective interests. The article presents a mixed-method study conducted among migrant and non-migrant couriers and drivers working with platforms in Poland. Not assuming platforms' negative impact, we focus on employment flexibility and availability, and how these translate into platform work's role as: 1) labor market entry points, 2) work of last resort, 3) precarious employment, and 4) opportunity for transitory or flexible income. We find that workers' migratory status is crucial to their experience of platform work. However, it appears that platform workers' situation is less about the platforms themselves and more about the broader legal and economic environment that offers few alternatives to platform work.

Key words: platform work; platform economy; gig economy; migration; migrant labor

Introduction

Digital platforms which serve as intermediaries between workers and customers such as Uber, Bolt, Wolt, or Glovo, are often depicted as villains, actual employers who exploit their precarious workers for profit (Polkowska, 2019; Gebrial, 2022). However, many people working with/for the platforms are satisfied with the work (Holtum et al., 2022). Researchers often admit that their interlocutors accepted and sometimes had a positive attitude towards platform work,

but frame it as the workers failing to see the truth. (Polkowska, 2019; Holtum et al., 2022; Purcell and Brook, 2022). This article aims to take a step beyond criticizing or assuming the negative consequences of platform work (still, we do not aim at defending or promoting it), but to present platform work from different perspectives and both in the words of scholars and the workers themselves.

Platforms are digital intermediaries that coordinate customers' demands with individual service providers, typically through algorithmic matching. The broad definition includes many types of work that scholars divide along different lines. For example, the ETUI 2022 report differentiates platform work into: remote clickwork, remote professional work, on-location work, transport, delivery, and other freelance services or tasks (Piasna et al., 2022). However, Vallas and Schor (2020) use a different typology dividing people working with or for the platform according to their work type into: 'architects and technologists of the platforms', 'cloud-based consultants or freelancers', 'gig workers', 'microtasking' and 'content producers and influencers' (Vallas and Schor, 2020, p. 4-5). This article focuses on all 'gig workers' in terms of Vallas and Schor's typology and on 'transport' and 'delivery' workers in Piasna's et al. (2022) terms. More precisely we look at platform workers in ride-hailing and food delivery.

We use the umbrella term 'platform workers' to describe everyone who uses a platform to get customers' requests, no matter whether they are the company's employees, independent contractors or working informally. This article focuses on their work's objective characteristics, but also subjectively viewed and differentially experienced: availability and flexibility. These two characteristics are what platforms themselves are proud of, and we argue that these are the source of both positive and negative impacts of platform work. We analyze these characteristics because we believe that any work that is easily available and highly flexible, no matter whether it is platform work or not, will have similar consequences for the workers. In other terms, we use platform work as a case study.

Availability has been a cornerstone in the rise of platform work, appealing to a broad spectrum of the workforce. Initially, the ease of starting work on platforms like Uber or Glovo – often as simple as downloading an app and registering – made them a popular choice for those seeking additional income. This ease of registering also established platforms as a primary entry point into the labor market, especially for students or people facing barriers in more traditional employment. However, we argue that accessibility often translates into bypassing essential formalities and exacerbating the systemic inequalities in the labor market. Flexibility, the second focal characteristic of platform work, is often a double-edged sword. It offers opportunities, the freedom to align work with personal preference and schedule. Studies in traditional employment settings show that enhancing work flexibility increases work satisfaction (Kröll and Nüesch, 2019), and has some positive impact on work-life balance (Allen et al.,

2013) but can also increase work intensity (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010). In platform work, flexibility is intertwined with the precarious nature of employment. While precarious working conditions have been the primary focus in the discourse on platform work (Schor et al., 2020; Zhou, 2022), migration scholars highlight the unique position of migrants in this landscape (van Doorn and Vijay, 2021; van Doorn et al., 2023; Holtum et al., 2022; Lam and Triandafyllidou, 2022). For many migrants, platform work is not only the most accessible entry point into the workforce but also a domain they find challenging to exit due to limited alternatives. Throughout the article, we will highlight this dichotomy of platform work's flexibility as both an opportunity and a precarity trap.

The study uses both qualitative (focus group interviews) and quantitative data (survey results) both gathered from January to March 2022. Many studies of platform work focus on qualitative data (e.g., Altenried, 2021; van Doorn and Vijay, 2021), with only some quantitative or mixed methods approaches (e.g., Milkman et al., 2021; Holtum et al., 2022; and Heiland, 2022). Juxtaposing results from the two sources enables us to notice and bridge the gaps between them and overcome the limitations of each method. For example, group interviews discover that many problems are common to both migrants and non-migrants, but the survey shows that while the problems are similar, they are more widespread and acute among migrant workers.

The article focuses on Poland and migration to Poland. Poland's specificity is related to the fact that it is historically an emigration country only recently becoming a New Immigration Country, with a large and growing Ukrainian minority. Therefore, our study involves both migrants and non-migrants, and we distinguish between the roles that platform work plays for both groups since their positioning in the labor market differs.

Theoretical framework

Vallas and Schor (2020) reviewed how the literature sees platforms, distinguishing narratives which portray platforms as 'Incubators of entrepreneurialism'; 'The digital cage'; 'Accelerants of [workers'] precarity'; 'Institutional Chameleons'; and finally, the narrative which Vallas and Shor (2020) themselves propose and for which they argue: 'Permissive potentates'. The permissiveness shows in how platforms hand over control to the users and workers. For example, platforms exhibit minimal oversight over workers' recruitment, they enable working for multiple employers, and cede quality control to the users (in the form of reviews and complaints). In the meantime, platform companies focus on task allocation, service standardization, pricing, transaction processing, users' and workers' recruitment as well as data gathering and management. This

selective focus enables platforms to retain workers' flexibility while perfecting work availability despite the often-complicated legal environment. Platforms might be superseded by other types of companies, but work will always be characterized by different levels of availability and flexibility with all the positive and negative consequences for the workers.

