

Article

Dependency and Social Recognition of Online Platform Workers: Evidence From a Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract

This article is about those who need or want to make a living from working on online platforms. Moreover, questions of financial dependence are related to why this work is done and what social recognition the workers expect from it. Our mixed-methods approach captures this heterogeneous field of online platform work by dividing it into three categories: (a) microwork, (b) mesowork, and (c) macrowork. Microwork involves offering short, repetitive tasks to an anonymous crowd, such as human intelligence tasks. Macrowork consists of market-based freelance platforms offering highly skilled professionals complex and more extensive tasks. In between, mesowork covers platforms offering specialized tasks such as software testing or content creation. While income opportunities and working conditions vary widely between these platforms, common features include self-employment and the ability to work from anywhere. Quantitative results show that only for a few highly skilled workers does income from platform work account for a crucial share of their household income. Surprisingly, workers' household incomes do not differ by skill level. Qualitative results complement this picture by giving us a more contextual understanding of the significant variation among workers. We find cases in which monetary remuneration is not the only reason for doing platform work. So, despite all the criticism of precarious working conditions, platform work does have some positive aspects and can also hold the potential for the social inclusion of people who cannot participate in traditional labor markets. This article contributes to these discussions by providing workers' perspectives on the risks and challenges of online platform work, acknowledging their different living situations, socioeconomic status, and health issues.

Keywords

clickwork; occupational health; online freelancers; online platform work; platform economy; qualitative interviews; social precarity; social recognition; well-being

Issue

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1. Introduction

The emerging field of online platform work offers new employment opportunities with low entry barriers and high flexibility. An internet connection, sufficient language, and IT skills are the main requirements for this work. Hence, virtual services provide employment opportunities for people who cannot participate in the traditional labor market. However, as an isolated and invis-

ible form of self-employment, it requires self-discipline and self-motivation while offering spatial and temporal flexibility. It is an open question whether platforms are exploitative or beneficial for workers (Schor et al., 2020). Working conditions in the platform economy vary widely, ranging from relatively well-paid freelance jobs to precarious, piece-rate, low-skilled, routine tasks (clickwork). The advantages of platform work include easy access to the labor market, even if one lives in a remote area, faces

health problems, or is looking for a way to combine paid work with other activities or care responsibilities (Wood et al., 2019; Zyskowski et al., 2015). The promise of a flexible source of income earned from home and new career opportunities (Idowu & Elbanna, 2022) attracts an ever-growing number of potential workers to the platform economy. From the point of view of employers and platforms, efficiency and opportunities are highlighted as being key (Pongratz, 2019).

Discussing the downsides, the discourse on precarity (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018; Vallas & Schor, 2020) due to on-call work, piecework (Stanford, 2022), and algorithmic control (Rahman, 2021) predominates (Schor et al., 2020). Furthermore, isolated online work has several long-term consequences for physical and mental health (Llosa & Agulló-Tomás, 2022), social protection, and financial stability. From a more macro perspective, online platform work has become a source of just-in-time workers, often bypassing labor laws and employment contracts (De Stefano, 2015), providing an “extreme form of commodification” (Howcroft & Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2019, p. 24). This development encroaches on new “areas of skilled labor (such as computer programming and legal advice) as tasks are digitally decomposed, and workers contend with piece rate pay structures” (Howcroft & Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2019, p. 33). Thus, online platform work also contributes to the prevalence of non-standard employment contracts (Mandl et al., 2015) and solo-self-employment (Pongratz, 2018) in a widening range of occupations. However, platform work is hard to picture as an isolated field of work because most workers tend to have traditional employment alongside it (based on our own quantitative research; see also Glavin & Schieman, 2022; Serfling, 2019). This mode of hybrid work has implications for the workers’ stakes regarding social protection. Using an already protected labor force allows platforms to freeride on conventional employers (Huws, 2020; Schor et al., 2020).

Against this background, the following mixed-methods study is one of the few that provides comparatively comprehensive data on the income of online platform workers. It discusses their financial situation and takes a closer look at the motivations for engaging in such work and the importance of social recognition for workers. We show that monetary dependence, motivation, and social recognition are closely linked.

The following theoretical part (Section 2) uses the concept of social inclusion to set the framework for (non-)precarious living and working conditions. We then present the data and method and clarify the categorization of platform work used in our mixed-methods approach (Section 3). In Section 4 we present the qualitative results and descriptive quantitative findings on the dependency rate of platform workers. Finally, we discuss the challenges of social inclusion (Section 5) and draw a conclusion (Section 6).

