Perceiving Platform Work as Decent Work? Views Regarding Working Conditions Among Platform Taxi Drivers in Tallinn

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The global proliferation of neoliberalism, prioritising market primacy, privatisation, and deregulation, has impelled employers to pursue enhanced labour flexibility (Kalleberg, 2009). Over recent decades, post-Fordist organisations have increasingly adopted flexible employment practices, such as outsourcing and temporary contracts (Vallas & Schor, 2020). Factors driving the expansion of precarious work are unlikely to wane under the prevailing paradigm of free-market globalisation (Kalleberg, 2009). Globalisation has introduced complexity, interconnectedness, and uncertainty, exemplifying the intricate interdependence of individual lives and distant decisions (Colombo & Reburghini, 2019). This is well exemplified by platform work, where multinational platforms like Uber set working conditions that have overarching effects on whole sectors around the world. Consequently, social process analyses necessitate an enhanced consideration of the local subjectivities of agents.

This chapter scrutinises the perspectives of Tallinn-based platform taxi drivers on their work, utilising the *decent work* concept as an analytical framework to capture various work dimensions. Previous discussions on platform work have only selectively considered aspects of the *decent work* approach. We draw from precarity theories (Betti, 2018; Kalleberg, 2009), emphasising polyvalent roles, workforce fragmentation, and risk-shifting. In accordance with the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Decent Work Agenda, we aim for a cohesive view addressing all three pillars: providing full and productive employment while ensuring social protection; upholding standards and fundamental rights at work; and fostering social dialogue. We examine platform taxi drivers' perceptions of work realities and desired working conditions, and our central research question is: in what ways do workers view their working conditions and how does their perspective align with the principles of decent work?

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Technological transformations in the employment sphere do not diminish the need for and entitlement to decent work. Do these principles also apply to platform work? In 2017, the ILO's Global Commission on the Future of Work addressed job quality in the platform economy (ILO, 2018a, 2018b), asserting the applicability of the principles of decent work to digital platform workers. Indeed, several analyses have already deemed platform work indecent work (e.g. Christie, 2022; Dukes & Streeck, 2021; Purcell & Garcia, 2021). The ILO Framework Work Indicators consist of ten elements, each linked to one or two of the following three main pillars (ILO, n.d.a, n.d.b):

A. Full productive employment, as reflected in indicators addressing employment opportunities, work stability and security, and equal opportunity and treatment.
B. Social protection, encompassing working time, pay and benefits, and safety at work.
C. Promoting social dialogue, involving evaluating the extent and coverage of social dialogue and the representation of employers and workers.

As platform work potentially embodies the future of work, its experiences inform innovative practices, particularly time and place flexibility and algorithmic management. Examining the experiences of Estonian platform workers and their reflections on aspects of *decent work* holds significance for the country's future work landscape and understanding the implications of platformization in general. Regarding platform work, we see that the main social challenges in Estonia are: ensuring that digital platform workers, irrespective of contract type, can anticipate decent working conditions, and simultaneously, preventing the potential innovative benefits of digital platforms from inadvertently reducing existing standards of respectable employment. A 2021 European Commission policy initiative aims to protect platform workers' rights by providing a list of criteria that enable to determine if the platform qualifies as an employer, and in that case making platforms responsible for guaranteeing employment rights for workers (Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament & of The Council on improving working conditions in platform work, 2021). In Estonia, debates around the directive intersect with calls for relaxed employer requirements. Employer representatives advocate for flexibility, suggesting the directive could be harmful (Eesti Tööandjate Keskliit, n.d.; Pisuke, 2022). The government seeks to balance business and worker interests (Sotsiaalministeerium, 2021), while think tanks explore independent contractor models (Erikson & Rosin, 2018). Trade unions, which do not yet represent platform workers, prefer equal conditions for all, proposing to extend the concept of employees and securing all workers a minimum level of rights (Holts, 2022).

1 Estonian Context

The Estonian state authorities and society have largely accepted platforms as service providers, not employers, exhibiting a liberal stance on the employment status of platform workers. The mid-2010s saw digital platforms infiltrate Tallinn's taxi industry, with the Estonian Taxify (now Bolt) and Uber emerging as major players. Pre-existing taxi apps never attained comparable success. In 2017, Bolt held the second-largest revenue among Estonian taxi companies (Kranich, 2018), while in 2019, 33% of internet users aged 16–74 argued they have used websites/apps to arrange a transport service (Statistics Estonia, 2023).

It is important to underline that Tallinn's taxi industry was already rather loosely regulated before the emergence of taxi platforms, and experienced further deregulation due to the impact of platform work (see details Kall et al., 2021). Contrary to many European cities, Estonia displays minimal collective organisation against platforms and lacks worker cooperatives or community-owned platforms. The nation's market-liberal, techno-optimist context aligns with its technologically progressive reputation in information technology (IT) and e-services. Consequently, platform work in Estonia is often celebrated with neoliberal, techno-optimistic views, and the Estonian-based Bolt is hailed as an Estonian economic success story (Sükijainen, 2019).