Availability: Platforms as Points of Entry to the Labor Market

Availability is one of the most apparent characteristics of platforms, which they work hard to maintain. When platforms first emerged, having a smartphone and registering in an app was enough. With time, countries introduced laws to regulate platforms' activities, but the companies used such strategies as stalling (Mazur and Serafin, 2023) and finding new legal (or not yet determined if legal) pathways to keep the work available to almost everyone (Polkowska, 2019, p. 735). Studies report that workers notice and appreciate, how little formalities they need to complete to start working (e.g., Lam and Triandafyllidou, 2022).

Consequently, numerous studies confirm that platforms serve as an arrival infrastructure for migrants (Lam and Triandafyllidou, 2021; Altenried, 2021; van Doorn and Vijay, 2021). Particularly those who need to start earning fast (due to e.g., a short-term visa) are more likely to choose platforms (Altenried, 2021). In Poland, a qualitative study by Polkowska (2019) and this survey study's results analyzed by Kowalik et al. (2024) confirm that here also platform work is often migrants' entry point to the labor market. Furthermore, most platforms provide standardized apps in multiple languages, making it easier for foreign workers to know what they are expected to do, while simultaneously enabling them to start interacting with the host country's language and culture (Altenried, 2021; Holtum et al., 2022). In Poland, aside from apps in different languages, the so-called fleet partners (companies that partner with platforms by recruiting and managing platform workers) advertise in multiple languages, in particular Russian and Ukrainian, and keep staff speaking those languages to make hiring migrant drivers easier (Polkowska et al., 2022).

However, scholars also pointed out that the platform's availability has its darker side as focus on the speed of work initiation often leads to overlooking formalities. Lack of formalities might result in illegal work and many assume that it is in the platforms' interest, but as Polkowska et al. (2022, p. 45) show it might also be desired or at least accepted by the worker. Saving on taxes, on health insurance or retirement contributions increases one's pay and workers might prefer that. However, migrant workers are more likely to be unaware of (il)legality of work and what it translates to when something goes wrong (van Doorn and Vijay, 2021, p. 13). Thus, while platforms enable both locals and migrants to integrate into the labor market easily, this is often done by skipping proper paperwork, making some vulnerable workers even more vulnerable to misfortune.

Availability: Platforms of Last Resort

Despite her criticism of Uber, Polkowska (2019) acknowledges that platform work offers opportunities to marginalized groups who otherwise would be relegated to unemployment. Katz and Krueger (2017) confirmed that in the USA, those who were unemployed for one year were more likely to work in the gig economy than in a traditional job the next year. Furthermore, Adermon and Hensvik's (2022) research shows, that gathering platform work experience can make finding standard employment easier, at least for the locals. This suggests that for some groups platform work might be a stepping stone to entering the traditional labor market.

Following this trope, many scholars point out that platforms' treatment of their workers follows the inequalities that already exist in the labor market (Altenried, 2021; van Doorn and Vijay, 2021; Lam and Triandafyllidou, 2022; Gebrial, 2022). Platforms do not create these inequalities, but as well as other employers, they respond to this preexisting stratification. Thus, a large share of platform workers of a certain race, ethnicity or nationality is a result of these people having no alternatives, as Gebrial (2022) notes in the case of Uber in London: "(...), the denial of social protections ostensibly provided by the state and/or employer produces a highly exploitable workforce, as it creates conditions whereby expulsion from the platform can mean expulsion from the means of life not provided for elsewhere." (Gebrial, 2022, p. 12).

Furthermore, even if platforms would increase formal requirements from their workers the result could be more people working illegally, as already some studies report account subletting, where workers who fulfil platforms' requirements share their accounts with people who don't (Altenried, 2021). This practice highlights that the often advised legislative change of categorizing platform workers as employees would not solve all problems, but would exclude many vulnerable populations from platform work and legal work in general (van Doorn et al., 2023; Gebrial, 2022). This was exemplified by Deliveroo's retreat from Berlin in 2019, which led many riders from Asia and South America jobless with no alternatives at their disposal (Altenried, 2021). Furthermore, even traditional employment allows for exploitation particularly when one is vulnerable e.g., when their right to stay in the country depends on the employer (van Doorn et al., 2023). Thus, it is not necessarily the rules that govern platform work that need correcting, but more general rules that govern the labor market, migration and welfare that create inequalities or segmentation of the labor market.

Flexibility: Platforms of Precarity

Precarity proves to be a multidimensional concept defined differently by different researchers, however the definition typically includes (1) low income, (2) no work security and (3) lack of work-related protections/rights (Kreshpaj et al.,

2020). Migrant workers are considered particularly exposed to conditions associated with precarity, including low wages, extended workdays, unstable, temporary employment lack of insurance, informal work and other factors associated with precarity (cf. Anderson, 2010, Lewis et al., 2015; Millar, 2017; Jóźwiak, 2020). Polkowska's (2019) investigation into the precariousness of Uber drivers in Poland considered all dimensions of precarity and studied work security both in an objective as well as in a subjective manner (Polkowska, 2019). She confirmed that her participants' work proved precarious except for one characteristic: her participants felt certain that they could continue working for Uber if they wished to, so they felt their job to be secure. However, Polkowska's (2019) study focused on local nationals, while research in other locations showed that unlike locals, migrant drivers did fear their accounts being blocked (Altenried, 2021; Holtum et al., 2022; Gebrial, 2022). The difference might stem from structural conditions and positionality in the labor market that migrants face e.g., legal status, welfare access, alternative employment opportunities and knowledge of local regulations including one's rights (Gebrial, 2022; Jóźwiak, 2020; Lewis et al., 2015). Thus, while for locals platform work might not fully fit the definition of precarity it might completely fit it for migrant workers.