2. Theoretical Framework

Following Wilson and Secker (2015, p. 53), we understand social inclusion as “a multidimensional concept encompassing physical aspects (e.g., housing), psychological aspects (e.g., a sense of belonging), social aspects (e.g., friendships), and occupational aspects.” While the latter is our focus, we aim for a broadened view of the overall living situation of the workers. This includes various physical aspects, such as housing and household income, social aspects (friendships, family, and social activities), psychological well-being, and health issues.

While the occupational situation covers a series of important topics, such as precariousness, decent wages, and workers’ social security, more is needed to provide a sufficient framework to discuss the nuances of socially beneficial activities. Work is more than a source of income; a broader picture of the living situation should cover social security, financial stability, and social inclusion. In the following steps, we discuss previous studies and recent literature in this field to derive a theoretical framework that bridges the well-known precarious employment situation to the as-yet-undiscussed potential for social inclusion through online platform work.

Schor et al. (2020) states that research on work in the platform economy often focuses on precarious working conditions. We acknowledge the importance of this issue, especially as we see the growing importance of this mode of work and the potential hollowing out of traditional labor market institutions. Taking a closer look, precarious employment lacks an international definition. It could be summarized “by means of a set of conditions such as temporary contract forms, lack of bargaining power and rights, vulnerability in the employee-employer relationship, employment insecurity, and insufficient wages” (Rönnsblad et al., 2019, p. 429).

The growing number of precarious jobs is not limited to the platform economy but results from several developments, such as de-unionization, financialization, globalization, and the digital revolution (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018, p. 5). The overall presence of precarious work makes it challenging to construct a “rational life plan” or a “career normative,” which is known to be “a key source of happiness and subjective well-being, and its absence is a source of mental stress” (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018, p. 18; Sennett, 1998).

Next to the precarious working situation, social integration is a crucial concept for researching the platform economy’s potential for social inclusion. Gallie and Paugam (2002, p. 115) name people’s personal sense of integration and their overall satisfaction with the society they live in as “two key dimensions of subjective social integration.” These aspects, though focusing on social integration, are strongly linked to financial issues: “Financial difficulty [is] the single strongest predictor of both dissatisfaction with life and psychological distress, while social isolation also [has] sharp negative effects

on both measures” (Gallie & Paugam, 2002, p. 127). Matilla-Santander et al. (2022, p. 2) use the concept of social precarity to examine the relationship between precarious employment and social outcomes:

[It] can be defined as the factors related to higher risks of social exclusion and has two dimensions: living conditions (i.e., poverty, financial resources, social connections, social isolation, and satisfaction with family life) and working life (i.e., task quality, work pressure, skill development, and job security).

Social recognition is a central source of identity work and, thus, of social inclusion. Contemporary developments in the world of work may have de- and re-institutionalized sources of recognition (Voswinkel, 2013), such as an occupation, organizational membership, or the normative alignment of the standard-employment-biography. However, work remains a pillar for constructing identities and social inclusion even in the precarious form of non-standard employment within a virtualized place (Voswinkel, 2000). Workers are by no means without agency; they can recombine values and meaning and reinterpret sources of recognition in new ways (Holtgrewe, 2002). Especially in the case of the standard employment biography, we find examples of escapists (Frayne, 2015) or digital nomads (Reichenberger, 2018) who work well with spatially flexible online work. Within the “placeless” realm of digital work (Flecker & Schönauer, 2016), sources of recognition have changed in three ways: Traditional sources, especially ones bound to office space, are missing; new sources of recognition are provided in the virtual space or on the platforms (e.g., ratings, profiles, portfolios, social networks); and the subjective processing of these sources in the sense of identity work is happening in a virtual space (Klaus & Flecker, 2021).

We close this literature review by pointing out that the potential benefits of social inclusion in online platform work should not be limited to its income potential. It provides ways to engage in meaningful activities despite precarious working and income conditions. Our empirical research gives insights into examples of social inclusion and actual usages of the various possibilities that platform work provides.