Estonia has opted for a neoliberal approach since the early 1990s (Saar, 2011). Therefore, Estonia's social welfare spending has been relatively low between 2005 and 2021 compared to the EU28 average. European Union membership has among other factors enforced a consideration of social welfare issues and empowered the otherwise weak voice of trade unions. Therefore, there has been a rapid increase in the minimum salary between 2005 and 2023, but it still lags behind most EU countries (Eurostat, 2023a, 2023b).

Navigating the complexities of social insurance within Estonia's platform work landscape can be challenging; a fact that becomes evident as we delve into the realities of maintaining coverage, the constraints of contract options, and the lack of transparency in data exchange between platforms and state authorities.

Social insurance coverage in Estonia is dependent on continuous payments of social tax above a certain threshold, which poses a challenge for platform workers with fluctuating incomes who might struggle to maintain coverage. Employment contracts provide insurance coverage for employees, even if employed part-time. Social protection can also be achieved via a contract under the law of obligations, but only if the income and related taxes are above a threshold and continuous. Typically, platforms do not offer employment contracts or even those provided by the law of obligations. Platforms like Uber do not assume responsibility for the welfare and social protection of their taxi drivers. Consequently, platform workers must take active steps to pay their social taxes and health insurance, be eligible for pension accumulations, and so on, either as individuals, self-employed, or through another (non-platform) company. While there are more options for obtaining social insurance,

only those opting for employment or service contracts qualify for unemployment insurance benefits. Platforms and state authorities in Estonia have cooperated to simplify the tax declarations for platform earnings. However, as there is no data exchange between platforms and state authorities on the earnings of taxi drivers, there is no overview of the different options used by platform taxi drivers nor on how many of them lack any social insurance (see details of different employment relations and associated social protection rights in Kall et al., 2021).

2 Methodology

We analyse the perspectives of platform taxi drivers on the basis of qualitative in-depth interviews with the workers. The individual interviews (15) were conducted between November 2019 and March 2020. To gain an understanding of the workers' experiences during the pandemic, we also concluded a focus group interview in November 2020. This comprised four participants, representing 2 types of platforms (Uber/Bolt and Airbnb). All participants had experienced platform work before the pandemic as well as during the pandemic.

Although the PLUS project focused on Uber drivers, in Tallinn most of the interviewees also used other taxi platforms, thereby enabling us to gain a wider perspective of platform taxi drivers. To recruit the interviewees, a combination of strategies was used such as purposeful riding with Uber taxis in Tallinn, and public calls in the Uber drivers' Facebook groups and among students at Tallinn University. The snowball technique was also applied among already interviewed individuals to contact their acquaintances. The aim was to have a diverse sample regarding age, gender, nationality (mother tongue), education level, experience of driving a traditional taxi, and work situation. When considering age, experience of driving a traditional taxi, and work situation, the final pool of interviewees was rather diverse; there is over-representation in the final sample of men (13 out of 15), people with higher education (10 out of 15) and Estonians (11 out of 15) (see also Table 1).

The age ranged from 24–66 years. No respondents had one single taxi platform as their only source of income, most of them combined multiple taxi platforms or used Uber as an additional income source. The number of hours worked for Uber ranged considerably (from 3 to 70 per week), but not all could make a clear separation between working for Uber and for other platforms. We can assume that the self-selection of the study made it more likely that nearly all the study participants were from the dominant social group (male, Estonian speakers), who might have been in a more advantaged group among drivers, as they could afford the time to be interviewed. We succeeded in interviewing Estonian-Russians and new immigrants, but it is possible that we still missed enough interviews to cover the whole spectrum of different social groups, especially those who do not speak either Estonian, Russian, or English.

The main topics covered during the interviews related to working conditions and labour processes, social security, and skills. The structure of the interview guide

Table 1 Characteristics of interviewees (N = 15)

Sex	Male	13
	Female	2
Age group	Below 30	5
	30–50	7
	Over 50	3
Nationality: majority/minority	Estonian	11
	Estonian-Russian	2
	New immigrants	2
Education level	Below secondary	0
	Secondary	5
	Higher	10
Monthly working hours on all platforms	Up to 40	2
	40–100	4
	More than 100	9
Main source of income	Uber	1
	Multiple (taxi) platforms	5
	Regular employment	5
	Own company (not taxi)	3
	Pension/scholarship/other allowances	1
Basis for social security	Platform labour	1
	Other	12
	None	2

Source Compiled by the author

divided the discussion into three broad topics, but allowed the interviewees to freely reflect on all their perceptions and topics related to platform work that were important to them.

An inductive thematic analysis method was then applied to the collected data. It must be noted that our method is limited to allow us to focus our analysis on perceptions, elaborating how platform taxi drivers currently see and would like to see their working conditions on platforms, and how aspects of decent work are reflected in these observations.

In the following, the results are presented in three subsections, each consisting of a selection of the ILO decent work indicators that fall under: employment opportunities, work conditions, and the social dimension of working as platform driver. The analytical findings in the chapter are supported by direct quotations from the interviews.