Holtum et al. (2022) argued that in the labor market migrants structurally occupy more precarious positions than non-migrants. They are said to have limited work choices, bargaining power, lower wages and less control over work conditions (Holtum et al., 2022). Their bargaining power is further undermined by the simplicity of platform work. Thanks to platform apps, starting work requires minimal training and no local language proficiency, which leads to a workforce that is easily replaceable (Altenried, 2021). This article focuses on migrants, however, any group that faces constraints in the labor market could find itself in a precarious position. For example, Schor et al. (2020) focused not on migratory status but on people's financial situation identifying platform dependency as the key factor in determining workers' experience of platforms. Furthermore, Glavin and Schieman (2022) found that workers who rely on platforms for primary income experience more mental distress than others. Thus, it seems that platform work satisfaction works in line with the 'Matthew Effect': those who start from a disadvantaged position experience platform works' precariousness, while those who start from a privileged position can leverage platform work to achieve their goals.

Flexibility: Platforms of Opportunity

The bright side of flexibility includes notions such as 'be your own boss' and 'decide when and where you work' highlighting platform workers' agency. In line with this positive view, non-migrant Uber drivers studied by Holtum et al. (2022) often treated Uber as a supplementary, extra income, that helped

them support their lifestyle or transition from one job to another. Unfortunately, migrant drivers were more likely to treat Uber as the main source of income and were often concerned about their ratings, personal safety and job security (Holtum et al., 2022, p. 305). Other studies corroborate these findings. Schor et al. (2020) showed that those dependent on the platform felt pressure to work overtime and follow the platform's suggestions on the best working times. Thus, while still nominally flexible, workers who rely on platforms, would be stuck in constant work mode (Schor et al., 2020; Glavin and Schieman, 2022) or as in China's example described by Sun et al. (2023) in non-flexible working hours. On the other hand, those with other income sources and security measures could resist and experience flexibility and more positive experiences.

Interestingly, while migrants typically occupy a disadvantaged position in the labor market and often depend on platform work, they also seek opportunities to improve their standing (Jóźwiak, 2020). One such strategy follows Schor et al. (2020) suggestion in a way, as it includes working simultaneously in several places. For example, Altenried's (2021) interlocutors often worked multiple jobs both on and off the platforms to make ends meet, which was necessary due to low pay in all of the jobs, while possible at all because of platform work's time flexibility. Thus, platform work was a way to deal with other job's deficiencies. In a similar vein, these workers also mentioned that they perceived platforms' algorithmic control as containing less racism or negative feedback than human supervisors they worked with, making the platforms' supervision feel more neutral and freeing (Altenried, 2021).

The Polish context

Poland is a New Immigration Destination country and is still developing its integration policies, while the share of migrants in the labor market constantly increases (Mrugała et al., 2023). Migrants' right to work in Poland varies based on their citizenship: migrants from the European Union can work without a permit; migrants from Ukraine, Belarus, Armenia, Georgia, or Moldova can work after completing a simplified work permit procedure; and migrants from other countries must undergo a comprehensive process of obtaining a work permit.

Poland has little legislation surrounding platform work (Polkowska and Mika, 2022; Kaczmarczyk et al., 2022), however, the rules that are in place create a unique structure. The main feature is that ride-hailing platforms in Poland have no contracts with individual drivers, instead, they employ other companies, called 'fleet partners' who handle licensing, formalities, and driver contracts (Polkowska and Mika, 2022). Thus, drivers are formally bound only to their fleet partner. The partner decides the fees, training, type of contracts as well as insurance, taxes etc., thus leaving room for diverse legal solutions. While

there is no similar law regarding food deliveries, still many food delivery platforms enlist intermediaries to hire their couriers (Polkowska et al., 2022). This situation is complemented by the fact that Poland has overall high rates of temporary contracts and other forms of atypical employment, creating a situation where "(...) most platform workers in Poland are neither self-employed nor employed in the sense of the labor code." (Kaczmarczyk et al., 2022, p. 8).

Methodology

The study followed the Centre of Migration Research's Ethics Committee recommendations and obtained its approval (decision number CMR/EC/6/2021). Thus, all participants had to provide informed consent before participation, and they had to be at least 18 years old to take part.

Survey Data

The 'Polish Platform Work Survey' studied platform workers in Poland using an online questionnaire (Computer Assisted Web Interview) in four languages (Polish, English, Russian, and Ukrainian). The questionnaire included 52 questions and could be easily completed in 10 minutes on a mobile phone. In the period between January 10th and March 15th, 2022 the survey gathered answers from 372 respondents who worked for Uber (Eats), Bolt (Food), FreeNow, Glovo, Wolt, Pyszne.pl (Takeaway.com), DeliGoo and others. The recruitment was halted once it was clear that Russia's invasion of Ukraine impacts platform workers in Poland. Considering how hard to reach platform workers are, the 372 respondents make the 'Polish Platform Work Survey' the largest survey of platform workers in Central and Eastern Europe.

Survey participants were recruited through Facebook posts and mostly through Facebook advertisements in 20 cities across Poland. Facebook ads recruitment follows methods used by platforms and their partners, and it enabled us to invite a broad range of people to the study. To ensure diversity and representativeness of the sample, our Facebook ads targeted specific groups based on age, gender, place of residence, and language used. We defined the targeted groups relying on data published by Maciej Beręsewicz's team that analyzed the composition of the platform workers' population in Poland using mobile data (Beręsewicz et al., 2021; Beręsewicz and Nikulin, 2021).

Figure 1. shows that the general characteristics of the survey's sample are similar to our estimates of platform workers' population (based on results from: Beręsewicz et al., 2021; Beręsewicz and Nikulin, 2021). Since most platform work takes place in larger cities, so 39% of our respondents lived around Warsaw, 18% around Kraków and the remaining 43% in other Polish cities.

Almost nine in ten respondents were men, over six in ten had Polish national-ity, and more than five in ten were below 30 years old. Ukrainians constituted nearly a quarter of the sample, while participants from other nationalities, such as Belarus, India, Pakistan, Russia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Turkey, Zambia, Uzbekistan, Romania, Nepal, Israel, Chile, and Algeria, accounted for just under ten percent. More descriptions of and statistics from the study can be found in the working paper written by Kaczmarczyk et al. (2022). To conduct statistically robust comparisons, survey responses from Ukrainians and people from other nationalities were grouped as non-Polish nationals (N = 133). However, when describing qualitative results, we refer only to the experiences of the focus group's participants: Poles, Ukrainians and Belarussians.