3. Data and Methods

3.1. Three Types of Online Platform Work in Our Mixed Methods Design

Various conceptualizations of online platform work highlight different aspects of work, making it challenging to use consistent terms (Pongratz & Bormann, 2017; for an overview see European Commission, 2021). Some focus on the task complexity or required skills of the jobs, differentiating between micro and macrotasks (e.g., Krzywdzinski & Gerber, 2020). Others focus on

the mode of job allocation, freelance marketplaces, crowdwork, or contest platforms (e.g., Schmidt, 2017; Serfling, 2019). As not all platforms fit these analytic typologies, sometimes platforms are grouped by the type of service they offer (such as content creation, testing, clickwork, or creative design). Regarding our survey sample, we decided to focus on task complexity. However, we added a third category (mesowork) between the low-skilled and short microtasks and the higher-skilled and longer macrotasks. In our sample and in general, microwork is allocated to an anonymous crowd (crowdwork), whereas macrowork takes place on freelance marketplace platforms. In between, the platforms categorized as mesowork allow different modes of work allocation and would be instead classified as testing or content creation. The three categories allow for a better generalization than other approaches and hold to empirical analysis concerning task complexity, task length, and hourly wages. We do not deal with creative contest platforms.

To summarize, our sample is divided into three categories: (a) macrowork, in which freelancers provide highly skilled work in longer projects; (b) mesowork, providing semi-qualified longer tasks such as content creation or testing services; and (c) microwork, consisting of low-skilled tasks taking just a couple of minutes. Based on the EU CEPS database (European Commission, 2021), we selected several platforms providing digital remote work, which we keep anonymous. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected by inviting workers to participate via job posts on the platforms.

We work with a sequential mixed-methods design with different research phases (Creswell, 2009). The qualitative interviews help to explore the quantitative indicators for our survey, and both findings are analyzed in parallel, giving us a more nuanced perspective on the heterogeneity of platform work in practice. We interpreted and discussed the results with an interdisciplinary team of economists and sociologists.

3.2. Qualitative Methods

From March 2022 to April 2023, we conducted 30 problem-centered online interviews with German-speaking workers of different skill levels, varying in age and socioeconomic status. The interview call was posted as a job on seven platforms, which we keep anonymous, and on workers’ forums related to the platforms. The call was addressed to German-speaking workers regardless of their place of residence. However, most of the interviewees lived in Germany. Participants were selected aiming for a large variety of tasks and socioeconomic backgrounds across the three platform types outlined in Section 3.1. They received a remuneration of 20 EUR for an interview that lasted between one hour and 2 hours and 30 minutes. The aim is to fill the empirical gap in studying the spectrum from highly skilled, demanding tasks (macrowork) to repetitive,

monotonous clickwork (microwork), including crowd work and marketplace freelancing.

For the qualitative analysis, we, as a group of four interpreters, started with an intensive sequential fine analysis of key passages (Lueger et al., 2005) to better understand latent meanings. To systematize all the material, we then used MaxQDA for open coding and code structure analysis (Froschauer & Lueger, 2020). Writing memos for the codes or each case immediately after the interview led to a circular process of constant reflection during the analysis.

3.3. Quantitative Methods

From January 2023 to April 2023, we conducted an online survey with workers contacted on four platforms ($n = 1,969$). For the survey questionnaire, we combined qualitative insights and validated scales on mental health issues (Burnout Assessment Tool, Flourishing Scale, Austrian Health Instrument Survey) with the Employment Precariousness Scale (Padrosa et al., 2021), which we adapted to the specific situation of digital platform workers. After cleaning the data for missing information and checking consistency, the sample size analyzed here is $n = 1,773$.

4. Results

In the interviews and the survey, we collected extensive information on financial status and general living situation, allowing us to draw conclusions regarding the worker's dependency on platform work. To systematically describe the diversity of platform workers emerging from qualitative results, we refer to five typical situations of platform workers and their respective requirements for social inclusion (Section 4.1). A concrete case illustrates these types by describing their living and working conditions. In Section 4.2, we outline some quantitative results of our survey. We compare the three categories of platform workers (macro, meso, micro), describing their income from digital platform work and its importance for livelihoods to measure their dependency on platform income.

4.1. Typology of Online Platform Workers

The following typology derives from the interpretation of the qualitative interviews to provide more contextual knowledge on the living situations of workers engaged in this field. This aids in our understanding of the different motivations that drive them to do this work. In their stories, we see how they construct the meaning of working on the online platform. Qualitative evidence is better suited to give us a complete picture of the meaning of income, remote work, and other life activities related to online platform work.

We now describe five illustrative types, each representing a real-life case of a platform worker, to show

the varying forms of social recognition, work aspiration, and meanings of online platform work from the worker's perspective.