3 Perceptions of Working Conditions: Earnings, Time, Safety

3.1 Fair Income—Adequate Earnings and Benefits

Our research suggests that Tallinn's taxi industry—during our research rather dominated by platforms—is characterised by high-intensity competition, low prices, and widespread tax avoidance. Since platforms entered the market in the mid-2010s, the income of taxi drivers has stagnated compared to the rest of the economy. The market, however, expanded as new customer groups started using taxi services. The interviewed drivers generally argued that the taxi business as a whole is built on the lowest price offers (price dumping), and although clients could be satisfied, taxi drivers are the ones taking a hit from ever decreasing rates. Taxi apps, but also drivers (whose numbers have increased as barriers to becoming a taxi driver have decreased) compete with each other, driving down the prices. One of the interviewees with longer taxi driving experience stated:

> Then when I came back [from a foreign country], I started to drive Uber and also Taxify, now Bolt. It was rather good in the beginning, but the situation has become worse and worse. There are more drivers and now the situation is really bad. This is not a job anymore. If we look at it like that, a few years ago you could say it was a real job. When you did it full-time, then you could get a decent salary after all expenses, but now you can't. You can't earn the same income working the same hours. (U_M_Tln_14)

Although platform taxi drivers are not considered employees but independent contractors, they do not have any opportunities to set the price levels themselves and are at the mercy of the platforms. Some drivers also have low awareness of their actual earning potential—they do not know how to calculate whether taxi driving is beneficial, so they may be like donors to the system for some period before realising that they are actually paying for the opportunity to work—especially if we include the waiting hours in the equation.

There seemed to be a consensus among the interviewees that platform taxi service prices are too low, although occasionally bonus systems increase them to a decent level. Nevertheless, being more or less satisfied with the earning opportunities depends if platform work is a main activity or not. If platform work is seen as extra income alongside a main job, it could be seen as a good-enough addition. Furthermore, some argued that the pricing policy is not transparent; for example, sometimes the app says the price should be three times higher indicating a red colour on the map, but the rides are still offered at a lower price. A few of the respondents contacted the Uber office asking about this, but the answer was something vague, like "it depends on demand".

As the interviewees testified, getting by in this line of work or even being successful requires being a good strategist, but also having the "right kind" of personality traits, such as being disciplined and organised. What follows is that workers can take pride in being successful in a rather insecure and tough line of work:

> So I am very careful about the hours I choose to drive and the hours I choose to take a break, as well as what weekdays to work or not. The goal, you see, is to survive, somehow, until the high season that lasts from May to September. Well, this is rather a demanding period, and no-one can work all seven days of every week. So you have to understand the limit of your capabilities – when you reach that limit, what follows are accidents, and of course this would be the toughest of cases. To stay disciplined, to plan ahead is very important. Sticking to the plan, it is rather possible to make ends meet comfortably, and this is my case. (U_M_Tln_15)

As we see from this quote, a specific type of driver emerges, who invests considerable time in analysing how to benefit the most: techno-savvy tax optimisers. They have developed detailed logic and strategies to make the most of the benefit systems offered by Uber, Bolt, or other platforms, trying to pinpoint the logic behind the algorithmic management by optimising their work hours and timing and also finding ways to reduce the tax load via their own small company. The main strategy for increasing the income for many interviewees was to take orders from the app that provided the best prices at that time (e.g. had peak-time coefficients or some bonuses); therefore, these strategies extended beyond a single app.

Even if the drivers highlighted the extremely low prices for their services, some of them did not express strong attitudes towards the need to regulate the market. However, sometimes the dissatisfaction with the working situation was great enough to even clash with their political ideas—either their belief in the supremacy of the free market and/or their techno-optimism, as exemplified in the next quote:

> This free market and all are very good, but still we need some [regulative] framework, just normal framework, so that we could make do. Maybe raise the price? Nobody will even notice, taxis are so cheap at the moment, just impossible /…/. So, yes – let the state intervene! (U_M_Tln_4)

Furthermore, even if not satisfied with the work situation, the flexibility of platform taxi driving (being your own boss) was seen by some drivers as an ultimate advantage, not least because of the perceived flexibility, problematic issues could be overlooked.

> Q: Is there anything Uber could do differently to improve the working conditions of the drivers?
>
> A: Well, look, there is no employment relationship as such. And in this sense, the platform is one example of the freedom of entrepreneurship. So you work when you want. And to have enough of the service providers on the market, this is already their [platform's] background policy, how they attract the drivers to the streets the best way. Or how to make the service more attractive for the consumers – this is already their craft. What else could they do? I do not know. I haven't really missed anything. (U_M_Tln_6)

3.2 Decent Working Time and Combining Work, Family, and Personal Life

Ride-hailing companies encourage over-working, no social security or income stability for full-time hours, and promote driving as an additional job. This can

lead to dangers in traffic for all parties involved. Everyone in our sample who pays their social tax from their taxi driving income drove at least 40 h per week and in one case even 60–70 h per week. Several interviewees outlined that there are many taxi drivers who work enormously over the normal workload and that Uber is the only app on the market which requires a break after 12 h of work. However, drivers can then continue to drive using other platforms. If taxi driving is used for additional income, it can often be added on top of a full-time job or studies. In addition, taking longer breaks (holidays, vacation) means that the platform worker do not receive any compensation for these periods.