Figure 1. Survey participants compared with platform workers' population estimates by city of residence (or its surroundings); gender; age group; and nationality
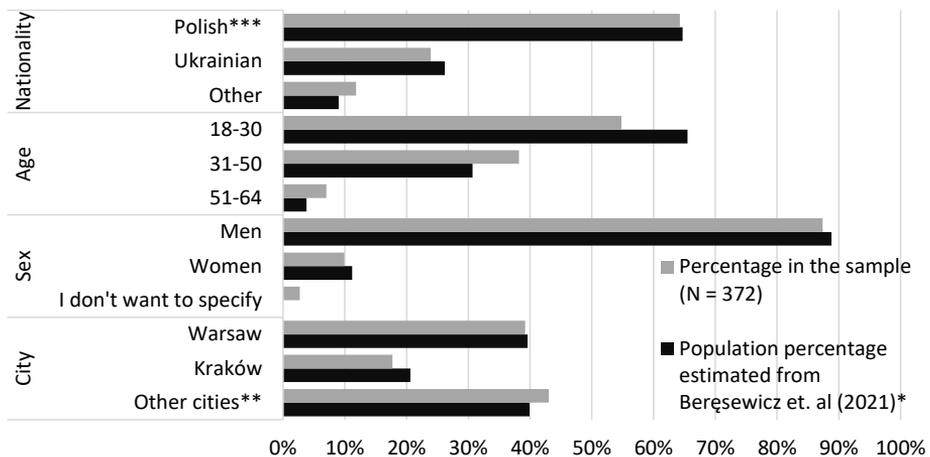
Source: Beręsewicz et al., 2021; Beręsewicz and Nikulin 2021; Polish Platform Work Survey.
* Estimates calculated assuming that platform workers work with a similar number of platforms in-cluded in the Beręsewicz team's study.
** Other cities: Białystok, Bydgoszcz, Gdańsk, Gdynia, Gorzów Wielkopolski, Katowice, Kielce, Łódź, Lublin, Olsztyn, Opole, Poznań, Rzeszów, Sopot, Szczecin, Toruń, Wrocław, Zielona Góra.
*** Survey respondents with Polish citizenship (even if they also hold another one, as was the case

Focus Group Data

Focus group interviews conducted between March 22nd and April 6th, 2022 included Polish, Ukrainian and Belarusian platform workers. The criteria for participation in the focus group were the same as in the survey – at least 18 years of age and experience in platform work in Poland at least once in the past 12 months. We made effort to broaden our sample by including workers from

Asian and African countries, but these failed. In general, focus interviews' organization posed a challenge, compounded by the outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2022 which (among other important things) caused most pre-recruited participants to become unavailable and naturally introduced war-related topics into the discussions. Despite the challenges, we conducted a total of four focus group interviews, each lasting 100-120 minutes. Overall, 22 participants (4 women and 18 men, all aged 20-40) took part. For all the migrant-workers, platform work was their full-time job, while for some of the Poles platforms served as a part-time or additional source of income. Participants were recruited through multiple channels: social media, snowball sampling and inviting 'Polish Platform Work Survey' respondents (through a separate form). All focus group participants had experience as drivers for ride-hailing platforms (such as Uber and Bolt) or food and grocery delivery riders using vehicles such as cars, bicycles, and scooters (platforms like Glovo, Uber Eats, pyszne.pl, Jush, and Wolt). These diverse compositions provided a rich context for discussing the differences in platform work. Three out of four interviews took place online to enable participants from other cities than Warsaw to take part in the study. The group interviews were conducted in three languages to enable migrants to participate:

- Polish (two group interviews: one online and one in-person, each one with 6 participants – all of them Polish citizens),
- Russian (one online interview with 6 participants – the citizens of Belarus and Ukraine) and
- Ukrainian (one online interview with 4 participants – citizens of Ukraine).

In addition, we also conducted one in-person interview with two Polish participants in Polish. Altogether, including this additional interview, we interviewed: 14 Poles (11 men, 3 women), 5 Ukrainians (4 men, 1 woman) and 5 Belarussians (4 men, 1 woman). Non-Polish participants had different migration histories. Some of them had worked in Poland for over 5 years (but not necessarily lived here through all the period), some arrived in Poland within a year before the study. One Ukrainian man arrived in Poland exactly on the 24th of February 2022 (that is when the full-scale war started). We refer to the interviewees by pseudonyms, to secure their anonymity, but (when provided) we stick to their actual country of origin and place of residence in Poland. After all, a diverse composition of specializations and experiences provided a space for discussing the specifics of particular kinds of work and differences between them. The atmosphere during the interviews was positive, the participants were kind to each other and they willingly shared their experience, commented on each other's statements, supplemented them, asked questions and gave advice. They also highlighted positive and negative aspects of this work.

Results

Availability: Platforms as Points of Entry to the Labor Market

The survey confirms that platform work often serves as the first entrance to the labor market both for migrants and the local population (as shown also in Kowalik et al., 2024). Almost three in ten (27%) Polish-nationality respondents were unemployed before starting platform work, while one-fourth were in education (24%, Figure 2). These results are corroborated by the focus group interviews which included several Poles for whom platform work was either a first job, a source of additional income or a necessity related to turbulent labor market in Poland.