4.1.1. Type "Healthy, Safe & Young": Anita (Macrowork)

Anita (F28) lives alone in a jungle house on the beach in Brazil. Platform work is sufficient as her primary income source due to the low cost of living in South America compared to Austria, her birth country. She still has to pay back student fees of 4,000 EUR. She would like to continue making a living from her successful work as a freelance writer. Her dream would be to build an arts center for locals in Brazil. She is recognized for her work because she receives good feedback from her clients; they are loyal and use her services repeatedly. With the prospect of living in a low-cost country, digital nomadism works just fine.

This type represents young workers who simply do not need to engage in a secure traditional employment relationship but prefer the spatial flexibility of online platform work to enjoy a better work-life balance and flexibility. Health issues are not pressing, and income is secured through other means (assets, savings, partners, investment income, etc.). This ranges from digital nomads to middle-aged "dropouts" who now take care of their families.

4.1.2. Type "Wealthy Retiree": Ronja (Mesowork)

Ronja (F74) lives with her husband in a house in a small town in Switzerland. Both have an IT background and are retired; they are financially well off and own a second house in a pleasant rural area that they occasionally rent out to travelers. She has children and grandchildren who visit her occasionally, and she keeps busy with leisure activities (traveling and visiting friends). She is delighted with her life and has nothing to complain about. Recent developments, such as the war in Ukraine and climate change scare her, but she is doing well. The platform work offers her meaningful activity and recognition by continuing to be productive and supporting clients through her work. She sees platform work as a mental workout that helps her stay mentally fit.

A prime example of this second type of worker is older people who are retired but work on platforms to keep themselves busy and train their brains. They want to stay mentally fit and healthy. They also appreciate a meaningful activity but do not need the additional income. Similar cases are people who have partially withdrawn from the traditional labor market because they no longer need income and want to spend more time at home.

4.1.3. Type "Old Freelancer": Lorenz (Mesowork)

Lorenz (M59) lives with his wife in a house in a small town in Germany. They have six children, most being

old enough to have moved out. Lorenz struggles to earn a decent income even though he is a salesperson and resorts to platform work only as a supplement. The financial situation of being an older person with little or no prospect of a decent retirement weighs heavily on him, as does the risk of not being paid for a job. He has been a freelancer for most of his life now. When the pandemic broke out, business was terrible. As a salesperson for various products and in the event business, he tried several new avenues, but it could have gone better. Now, he is trying to compensate for the loss through the internet and the platform economy. Unfortunately, the income he generates is minimal.

This type describes older people who have done much freelance work in their working lives and who now lack the social security of a decent pension. They do all they can but have limited opportunities in the traditional labor market (due to age, health problems, lack of skills, or a place to live). They are highly precarious as they are outside the social security net and have low incomes (with a slightly higher cost of living than younger people).

4.1.4. Type “Young, but Ill”: Ella (Mesowork)

Ella (F28) lives alone in a flat in an Austrian village, has a marginal part-time job, and has very little disposable income. She is trying to set up a small online business and works on a platform to earn additional income, focusing on easy tasks that suit her interests. Her parents support her financially, and she often visits them for lunch or dinner. Ella suffers from long Covid and cannot leave her home for long. Her health condition strongly influences her employment opportunities despite her young age. Her income situation is highly precarious, as she can only survive through savings and her parents’ help.

This type is younger people with chronic health problems (unrelated to age) who cannot engage in traditional employment patterns. They work on the platform because it is feasible and means they do not have to leave the house. They can survive thanks to other sources of income (partners, family), but they could not do it without them. This dependency is another source of precarity.

4.1.5. Type “Old, Health Issues, Monetary Dependent”: Mischa (Microwork)

Mischa (F50) lives alone in her parents’ house in Germany, which is too big for her. She has the right to live there for life since her parents died, although her sisters inherited the house. Her mental health problems (panic attacks) are a major reason for her daily platform activities. From 9.00 to 22.00, she looks for jobs simultaneously on four different microwork platforms. With her seven-day week, she earns about 500 EUR net per month. The effective working time is 4–5 hours daily, including much unpaid search work. She feels socially recognized in her work when she is paid and has the chance of receiv-

ing bonuses—which has only happened once. To some extent, she also “enjoys work.” However, she receives little recognition from a friend for wasting her talent on such activities; she is told she is far too intelligent for such jobs.