> In order to secure average Estonian wages, one has to... Well, no point talking about eight hours, regular full-time! This is hopeless. Any vacation as such – only when you give up driving for a month, so you do it only at your own expense! (U_M_Tln_15)

When there are bonus systems in place, this can motivate drivers to work at certain times, and might also lead to long working hours. During the period of the interviews, Uber had a bonus system (do an increasing number of rides and get a bonus), which one of the respondents summed up as a game that makes you want to work more and more, which can be dangerous (e.g. sleepy drivers driving around). Bonus systems seem to be one of the main management strategies that taxi platforms use:

> Every application is trying to give some incentive, so the driver might be in a hurry, to do those things. /…/ Three days back… I was in a hurry, I wanted to complete my ride and get back to the city, because my friends said that there's a peak hour in the city. So, in a 30 [km/h] speed-limit zone I was going 50. (U_M_Tln_12)

Platform service prices are generally low, but higher during peak periods. Although flexibility in terms of working time was often highlighted by the interviewees as the main advantage of this line of work, when talking about the strategies that make the work more profitable, choosing the "right time" to work is actually one of the most commonly used. As the number of clients varies considerably and in order not to wait without compensation, one has to choose specific times like nights and weekends. Another issue is the seasonality of this work, with some months being more profitable and others rather low on clients, not to mention extraordinary periods like the COVID lockdowns, where work decreased considerably.

> In order to drive those nice and rich months, you also need to be there driving those lame months, and it is then when you can take time off. /…/ So, I choose my hours carefully, when to work and when to take my rest, as well as the days to work or not. (U_M_Tln_15)

Nevertheless, drivers have generally internalised the flexibility discourse, even if it sometimes contradicts their practice. Furthermore, satisfaction with the work-life balance depends on how their life situation (e.g. other work or family obligations) coincides with the potential to earn via the platform. Indeed, the work schedule of the interviewees varied. While some drove during evenings and/or nights and weekends, others worked during regular working days (e.g. from 8am to 6 pm), depending on their life situation, but also the "necessities" dictated by the platforms like peak periods:

> Well, if it were my main job, that would be different. Or, I think that people engaged in this line of work – for them it is maybe better that they can themselves choose the times they work. But if one has a main job elsewhere and then you think you will put in some extra hours every night, then you really won't even see your family. (U_M_Tln_10)

3.3 Safe Work Environment

Platform taxi driving entails multiple inherent dangers, such as being in the traffic for long hours, dealing with difficult customers, and navigating the expectations of "greedy apps". These are dealt with by being calm, patient, using good self-control, and ultimately, by turning down offers. There are no formal and effective regulations and practices in place that would ensure that the working environment is indeed safe. Therefore, the drivers do not encourage seeing this as "easy money":

> So, there are not many opportunities – you earn as much as you earn, and it is little anyway – but there are very many risks. Even just driving in the city at least 150 kilometres each day, this in itself is the main risk. (U_M_Tln_5)

Although some drivers highlight several problems they have had with "difficult clients", they also emphasise that with the right kind of soft skills and personality these can be overcome:

> One has to be so calm, patient in the traffic as well as when communicating with the customers. The customers are different! And then you have to also be flexible; for example, when some situations require quick interventions, or sometimes there are provocations and you should not get involved. And maybe it is beneficial to just listen to the person, so you can tell them that you understand them very well, and it seems the problem is not really between you and them, but lies somewhere else entirely. Well, these more or less complicated communication situations indeed occur. (U_M_ Tln_3)

Feeling secure or not also depends on the kind of experiences a person has encountered. For example, a female driver felt that Uber clients are generally decent and very rarely have there been any unpleasant situations and so she is not worried. On the other hand, drivers belonging to (visually distinguishable) ethnic minorities have encountered racist incidents and one driver explained how he had to call the police when a client hit him in the head. These drivers, however, do not conclude that the jobs are inherently insecure for them, and they have no expectations that the platform should solve these problems. Taxi apps, for one, do not provide any effective forms of protection.

Another area of difficulty that can lead to mental distress that the drivers encounter is related to the surveillance and non-transparent algorithmic management the apps use. For example, one of the drivers explained how he has been put onto a blacklist because he cancelled three clients in a row as they just did not show up:

> Well, the last time was just a couple of weeks ago. Completely by accident on a Friday night I had three clients via Uber: I got to the place, waited in the right place and they did not show up. What else can I do but to try to contact them. Client does not answer. So initially I cancelled the ride. It wasn't a problem for me as there is this cancellation fee for a driver,

> but the thing is that there were three clients in a row like that! It was a bit suspicious even for me, but I guess the Uber system saw that it is suspicious and blocked my account. (U_M_Tln_8)

The lack of transparency is also felt in relation to client feedback: there is no way to know who gave a bad rating and why if they do not add comments (which, fortunately, Uber enables). Algoritmic systems are sometimes not transparent and can change rather quickly, increasing the insecurity felt by the drivers. This is lessened if the driver is more tech-savvy and can better figure out the logic of the apps. Furthermore, some argued that the pricing policy is not transparent. Bonus systems are something that drivers generally highlight when asked about how taxi platforms direct their work. However, not all drivers think of the algorithmic management and surveillance as problematic, or think about it at all:

> I do not think they do anything [to direct drivers]. Well, they only direct us by putting back the bonuses, so people would get out more to drive, to switch their apps on. (U_F_Tln_2)

In such accounts, algorithmic management is just something that contributes to some systemic management, thus providing some sense of safety and security by extension.