Before working in Glovo, I was simply at the secondary school. And it [food delivery platform] was a kind of holiday job. And now I work for Pyszne and it is permanent. [...] Yes, Glovo was my first job [Piotr: Polish, male, delivery rider]

Among survey participants without Polish nationality, responses were similar in terms of unemployment with three in ten (29%) being unemployed before starting platform work. However, while many Poles were studying before, it was less common for non-Polish nationals (8%), simultaneously more than one-fourth of them were living outside of Poland (27%). In a separate question, aimed only at migrant respondents, more than one-third (37% out of 114 answers) reported that platform work was their first work in Poland, confirming its role as an arrival infrastructure. This is where we can see an important difference between migrant and non-migrant workers. Even if for many migrants, platform work was their first job in Poland, focus data show that many of them had jobs (some of them even well-established careers) in their countries of origin. Thus, platforms served as entry points not to the labor market in general, but specifically to the Polish labor market.

Figure 2. Survey respondents by their nationality and answers to "Which term best describes your status in the labour market in Poland before platform work?"

Source: Own elaboration based on the 'Polish Platform Work Survey'

However, most non-Polish respondents did not plan platform work in Poland before coming (59% as Figure 3 shows) because sometimes they didn't think much about it, sometimes they had other ideas for work, and sometimes they didn't even plan to come to Poland. Ivan is an extreme example of such a situation. On the first day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (24 February 2022), a self-employed entrepreneur from Kyiv, found himself with his family in Warsaw on their interrupted way back home from holiday. They decided not to return to Kyiv (which was under direct attack and partial siege at that time) but they needed an income to sustain themselves. Having no experience in platform work, it took Ivan a few days to start driving passengers for Uber:

I found the job myself, prepared the documents, found out what documents are needed to register for a cab. [I found all the information] *Through the Telegram channel. It was not a big problem, those who want to work will always find a way.* [Ivan, Ukrainian, male 'taxi' driver]

On the other side of the spectrum are those non-Polish nationals who already planned to perform platform work in Poland (26%) or at least considered it (15%; Table 1). Thus, platforms not only serve as an entry point to the labor market for migrants, but also some migrants expected them to be such an entry point. For example, Alexandra from Belarus worked as a non-platform delivery worker (for one particular shop) in Minsk before moving to Poland in May 2021, where she took up work as a platform delivery rider.

I learned about Jokr [platform] *from a friend. I immediately applied and I got a response quite quickly. It was through a partner, then I registered and that was it – I'm working. I have not worked on any platforms before, I worked as a bicycle deliverer in Minsk.* [Alaxandra, Belarussian, female, delivery rider]

Table 1. Migrant survey respondents by answers to "Did you travel to Poland for your current stay with the intention to perform platform work in Poland?" (N = 114 of non-Polish nationals)

Did you travel to Poland for your current stay with the intention to perform platform work in Poland?	Share of responses
No, I did not plan for	58,8%
Yes, I considered it an option	14,9%
Yes, that was my intent	26,3%
Sum (N = 114)	100%

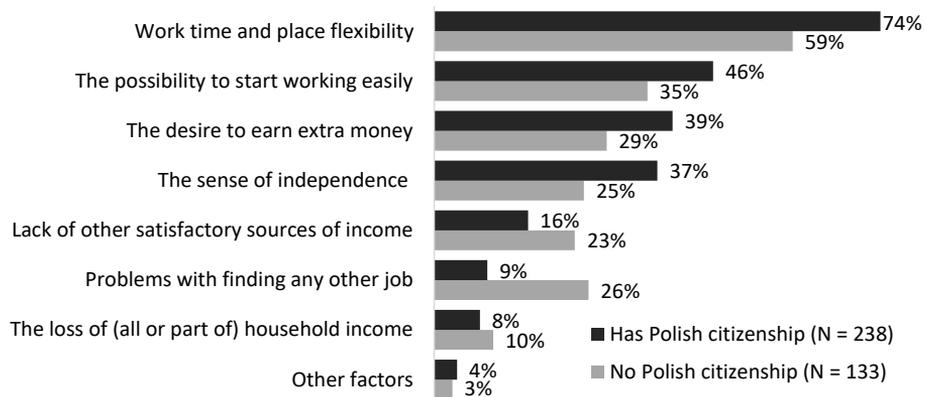Source: Own elaboration based on the 'Polish Platform Work Survey'

For both of them, platforms served as a point of entry to the Polish labor market as the only realistic opportunity. In the case of Ivan, several factors

shaped his position in Poland: the decision to stay in Poland due to war in his home country, his decision to become a 'taxi' driver (he had never worked as a driver before) and the fact that he and his family neither left Ukraine nor came to Poland intending to stay and work here. Alexandra came to Poland looking for opportunities and better earnings than in Belarus and started with work that was open to almost everyone.

Availability: Platforms of Last Resort

The perception of platform work as readily available has a darker side revealed by motivations leading people to perform it. As figure 3 shows, many Polish respondents started platform work because of its flexibility (74%), ease of access (46%) and the opportunity to earn extra income (39%), as well as independence (37%). These factors were also important for non-Polish nationals, yet among migrant respondents many motivations were negative, such as: lack of other satisfactory income opportunities (23%) and trouble finding any other work (26%). Kowalik et al. (2024) uses this data to show how negative reasons to perform platform work relate to lack of job satisfaction. For instance, upon arriving in Poland, Alaxandra's job choices were limited, so platform work was one of the rare jobs that she could start. Thus, choosing platform work might be caused by its positive, pulling characteristics, but also by being pushed out from everywhere else.

Figure 3. Survey respondents by their nationality and factors that prompted them to start platform work in Poland (each respondent could choose up to three factors)

Source: Own elaboration based on the 'Polish Platform Work Survey'

Note: The percentages don't sum up to 100% because each respondent could choose up to three factors. The exact question was "What factors prompted you to start platform work in Poland. Pleases select up to three most important."

Even for Polish nationals with longer unemployment spells, lack of qualifications or family responsibilities, finding and holding a job might prove difficult. Platform work becomes their fallback option: always available when other jobs fail. The pandemic showcased this, since when many workplaces just stopped and workers like Anna and Ivan had to scramble for income, platform work offered them a solution.

I worked at the EXPO in Krakow but the pandemic came and we had to change jobs. [Anna, Polish, former delivery rider, office worker at the moment of the interview].