For this type, platform work is precarious and frustrating, especially when unsatisfied clients deny remuneration for completed tasks or poorly communicate their tasks’ requirements ahead of time. In such cases, workers’ objections often go unheard by the platform, or it takes too long to be worth the effort and the low remuneration. The possibility of relying on platform income is further threatened by platforms suddenly closing workers’ accounts without transparent explanations. More task offers and transparency in acceptance of the fulfilled work would be beneficial.

4.2. Quantitative Results

The surveyed sample is, on average, 37 years old and composed of 55% male, 43.8% female, and 0.2% diverse respondents (1% did not share the information). Almost half of the participants (49%) have obtained a university degree and report to be mainly employed (46%). The two most frequently reported social and occupational groups are self-employed (29%) and students (12%); the number of unemployed and retirees is low (3% and 2%, respectively; see more details in the Supplementary File, Table A1).

In our overall sample, 57% are covered by compulsory insurance. Significant differences arise between the categories (63% of microworkers and only 44% of macroworkers benefit from compulsory insurance). This relatively low number can be explained by high numbers of students (being co-insured) and freelancers who are without social security and retirees.

Asked about their motivation for working through an online platform, 71% of the sample reported that they were aiming to earn an additional income. The second most frequent motivation was temporal flexibility (64%), followed by the desire to try something new (57%). The possibility of working remotely was also appreciated, with 49% of respondents beginning work on platforms for spatial flexibility. Motivations beyond the monetary and working conditions emerge from the motivations that online platform work “is fun” (37%) and offers a “meaningful way to spend time” (35%). A fourth of the sample was looking instead to gain work experience, while 20% wanted to re-orientate themselves professionally (see Supplementary File, Table A2). Using the quantitative data, we show differences between and within the three categories of micro, meso, and macroworkers in platform income (aggregated for all online labor platforms), total household income, and the share of the platform income in the total household income. The latter captures “monetary dependency” from platforms. We show quintile cut-off points instead of means, as they are robust against outliers. Considering deciles

yielded similar findings, we opted to display quintiles for a clearer, aggregated overview.

Figure 1 shows the personal gross monthly incomes from working on digital platforms by quintiles for each category of platform worker. Comparatively, incomes are much higher for macroworkers than for the other two categories. However, income levels are relatively low, except for the top 20% of macroworkers. This suggests that most workers rely on something other than this income source since it cannot guarantee a living wage.

Figure 2 shows that monthly net household incomes from macro, meso, and microwork vary greatly within categories and less between them. This is surprising as

microwork is often described as low-skilled, monotonous work supposedly done by people on low incomes. Contrary to this assumption, our results show that microworkers have similar net household incomes to macroworkers (even higher, as shown by the percentiles depicted in Figure 2).

In Figure 3), we quantify the dependence on platform income by calculating its share of total net household income. Our study determines economic dependency as being when at least half of the household income comes from platform work. As we show, this varies strongly within groups but even more between them. For macroworkers, more than 80% of the household income

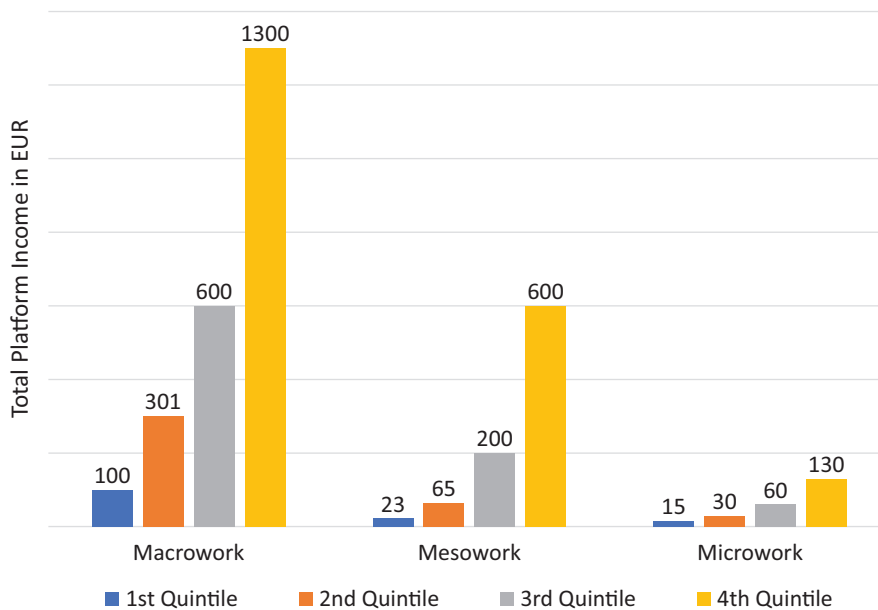


Figure 1. Worker’s total digital platform income by platform category (in EUR).