3.4 Is There Work that Should Be Abolished?

In many of the interviews the autonomy and freedom of choice were emphasised as valued characteristics of platform work; however, some of the interviewees used the notion of exploitation rather freely. Indeed, there are clear aspects in working for taxi platforms that align with the type of work that the ILO might consider as needing to be abolished, even while these jobs are generally not understood as representing a case of forced labour but rather emphasise autonomy. The ILO states that "A work relationship should be freely chosen and free from threats" (ILO, 1930). More specifically, the ILO Forced Labour Convention 1930 (ILO, 2013) states the term *forced or compulsory labour* as "all work or service which is extracted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered him or herself voluntarily".

In terms of measuring forced labour, then two criteria must be present: (i) involuntariness/deception, and (ii) penalty and coercion. It is important to notice that the criterion of involuntariness covers the three phases of the working relationship during which coercion may be applied: recruitment, conditions of work (and living conditions) if imposed by the employer, and the possibility to leave the employer. We should not assume that drivers in Estonia are coerced into platform work, and similarly we should assume they are free to leave platform work. Still, there is evidence of practices that limit the drivers' opportunities to choose or refuse work, punishing the driver, for example, by halting their access to the platform. Both of these two aspects of the ILO definition of *forced labour* deserve to be highlighted here: that a penalty follows when a person has not offered themselves for work.

4 Perceptions of Employment Opportunities: Access, Stability, Equality

4.1 Access to Employment Opportunities

Overall, entering platform taxi driving has been perceived as having a low-threshold, yet it has also increased competition in the taxi industry, making it harder to earn a living as a driver. The reasons the interviewees started working or continue working through taxi apps are manifold. These include the need or desire to earn extra income on top of their main employment, not finding a more secure, higher paid, or professional job, and using the option to earn income (e.g. during studies) with a flexible schedule. For those who started out as traditional taxi drivers, using apps in addition to or instead of working as a "traditional taxi" stemmed from the latter being less beneficial after platforms entered the market. As platforms brought down taxi prices (and earning opportunities for drivers), working for multiple companies and apps has become more of a necessity. For new migrants, taxi apps can also be a way to enter the labour market without speaking Estonian. There are those who started providing services in the very beginning when Uber and locally owned Bolt (back then Taxify) came to the market in 2015 and 2013, respectively, and this area was without any regulations and advertised as a way to share your car and earn some extra income. Some interviewees expressed nostalgia for the period of "actual ride-sharing" when their service was different from the traditional taxi service.

In Tallinn, it is a common strategy to use multiple apps (Uber, Bolt, Yandex, Taxigo) at the same time, whereas in comparison to others, Uber stood out as the most elitist. Uber is the app with the highest entry barriers. Compared to other apps, Uber requires and checks if the driver has all the necessary documents, including taxi insurance. Uber also restricts continuous driving time to 12 h and requires a 6-h break as a minimum, aiming to prevent drivers being overworked. Furthermore, there also seems to be a generally agreed hierarchy between apps, where some interviewees highlighted that using Uber is their first choice—the reasons for that included better clients and rates (although rate differences with Bolt are small), better functioning application (e.g. the client can leave a tip via the app) and Uber's decent communication with drivers. However, multi-apping seems to occur because Uber lacks clients, so there is a lot of waiting time. This highlights an important aspect of platform work—an inherent insecurity for the workers written into the business model. You can never be certain how much (if any) work there is, how much you have to wait to get your next gig.

4.2 Social Protection and Stability of Work

In Estonia, the platforms are not considered employers, so they do not have to provide their workers any kind of employment contracts, pay taxes for them, or

follow minimum wage or working condition requirements. Although the traditional taxi sector has relied mostly on (false) self-employment when hiring taxi drivers (e.g. taxi services are provided via a one-person company who signs a contract with a larger one), and companies do not provide employment contracts to drivers, platforms introduced a new practice that made the situation more precarious: working as a natural person without any kind of contract with the platform. Therefore, platform taxi drivers are totally responsible for covering their own taxes, social security payments, and other working conditions. Platform workers can, and some indeed do, pay their own labour taxes and receive social security coverage this way. However, paying employment taxes reduces earning opportunities significantly and, as evident from the interviews, this rarely happens. The strategies used for coping included avoiding tax payments and taking the risk of not having social security coverage at all, or to obtain social security coverage from elsewhere.

In our sample, a wide range of ways of obtaining social protection from elsewhere was represented. A rather heterogeneous group of drivers combined platform work with other income sources. Characteristic to this group was that they drive around 10 h per week and worry about the high costs eating up their earnings. Avoiding paying taxes, or skipping the mandatory car insurance for taxis is used to make driving economically beneficial. That the costs are too high to follow all the regulations was a common theme in this group. Social protection—if any—is gained either from their main job or from their own company, which is often a one-person business created to optimise taxes. Those with more of an entrepreneurial identity considered the situation as normal or even desirable, highlighting that they see the platforms only as mediators, with no responsibility towards the platform workers:

> [I]t is me who can choose when I work and with whom I work and what customers I offer rides to. Uber is but a communication channel that connects me as a driver and the customer. So, directly speaking, Uber is not providing me with work but just information about customers. (U_M_Tln_3)

Another group included students who received their social security through their student status. On the one hand, our interviewed students were of different ethnic backgrounds. From a social status perspective, however, they were a rather homogenous group. All were below 30 years old and were somewhat privileged at least in terms of being able to afford to own a car. It seemed that the opportunity to have health insurance from the state and their own car made it easier to find a balance between the costs and earnings.