My situation is a bit unclear, I don't know... basically no one knows what will happen next. And I chose a cab to have money on hand, right away, yes. And honestly, I don't think about staying in a taxi for good. [Ivan, Ukrainian, male, 'taxi' driver]

Thus, one can say that platform work does not provide insurance, holiday, sick leave or other benefits of formal employment, but then for some, it is a work of last resort when other more prestigious, safe, stable jobs are unavailable. And jobs are more often unavailable to migrants, thus a higher share of migrants gets pushed into platform work against their preferences.

Flexibility: platforms of precarity

Choosing platform work as a last resort tends to translate into instability and unpredictability as seen in the narratives of migrants and non-migrants alike. For example, Anna, balancing studies and event jobs, lost most of her income due to the pandemic. Shifting to online classes didn't ease her schedule, pushing her towards platform work that meant worrying about weekly earnings, work availability and often necessitating long hours to meet her financial needs. While Anna had no holidays or sick leave, her studies did provide her with health insurance, giving her some kind of security.

Anna's situation follows a broader trend, since survey data reveal that only 3,9% of Polish nationals and 9,5% of non-Polish nationals studied had stable employment contracts (Figure 4). The majority relied on precarious arrangements such as a contract of mandate (52% of Polish and 32% of non-Polish respondents) or self-employment (23% of Polish 5% of non-Polish respondents), or even the most extreme situation of no written work contract at all. Lack of formal employment had two forms: first in which there were no documents (10% of Polish, 33% of non-Polish respondents), second in which there were documents but they only confirmed rental of a car, a bike, a backpack or other means necessary to work, but not the work itself (10% of Polish and 18% of non-Polish respondents). Those two forms translated into one in five of Polish and half of non-Polish respondents having no employment contract. Thus, they had no work stability, social security provided by the platform, forcing them to find other sources of insurance, or leaving them vulnerable.

I started with a partner, not entirely legally, as they say, because it was without a contract. It was only 30 zlotys per drive, it was without any... a bit off the books ['na lewo'] [Krzysztof, Polish, male, 'taxi' driver].

I don't have any contract so far, I haven't signed anything. [...] *I simply pay for the services of the taxi partner, and he pays me money* [Ivan, Ukrainian, male, 'taxi' driver].

Working without a legal contract strips one of insurance and work privileges, but it also decreases the tax burden and some obligations towards the employer. Thus, it makes it a profitable arrangement in the short term. These advantages were mentioned by most of the group interview participants regardless of the type of work or citizenship. Paweł [Polish, male, 'taxi' driver] pointed out that having a work contract leads to more obligations and fewer profits (as some costs, like fuel, might be deduced from the salary, which in turn contributes to uncertainty):

If you have a work contract, you share all costs fifty-fifty [with the company]. *It wouldn't work out so nicely. Because, for example, if I go out there for an hour minimum, I would have 35 zloty deduction of fuel, well so random 24-19 zloty all over Warsaw* [Paweł].

Similarly, Igor [Belarussian, male, delivery rider], while not rejecting the idea of a stable work contract as such, talked about the structural obstacles to obtaining such a contract:

But you understand, when it comes to a work contract, it is .... you have to work a certain number of hours and so on. And it seems to me that in this type of work, I don't know, it's rather difficult [...] *well, and nobody wants to pay taxes for you.* [...] *It's not that kind of work, maybe that would be an option for some small groups of deliverers.* [...] *But I understand that it's unrealistic.* [Igor, Belarussian, delivery rider]

Jacek (Polish, delivery rider) exemplifies how instability (or what the researchers perceive as such) is seen through a positive lens:

I would definitely not like it. I would not want a work contract, because a work contract requires me to have some kind of availability per month and to do immediate orders, immediate calls for work. I've worked on a work contract and I prefer this kind of work mode like a mandate contract. My full ability to do what I want to do at a given time [Jacek].

Therefore, platform workers might agree to no contract, because they are forced to or they believe it pays better in the short term and do not think that this situation might last and impact them in the long term. One way or another, the parties involved (platform workers, fleet partners, platforms) find ways to limit their costs and paperwork, often entering the grey zone and introducing both flexibility and uncertainty.

Figure 4. Survey respondents by their nationality and the main type of contract under which the respondent performs platform work
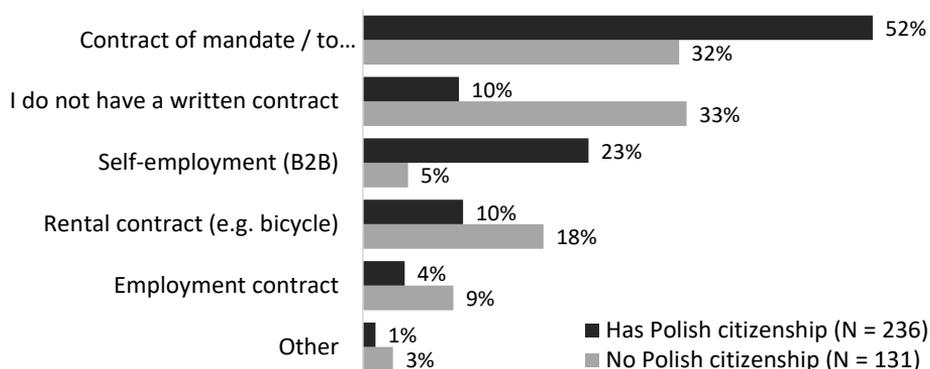
Source: Own elaboration based on the 'Polish Platform Work Survey'. Kaczmarczyk et al. (2022, p. 18) presents detailed statistics on this and compares with reference groups.

Note: The question was: "Please indicate the main type of contract on the basis of which you perform platform work (whether the contract is with a partner or with a platform)."