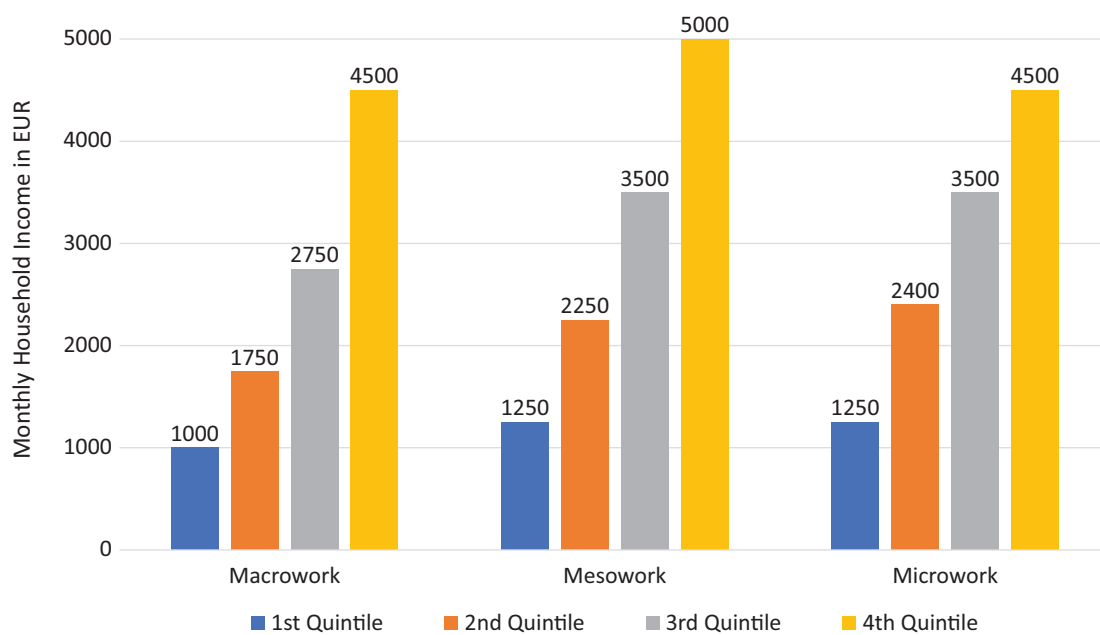


Figure 2. Monthly household income of workers by platform category (in EUR).

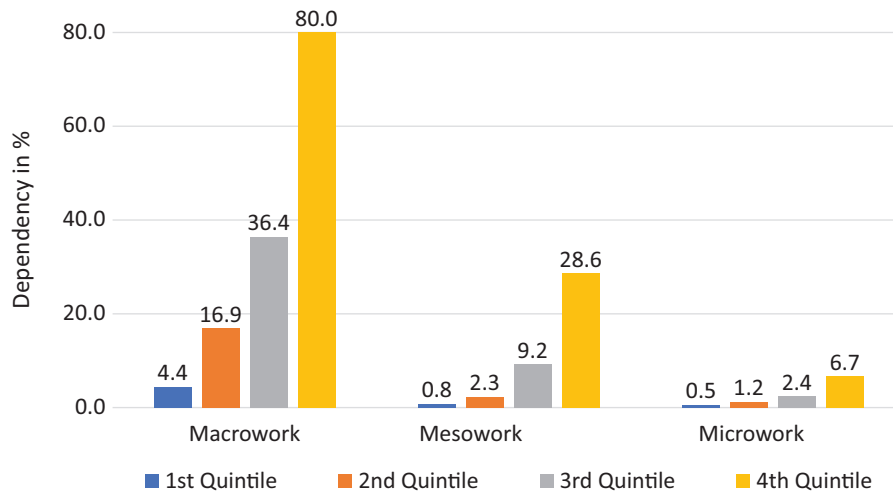


Figure 3. Share of platform income on total household income (in EUR).

of the top 20% of workers depends on platform work. Even the bottom 20% of macroworkers have a higher dependency than most microworkers. For microworkers, on the other hand, the top 20% depend on platform work for 6.7% of their income.