> Well, it is you who is working "in Uber", then it is you yourself who has to be thinking about the health insurance. Nobody else is going to provide this. /.../Now, I myself have it, since I am entitled to it as a student. But I know that when I graduate from university, I will be searching for a regular job, and I will not drive anymore... Well, maybe I still will, over weekends, for a little extra money, but I do not want to see this as my main source of income. /.../ I have also explored creating my own business and working through this, but, well, then it seems it is more profitable to become a real taxi driver in a taxi company, not being an app driver. (U_M_Tln_4)

In the cases where drivers obtained social security via self-employment or their own company, it was a common strategy to keep the tax payment to a minimum. However, it might not be possible to maintain continuous coverage because of their fluctuating monthly incomes. This group does not consider it possible to survive by driving only one app. Therefore, especially if platform driving is the only source of income, multiple apps are simultaneously used.

Since 2018, it has also been possible for platform workers to declare taxes via the entrepreneur account system for natural persons that provides the option to pay a lower rate of social taxes with less bureaucracy. In that case, the payments into the account need to pass the minimum social tax threshold. As no costs can be deducted from their income, the taxi drivers appeared to have little interest in this option. Furthermore, in cases of high car expenses (e.g. lease payments), the platform income would not cover the minimum social tax payments. As in the case of Jane (female, 48), social tax contributions might be the first to be sacrificed. She argues that she is not worried about that and sees no solution under the current circumstances. Elsewhere in the interview, she emphasises the flexibility of such work as a great asset, relating it to the personal freedom she expects from the work (U_F_Tln_13).

Workers whose social insurance is not paid, mitigate this situation by trying not to think about it much, and hoping that somehow the situation will work out when necessary, although it seems the situation can cause quite a lot of worry and stress:

> Well, right now the app is all there is, there is no other... no benefit or support is available from any other source. /…/ I mean, I have not even been employed for the required amount of years [to receive a state pension], and this is important. What about my pension? This is a big fear I have, this is the biggest fear I have! Have I been thinking about it? Well, all the time! I think that something needs to… Yes, this is a fear I have! My friends are talking about pension; well, in 30 years – who knows what happens then! But, well, these 30 years will pass so quickly and at some moment one has to confront it. I cannot really imagine what then! It is better not to think about it now. Maybe by then there are some other arrangements? Some new world order, some new system of retirement. (U_M_Tln_9)

These answers reveal that even if platform drivers have a clear idea what is at fault with the social security of their contracts, they also do not see a good way out of this insecure situation. Unless their social insurance is secured by some other social position, only a few of them are willing to make the necessary additional payments, even if the taxation system has made it easier, as that would considerably reduce their earnings.

4.3 Equality of Opportunity and Equal Treatment in Employment

In the interviews, we found three dimensions relevant for discussing the principle of equal opportunity: perceived dignity of platform work in relation to other jobs; gender; and drivers' migration status and ethnic origin.

Platform work is not generally perceived in a negative light in Estonian society as it can be in some other contexts. Perhaps platform drivers have gained some of the prestige related to taxi drivers that originates from the era when car ownership was rare and the only alternative to using the taxi service was public transportation. However, no control over price-setting and the resulting low levels of pay in platform work contribute to the lower status of platform drivers in the general occupational hierarchy. One of the interviewees suggested: "like price ceilings, price floors should be established, so that the driver could ask for fair pay" (U_M_Tln_5). The interviews indicated that the labour exploitation by ride-sharing platforms requires drivers to accept not only this exploitation, but also the discrimination of platform drivers compared to other taxi drivers. In addition, individuals from groups with a lower position in society in general (e.g. ethnic minorities) are perceived to have even lower status among drivers, sometimes resulting in unequal treatment and hostility from customers as well as other drivers. Again, the acceptance of differentiation among the drivers serves as a precondition for unequal treatment.

The dimension of equal treatment on the basis of gender emerged in the interviews when discussing the safety of female service providers. The women in our sample did not report many difficulties specific to women, such as harassment, but this may be because they had low expectations. As one of the women drivers put it, she often gets asked if it is safe for women to drive a taxi, but she feels that Uber clients are generally decent and very rarely have there been some unpleasant situations and she is not worried. This indicates that she has had some unpleasant situations, and this may explain why in general women are relatively underrepresented in the less-regulated ride-hailing business: it is understood that this is less safe for them. Another woman stated that she does not feel more threatened by clients because she is a woman, but implied that this business is inherently somewhat more dangerous. It might be important to point out that the female drivers in our sample belong to the medium age group, so they may have already experienced various gender-based challenges and have been able to prepare their own strategies to respond or prevent them. On the other hand, their primary socialisation as well as socialisation into work contexts took place before the *#metoo* era and perhaps their cultural capital allows this risk to be seen as irrelevant.