Platform dependence

Schor et al. (2020) highlighted the role of financial dependency on platforms for workers' satisfaction, while other scholars (Gebrial, 2022) focused on workers' positionality in the labour market. Analysing the data, Kaczmarczyk et al. (2022) noted that lack of job satisfaction correlated strongly with number of job deprivations experienced (low pay, long hours, lack of contract, work-life balance), thus, lack of satisfaction seems to stem from real issues. We follow Schore et al. (2020) and focus on platform dependency and migration, as an indicator of labor market positionality. Figure 5 compares work satisfaction with the degree of income dependence on platform work. It shows that higher income dependence on platform work meant fewer people satisfied with the work, but the differences are marginal. However, if we look at workers' nationality, as Figure 6 presents, we can see that non-Polish nationals are much less satisfied than their local counterparts (in line with Kowalik et al., 2024 model). These results suggest that it is not the income source dependence but the labor market positionality that matters.

Interestingly, the differences in work satisfaction between Polish and non-Polish nationals were hardly visible in the focus group interviews. Both groups reported similar problems: platforms' changing rules, and the difficulty of earning a living. Of course, migrants experienced more difficulties, because they also had to manage the language, culture and their legal status, but these did

not seem to be that much connected to their work. The real differences lie in the likelihood of work-related problems (e.g., accidents, miscommunications with customers); migrants' capacity to manage these challenges (e.g., understanding the situation and its context); and the impact it has on them (e.g., will a negative review cause their account to be blocked?). Thus, seemingly similar situations might happen more often to migrants and have distinct outcomes for them in comparison to locals.

Figure 5. Survey respondents by the share of their income that comes from platform work and their satisfaction with platform work conditions (N = 365)
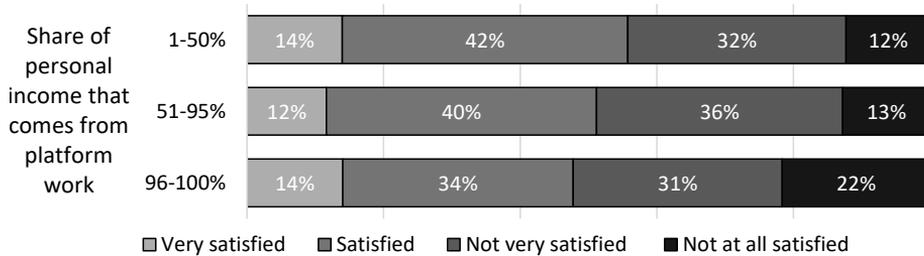
Source: Own elaboration based on the 'Polish Platform Work Survey'.

Note: "What share of your personal income comes from platform work. e.g., in a typical month in which you do platform work?" and "On the whole, are you very satisfied, satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with working conditions in

Figure 6. Survey respondents by their nationality and satisfaction with platform work conditions (N = 238 Polish and 133 nonPolish nationals)
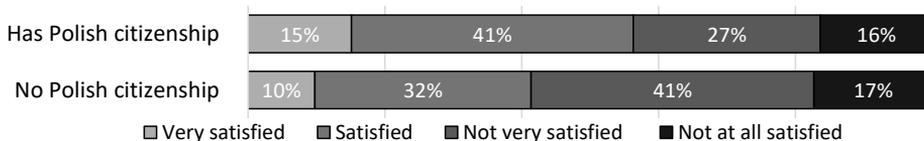
Source: Own elaboration based on the 'Polish Platform Work Survey'.

Note: „On the whole, are you very satisfied, satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with working conditions in your platform work?".

Flexibility: Platforms of Opportunity

Platform work might be precarious and uneven, but as shown earlier (Figure 3) most workers chose platform work partly because of the flexibility in time and place of the work (74% of Polish and 59% of non-Polish respondents). In focus groups, participants talked a lot about how they benefit from it and from the lack of direct supervisors telling them what to do.

Independence is the greatest advantage, I go to work when I want, I finish when I want. If a task doesn't suit me I don't do it. If something suits me, I do it. In fact, I decide what I do and what I want to do, and when I want to do it. [Bartek, Polish, male, multi-platform delivery rider].

Furthermore, participants often felt responsible for their own income, thus they sometimes tried to maximize earnings by playing with or tricking the platform's algorithm. Sebastian [Polish, male, delivery rider] described his tactic of adjusting to special bonus zones in Warsaw's suburbs by positioning himself at the edge of the zone when the promotion started. Unfortunately, an order from a neighboring zone, or a cancelled ride, could derail the plan. Still, it is a thrilling bet and a way to exhibit control over one's earnings.

Platform work is work, but then it includes being outside, meeting people, driving a car (which some like), or a bicycle (which others like). Thus, some focus group participants, particularly two Belarussian bike enthusiasts, treated it as a hobby. Furthermore, after finishing each drive or delivery the workers know they accomplished something and get immediate rewards. This was particularly valued by people who experienced stress, peer pressure and responsibility in other jobs. Thus, it might be perceived as low-paid but also low-stress work. Błażej combines delivery riding with working for an advertising agency with the former being a relief and a break from the latter.

For me, it is actually a mental relaxation, because this work is really not engaging. I will say this, I like to drive 40 thousand a year, with no rush. After sitting in front of the computer, which requires you to actually think, it is such a relaxation. And you get paid for that. [Błażej, Polish, male, delivery rider]

In a similar manner, Florian compares food delivery with his previous job as a manager in a restaurant:

It's a pleasant work. For me, it's such a leap from a stressful job to a job where I'm responsible for very little, and I don't have much stress. Especially on a bicycle, because with a car sometimes you get stressed about not having anywhere to park or something. And you just ride [the bike] *pleasantly, without stress* [Moderator: So you generally relax after your previous job?] *I'm resting a lot, we'll see for how long.* [Florian, Polish, male delivery rider]

Overall, it seems that people's work history, positionality in society and the labor market prove crucial for their self-selection (or being pushed) into platform work, and for their resulting vulnerability (or lack thereof), as well as their level of satisfaction with what they do.