Overall, we can confirm the dependency thesis (Schor et al., 2020, p. 838), as most platform workers do not rely on platform work as their primary source of income. However, our study is not so easily comparable with Schor et al.'s (2020) results, as we use different concepts and research different populations (German-speaking online platform workers versus US-based platform workers).

5. Discussion

While studies on platform work emphasize both the curse and the blessing of platform work (e.g., Eurofound, 2021), the discourse on precarious conditions in terms of negative effects of algorithmic control or economic dependencies predominates (e.g., Krzywdzinski & Gerber, 2020; Rahman, 2021; Stanford, 2022). We aim to provide a more nuanced picture by focusing on German-speaking workers and arguing that social inclusion goes beyond simply looking at working conditions. The position of workers depends on a strong safety net that varies not only by the welfare state and labor market but also by the changing household situation over their life course. The dependency thesis (Schor et al., 2020) makes it possible to get a better analytical grasp of the heterogeneity of workers, as follows.

5.1. Monetary (In)Dependent Workers

Based on our qualitative interviews and the quantitative data with a sufficiently large sample, most workers only use platform work as a supplementary income and are thus not dependent on it. Workers tend to be highly satisfied and happy with platform work when

there is more freedom of choice regarding jobs and total working hours. We found these positive examples of self-employment in all three categories, even within microwork. This is quite surprising, considering that many studies show that platform work has many different levels of uncertainty regarding income security, job availability, and control through algorithmic management (e.g., Glavin & Schieman, 2022; Huws, 2020).

However, some people are financially dependent on platform work, and our qualitative data offers insights into their experiences. They experience the pressure to succeed and accept all jobs and burdens in case of unexpected events (e.g., accidents, illness, living permanently without social security). This lowers the chances of a self-determined lifestyle. It is not only the platform conditions that are decisive but also whether workers can earn sufficient income to make a living. The preferred living place also plays a role (e.g., lower living costs).

Moreover, dependence is also related to recent trends in the unemployment rate and the likelihood of finding a new job in the regular labor market. Acceptance of a regular job also depends on the ability to do so; certain health problems or particular life situations only allow for flexible working hours and locations. It is interesting to note in this context that—according to our interviewees—the expanded possibilities to work from home impacted the labor market and the acceptance of telework during the Covid crisis. We interviewed young professionals such as Anita, who depends on the platform's income but is nevertheless satisfied with her overall life situation. Spatial flexibility allows for new lifestyles and freedoms, new fields of employment, and new working locations (e.g., on the beach). Short-term dependency at a certain stage of life (e.g., studies, childcare, health) is limited and has an end.

Other dependent people, such as Mischa, also rely on platform income and are in a precarious situation, yet they still deem platform work to be an improvement. Compared to her former employment as a cleaner,

which was physically exhausting, coupled with her mental health problems, platform work allows her to earn some money from home.

Apart from these advantages, there are also downsides, such as permanent insecurity and a lack of social security and labor laws. This comes with a heavy burden of financial risk, especially in the case of retirement or temporary inability to work, whether for health reasons (like Mischa and Ella) or simply due to a lack of employment opportunities. Next to the monetary significance of work, the question arises as to what forms of recognition the specific platform work offers.

5.2. Other Motivations and Social Recognition

Besides monetary reasons in the form of supplemental income, there are many non-monetary reasons to engage in platform work. They comprise building a social network, finding meaningful engagement from home, keeping brain cells in shape, fighting loneliness, or simply keeping oneself busy with productive activities. Another, even easier source of social inclusion lies in the fact that it is paid work. Since platform work is mostly part-time, the bar will likely be much lower than a regular job. Even small tasks are paid, proving they have value for someone. Ultimately, some platform workers argue explicitly that they are doing meaningful work by feeding artificial intelligence. We want to emphasize that the self-assessment and the assessment of others can differ significantly. For example, working from home risks isolation due to a lack of social contact at (or on the way to) work. Some respondents, however, do not see this as a problem but refer to other possibilities of social contact (including virtual spaces) or the additional time it allows them to spend with their family. Others even mentioned negative experiences at their previous job (e.g., bullying).