Migration issues relevant to the Estonian labour market have to be looked at in terms of three different groups: racial minorities, recent migrants, and minority ethnic groups with a second or third generation migrant background. The latter group is predominantly Russian-speakers, who have somewhat lower chances of success in the labour market than Estonian speakers (especially if their Estonian language skills are limited) (Lindemann, 2014). The explicit Estonian language skill requirements for taxi drivers were removed from the Public Transportation Act after the arrival of taxi platforms on the market, although as service providers, skills in the national language are still expected. The expectation that taxi drivers should speak Estonian is continuously present in society and the media (Postimees, 2020; Sutrop, 2019). Although the counterarguments offered by the platforms emphasise that their user interface is available in Estonian (Tiks, 2020), there are examples where the platforms have started to encourage drivers to learn Estonian (Geenius, 2021) based

on the Russian or English language. This is clearly a response to widespread public dissatisfaction rather than legal requirements, and the discussion is ongoing.

In our interviews, drivers with an Estonian background highlighted issues with the low language skills of migrant drivers as well as their poor knowledge of the city, as reducing the quality of the taxi service. While those interviewees used some racialised language, they did not make explicit claims about discrimination against customers or drivers. The interviewees that were recent migrants were from third countries and of a visible minority, and were engaged in ride-hailing alongside their graduate studies. They did not bring up the language as a topic relevant for their service, but they mentioned the need to be extra-polite, keep their cars extra-clean, and so on, to avoid conflicts. Still, they confirmed they had witnessed racially motivated insults addressed to them and had even experienced violence. In terms of access to social security, however, most of the foreign students have these rights arranged through their student status. For other recent migrants, issues with residence permits and the like may be a problem. Our interviewees said they did not find Estonia to be worse in terms of racism than other countries—another sign of low expectations, perhaps, as we noted in the case of gender.

The aspects shaping unequal treatment in platform work and attracting attention in public discussions cover predominantly language-related issues, but also racially motivated insults, especially because of the strong albeit minority presence of visible minorities. With women platform drivers being only a small minority, the gender dimension is almost not not(ic)ed.

5 Perceptions of Social Dimension: Social Dialogue, Social Integration, Social Capital

5.1 Social Dialogue, Representation of Workers and Employers

The freedom to express concerns and the right to organise and participate in decision-making is an important part of social dialogue, be it on the level of a specific platform or the entire sector of platform work. The Estonian ride-hailing sector stands out compared to the same sector in several other countries for its lack of collective mobilisation against taxi-app companies. There have been some collective actions against Bolt's dynamic pricing policy, but these did not lead to any changes. The platforms exercise considerable control over their drivers through algorithmic management that is often non-transparent. The interviewed workers felt that both their individual and collective agency is constrained by the control that taxi apps exercise over the drivers, including blocking drivers if they do not fulfil the (unfair) requirements, or also for unknown reasons set by the platforms.

Furthermore, the voice of platform workers is rather absent in the public discussions about their situation, and they have few possibilities to negotiate with the platforms. If they have problems with the platforms, the latter can just block their account without due process, as our interviews with the taxi drivers repeatedly revealed. As platform workers are formally some sort of independent contractors, not employees, they also cannot form traditional unions and negotiate collective agreements. De facto, however, they can be rather dependent on the platforms, and should be provided the possibility to exercise their collective voice. Taxi-app drivers, even those who see the need to regulate the market more and demand better conditions from the apps (and not all did—for some entrepreneurial identity and free-market ideology dominated), seem to express the attitude that it is very difficult, if not impossible, for workers to change anything.

The reason why collective mobilisation seemed unfruitful and problematic to the interviewees relates to the huge pool and diversity of available drivers and their individualistic attitudes. In addition, we can also highlight the fact that the drivers are independent contractors, that trade unions in Estonia are generally perceived as weak, suitable leaders are lacking, and the platforms have the power to block drivers who "act out". Regarding unionisation, the awareness about possibilities was very low and this also reflects the situation in society in general.

> Q: How do you see it, could trade unions have any potential in regulating taxis, or Estonian labour market in general?
>
> A: Well, as I already suggested, I do not see this opportunity, considering what is this… what is the business culture and culture of organisations around here – so what impact could trade unions possibly have here?! And with no impact, there is no need for them. (U_M_Tln_6)

As one interviewee mentioned, she has heard of some talk about establishing a union for the platform drivers, but until now no trustworthy leaders for the movement have appeared. She does not have any hope that it could bring any benefits, as she states "what damage could a small breeze do to the fence!" (U_F_TLL_13), likening potential unionising efforts to a breeze that could not possibly alter the general course of social norms and practices. While she seems at least to want such a breeze to turn into a more serious storm, the extreme capitalist viewpoint of one driver who favours minimal regulations and interference by the state sees no possibility for any collective action against the platforms. Instead, he sees the possible unionisation efforts as an opportunity for those not involved to earn more.

Some drivers practise individual agency by sending Uber feedback on how to improve the app, but it was also mentioned that the only feedback Uber expects from drivers is the following:

> Some kind of simple and fast survey that wants to know how satisfied you are with Uber as your cooperation partner. I have filled it a few times, but it is very general, rating some stuff on a scale of 1–5. (U_M_Tln_8)

Generally, it seems that both individual and collective agency is constrained by the power of the app.