Discussion

Insufficient access to, or development of, institutions such as welfare and standard employment relations is commonly linked with platform work, both in research and in the words of workers themselves. In Poland, non-citizens represent the largest and growing group of vulnerable workers. However, studies argue that in other countries, platform work and vulnerability follow hierarchies based on race (e.g., Van Doorn, 2017; Lam and Triandafyllidou, 2022; Gebrial, 2022), gender (e.g., Milkman et al., 2021) and migratory status (Sun et al., 2021; Altenried, 2021; Holtum et al., 2022; Zhou, 2022). While platforms use different strategies to influence or sidestep the state's rules (Mazur and Serafin, 2023), in the end, it is the state that plays the central role "(...) in creating conditions, through its policies, development strategies and legislations, for the thriving of the gig economy and its workers' precarity." (Zhou, 2022, p. 13). The importance of state's rules and workers' positionality is confirmed by analyses conducted by Kowalik et al. (2024) who compared this survey's data with results from the European Working Conditions Survey. They found that "Among natives, the job quality of platform work was comparable to that in similar occupations in the traditional economy." (Kowalik et al., 2024, p. 11-15). Migrants also seem to experience a similar number of job deprivations (in terms of low earnings, long hours, lack of contract, no work-life balance) as in other, comparable sectors. All precarious workers benefit when the state provides stronger support (Inanc, 2020). In particular, the labor code, welfare support, integration and immigration policies are key rules impacting who will get pushed towards platform work and who will have the option to choose it willingly.

In this vein, Schor et al. (2020) considered financial dependency on platform work as the crucial determinant of satisfaction and the ability to reap the benefits of flexible work. Glavin and Schieman (2022) while confirming Schor et al. (2020) results in terms of mental health also suggested that "platform dependency is more likely a sign of labor market vulnerability rather than personal choice" (Glavin and Schieman, 2022, p. 11). Our results indicate that while being income-dependent on the platform decreased work satisfaction, being a migrant proved a much stronger predictor. This suggests that it is not the income dependence but the positionality in the labor market that plays a crucial role in workers' satisfaction.

Within their economic environment workers (migrants and non-migrants alike) try to find the best possible employment arrangement available to them money and life-wise. People's strategies might be as in Polkowska and Mika's (2022) paper: income-oriented, but it can also be as Milkman et al. (2021) found: work satisfaction oriented. Platform work has the benefit of consisting of multiple small tasks and some people can feel satisfaction with each transported

person and each delivered dish. Furthermore, people can like the nature of the work. In line with our results on bike enthusiasts performing bike deliveries, Milkman et al. (2021) study participants delivered groceries, and many of them liked shopping and helping others through that. As a result, they were willing to work for less.

Income-wise, if access to traditional employment is limited, a worker's best possible arrangement might mean working for platforms (van Doorn et al., 2023), often for multiple platforms or employers (Polkowska and Mika, 2022), or even working illegally by renting an account from someone else if one doesn't qualify (Altenried, 2021). A general online survey in Poland suggests that for those who performed platform work (including online platform work) at some point time, it did fulfil most of their expectations (Tusińska, 2023). Also, the Polish strategy of 'kombinowanie' described by Polkowska and Mika (2022), and what we referred to above as 'taking advantage of a platform', fits well into this framework. Workers tend to search for ways to outmaneuver the algorithm, trick the platform to earn more, work less or both. Thus, even in a rigid set of rules and ascribed positions workers proactively search for the best solution available.

Conclusion

This article analyzed platform work from the perspective of scholars but also platform workers themselves, giving them a voice in the academic discourse and showing their agency in navigating the labor market. Our analysis juxtaposed results from two different datasets: a quantitative survey and qualitative group interviews, enabling us to draw conclusions that overcome the limits of either method. We focused on how employment availability and flexibility translated into gains and risks for workers. The study participants' answers showed that while they are aware of many drawbacks of platform work, this is often the best work that they can find and many are satisfied with it.

Platform work, while offering a flexible and accessible entry into the labor market, also intersects with deeper societal and economic structures. Our results reveal that platform work often represents the first labor market experience in Poland for both migrants and non-migrants, serving as a crucial entry point. However, this accessibility is a double-edged sword. For many, especially migrants, platform work is not just an opportunity but a necessity, born out of limited employment opportunities and the need for immediate income in a new environment. Platform work's flexibility is a boon for many, but it often translates into instability and uncertainty, particularly for those who rely on it as their primary source of income or who have limited other options. In Poland, the

satisfaction derived from platform varies with workers' platform income dependency but most of all with their positionality in the labor market, namely their citizenship. Our results highlight a significant aspect of platform work: its ability to capitalize on existing vulnerabilities and inequalities. Reducing these inequalities, by providing broad welfare support, changing labor market rules as well as immigration policies, could improve the situation of platform workers and generally vulnerable workers in the country.

As many countries have shown, changing the labor market's landscape is possible. The Polish government reacts to the ongoing criticism of Uber and other platforms by trying to regulate and control platform work specifically. For example, in May 2023, the Polish parliament obliged the platforms to verify their drivers' identity, and driving license in person (instead of online) as well as checking that they have no criminal record. While this law is aimed at protecting the passengers, it is not designed to protect the drivers. The drivers have more paperwork to fill and more barriers to overcome before they will be able to start working. However, the fleet partners are quick to adjust to the new expectations, and they might start taking an additional fee for helping with such formalities. Thus, in Poland, but also in other countries, the rules surrounding platform work keep changing and will impact the level of availability and flexibility of platform work.

We gathered data at the beginning of 2022 when Ukrainian men constituted a large share of migrants in Poland, since then the landscape has shifted. The war in Ukraine meant that many men left, while refugees, particularly women and children, came to Poland seeking safety. Simultaneously, the number of workers from other countries including Belarus, Georgia, India and Moldova increased (Mrugała et al., 2023), leading to more diversity and a larger share of migrants who need to go through the whole process of obtaining a work permit to become legally employed. We believe that these changes widened the gap between Polish and non-Polish nationals in their vulnerability, positionality on the labor market and satisfaction with platform work, making our results even more important.

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Declaration of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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