What makes online work of all kinds special are the nontraditional sources of recognition, such as user profiles and ratings (Klaus & Flecker, 2021). Platforms offer various forms of bonuses and rankings via “stars,” “gold standards,” or “levels” to value the quality and quantity of fulfilled tasks. These benefits could be seen as part of algorithmic management and indirect control (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), but some workers also perceive them as a form of (artificial) recognition. For example, when explicitly asked if platform work provides recognition, Mischa mentions that she once received a bonus for completing microtasks. This surprised her and made her feel proud and appreciated for doing platform work. In general, reputation mechanisms and ratings as a form of algorithmic control (Wood et al., 2019) are a double-bladed sword. They provide feedback for the workers (and certain security for customers), but they cause stress and could lead to unfair treatment. After all, a majority (66% in microwork, 80% in macrowork) of the workers perceive reputation mechanisms as a form of recognition rather than a burden (Gerber, 2020, p. 188).

In short, personal circumstances and the respective sources of recognition vary greatly between cases and within and across micro-, meso-, and macro-platforms. From an outsider’s perspective, platform workers are often pictured as suffering. In the interviews, however, the platform workers emphasize contradictory assessments: On the one hand, they feel pleasure in the online activity, a coping strategy to avoid cognitive dissonance—even clickworkers seem satisfied to a certain extent. On the other hand, they refer to shortcomings and pitfalls, such as the constant uncertainty of attractive and affordable tasks, paying taxes and social security contributions at their own expense, and controlling boundaries when they have to be available online 24/7.

6. Conclusion

Working on online platforms is an emerging area of non-standard employment that offers opportunities with relatively low barriers to entry. Work that is entirely flexible in terms of time and space can be attractive to people with poor opportunities in the traditional labor market, whether because they are ill, have limited mobility, or have caring responsibilities. The online labor market is especially important when other employment opportunities are lacking, whether for personal or structural reasons.

We have seen that the motivation to work through online platforms cannot be limited to monetary incentives. Our quantitative data shows that platform income only forms a significant part of household income for the higher-earning top 20% of macro workers. Surprisingly, the German-speaking micro-workers mostly do not need platform work. Moreover, since these tasks are low-paid, they could not make ends meet if working solely on platforms. In general, it remains a “winner-takes-all market” (Schor et al., 2020), as only a few have high hourly wages and earn a sufficient part of their household income with online platform work. The total monthly household incomes of micro, meso, and macroworkers are similar in amount and distribution. Especially in German-speaking countries, the platform economy works because it is *not* the primary source of people’s income. Moreover, it can be argued that this kind of online work also holds the potential for social inclusion—at least as long as citizens can rely on a comparatively strong safety net.

Our analysis has shown that the relatively small amounts of economic dependence on platform work within our sample are accompanied by other motivations beyond looking at financial aspects. In this respect, the qualitative interviews were insightful and allowed us to trace various meanings and resources for social recognition. Platform work enables different types of participation in society. Some do it for fun, some as a mental workout, and some just to keep busy while spending time at home. As a productive activity with its own sources of recognition, it offers a fulfilling—or at least a gap-filling—experience of doing something meaningful. Again, this is

mainly independent of payments, which are usually very low or benefit only a tiny group of high potentials.

As a result, we argue that the discussion should not be limited to the monetary aspects by concluding with some insights into the relationship between the financial situation of platform workers and their value attitudes: People who work online as a hobby or as a kind of occupational therapy out of boredom are changing market conditions. They tend to do unpaid work and change work demands and evaluations, a key issue for labor control and algorithmic management. In principle, these “voluntary” workers create an oversupply of labor that depresses wages, increases competition, and fosters a demand for even poorly paid jobs.

Despite being involved in productive activities as a source of recognition, online platform work does not provide social security benefits as does traditional employment. This long-term problem of freeriding on the labor markets leads to a high risk of precarity. Even if it meets the needs of younger workers seeking spatial flexibility, it is a time bomb for retirement and social security in case of unemployment.

To conclude, online platform work is an opportunity but also a structural problem: For some workers who are not economically dependent on their online platform work, it acts like a hobby, leading to fewer paid employment opportunities for those who rely on it as an actual job.

Within the same task type and on the same platform, we find workers in highly precarious situations and others who do not rely on this additional income but are engaged in platform work for other reasons. This makes treating them as a group with similar interests extremely difficult. We need a better understanding of the social security preferences of online platform workers. Furthermore, there needs to be more long-term research on the employment biographies of platform workers: Who can use it as a bridge into the regular labor market, or as another success story in life, and who remains trapped in a precarious situation?

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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