5.2 Social Integration, Social Isolation, Social Capital

The work can be quite isolating, as some do not know any taxi-app colleagues and sometimes Facebook forums are the only place to discuss work related matters. In Tallinn, the forums for Uber drivers are less active than those for Bolt-drivers, and some drivers argued that even worker-initiated forums are monitored by the platform and you could get into trouble if you speak badly about them. Uber also expects all communication with them to be done via the app, so there is no personal communication. The former can sometimes be too slow and inconvenient, although there are some drivers who did not problematise that. The lack of a collective was not problematised by some, especially those who consider themselves to be entrepreneurs, rather than labourers and those who only drive occasionally and have another main job.

> Being a taxi driver is a cowboy-like job. You are alone really /…/ Everything depends on yourself. (U_M_Tln_15)

Also, the isolation was sometimes mitigated by having a group of drivers as friends, despite the lack of communal space. Such friends were often mentioned by those interviewees who had been invited to drive for platforms by the same friends, suggesting pre-existing friendships. The other group seemed to be those who drive for more than one app, or even having had experience driving a taxi. For them the professional identity as a taxi driver originates from those times.

Outside of those more general aspects of social cohesion through professional identity and solidarity, the daily working life itself may end up isolating or integrating them with the wider society. The former can be the case when the driver takes atypical, rather asocial hours given these are the most profitable. On the other hand, if the driver chooses hours that provide the best match with the working hours of their spouse (or others in their social circle), even if these are not as profitable, this secures them a social role and somewhere to belong.

Some of the interviewed drivers were highly aware of the ways this job could affect their social capital. There were even those who claimed their main motive for choosing this job was the opportunity to interact with people, to meet new people. Some mentioned the possibility to make meaningful social connections; for example, they have received new business suggestions from their customers, pointing to an increase in the bridging type of social capital. Others appear highly aware of the low position their job holds in the social hierarchy and thus do not present it as building their social capital. On the other hand, the image of platform work is not perceived as negatively as it is in some other cities and, for example, also Estonian men, who are generally in a more advantageous position in the labour market than women or the minority population, do not seem to be ashamed of doing this line of work. They can even take a lot of pride in the work, especially when presenting themselves as small-scale entrepreneurs.

6 Conclusions

Our study uncovers the nuanced experiences and perspectives of platform taxi drivers in Tallinn. It reveals the paradox in the perceived access to employment opportunities and autonomy, tainted by instability and issues surrounding social security, fair income, and working conditions.

Platform jobs predominantly emerge as a viable option in the face of inadequate alternatives but fall short in providing long-term stability and decent wages. Our main insights suggest that the drivers perceive their working time as flexible and thus seem to experience a degree of autonomy, while they also point out the penalties for actually using this autonomy, and therefore that they need to stay available for customers and, related to this, deal with waiting times. The pay is deemed as a helpful addition if the driver has a regular income, but it is presented as being irregular in nature and insufficient when it is the driver's main source of income. The latter is most vividly demonstrated by the fact that drivers try to find ways to avoid reporting their income to tax authorities, and therefore also forego official social insurance cover. Further research is needed in the area of the potential for algorithmic management to create forced labour situations by using punishments or blocks to limit drivers' opportunities to choose or refuse work.

Another aspect problematised by the drivers related to the aspect of safety when engaging in traffic and avoiding accidents. On the one hand, the open access and low barriers make this line of work attractive to those individuals that are less employable or recent migrants who do not know the city and may be unable to drive safely as they have to follow directions by mobile app even in the midst of heavy traffic. On the other hand, the algorithms are perceived as encouraging or even pushing them to extend their working hours and work more, which could result in fatigue and more danger on the streets.

Our discussion of the social dimension of these platform jobs covered the topics of social dialogue and the representation of employers and workers, and promoting social integration. Our key findings suggest there is a lack of options for engaging in social dialogue in the framework of industrial relations. Due to the widely spread status of being self-employed or an entrepreneur while driving for platform taxis, drivers feel there are no actual negotiating bodies nor do they feel that collective organisation could bring about positive changes. It is safe to say then, that platform workers have not managed to organise themselves in order to have stronger voice in Tallinn so far. It is therefore questionable how much these jobs provide a sense of social belonging and social integration: while for some it served as means to meet and interact with new people, on the whole, the job was seen as a rather lonely undertaking, as there is not much communication with colleagues, and no avenues are created for this.

These findings reflect the interplay of Estonia's techno-optimistic ethos and the realities of the liberal market economy, creating a narrative that both empowers and restricts platform workers. While some individuals view the management strategies of the platforms as restrictive and the work as precarious, the interviewees mostly

appreciate the freedom the platform work offers. This sentiment aligns with Estonia's post-Soviet embracing of the liberal market economy and individual choice. The ability to be one's own boss and the perceived necessity for deregulation are connected to this mindset. However, the interviews reveal the negative impact of such ideologies on the well-being of the workers. Many platform workers, despite appreciating the freedom they have, mention low wages and the lack of social guarantees. Estonia's overall neoliberal and techno-optimistic mentality provides workers with narrative resources that often inhibit them from recognising the negative aspects of their work conditions and drawing connections to the prevailing economic ideas.

Our work further emphasises the importance of continually interrogating and assessing the alignment of workers' experiences with the principles of decent work, especially in the rapidly evolving digital economy. The experiences shared by these drivers provide invaluable insights into the future of work, offering lessons that can inform policy decisions and platform practices alike.

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