From exceptionalism to normalisation: How narratives of platform companies legitimise precarious work and commodified care

Abstract

When platform companies first entered the scene, they claimed that their novel business models did not fit with existing regulations. This narrative of 'platform exceptionalism' has increasingly been discredited. This paper focuses on platform companies that mediate labour in the care sector and explores what legitimation strategies they use today. We build our argument on interviews with platform entrepreneurs in Hamburg, Vienna and Zurich and an analysis of the narratives used on their websites and advertisements. Our results identify a pervasive discourse of normalisation: Platform companies now primarily state that their organisational models, forms of work and services are 'normal' and no different from other businesses. Simultaneously, they position their services as a solution for the crisis of social reproduction and a contribution to (female) emancipation. We interpret their legitimation strategies as an attempt to counter the critique they faced over the last years. Drawing on feminist perspectives on social reproduction and care work, we argue that this serves to justify a capitalist system that normalises precarious working conditions in platform labour and devalues care work and workers. Challenging the problematic imaginary of platformised care work as the solution to the crisis of social reproduction, we call for developing alternative imaginaries that allow time for care.

Keywords

platform labour, social reproduction, domestic care work, gender relations, normalisation, digitalisation

1. Introduction: Has the era of exceptionalism come to an end?

When digital labour mediation platforms entered the scene, they claimed that their business models were exceptional. Platform workers could therefore not be treated as standard employees. This idea of 'platform exceptionalism' established itself as a powerful narrative (Van Doorn, 2020). It allowed platform companies to argue that their novel organisational models did not fit within the existing regulatory frameworks. Analysing these new forms of work, numerous studies soon shed light on the precariousness of this type of labour (Berg et al., 2018). They criticised its strategic reliance on the exploitation of racialised groups of workers (Fuster Morell, 2022). They documented the detrimental implications of working under algorithmic control (Schaupp, 2021; Wood et al., 2018). Furthermore, they drew attention to historical analogies with earlier forms of marginalised labour such as day labour and piece wages (Altenried, 2019). Successful protests and organisation among workers and strategic lawsuits led some platform workers to be reclassified as employees (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020). Today, many European countries are in the process of debating or introducing legislative measures intended to better protect platform workers from exploitation (the EU's Platform Workers' Directive: European Union, 2021). Commentators on the platform economy of the US and Europe have thus been arguing that the era of exceptionalism is coming to an end (e.g. O'Connor, 2022 and Waters, 2019 in the Financial Times and De Stefano and Aloisi, 2021 regarding Europe).

If the narrative of exceptionalism is being discredited, the question arises: What legitimation strategies are platform companies employing now? In this paper, we address this question with data on care platforms operating in Hamburg, Vienna and Zurich. We will show that care platforms offer a distinct case within this broader trend away from exceptionalism. Care platform companies no longer position their organisational models, the labour and services they offer via digital platforms as exceptional — but as normal. Simultaneously, they legitimise their existence by emphasising the societal relevance of their services, as a solution to the crisis of social reproduction.

To contextualise, we first examine the historical development and defining characteristics of platform exceptionalism, including the distinctive criticisms related to working conditions and organisational models in platform labour. Following this, to understand how care platforms in particular legitimise their services by emphasising their societal relevance — particularly in response to the crisis of social reproduction — we explore the current crisis of care and the broader ideals concerning the societal organisation of care work under financialised capitalism (Dowling, 2021; Fraser, 2022).

For our empirical analysis, we conducted semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs from care platforms in Hamburg, Vienna, and Zurich. These platforms mediate services such as food and grocery delivery, cleaning, and care for children and seniors. Our decision to include food delivery platforms as a form of reproductive labour was deliberate, as we argue that much like cleaning and childcare, grocery shopping and meal preparation are essential domestic tasks traditionally assigned to women and therefore form part of the broader landscape of reproductive labour (Strüver, 2024). We discuss our findings in a joint rather than separate manner, especially since all our interview partners highlighted the societal relevance of their services as a solution for the crisis of social reproduction, regardless of their individual organisational models as well as the service their platforms offered.

In our discussion, we argue that our results indicate a noteworthy shift in the self-positioning of platform companies from exceptionalism to normalisation. With regard to the organisational models and forms of work, we read the normalisation discourse as a way how platform companies blend in and fly under the radar. It can be understood as a strategic attempt to shift public attention away from platform companies to other fields of the labour market. We argue that this discourse of normalisation, no matter if it is used strategically or not, is problematic because it serves to normalise the still highly precarious working conditions facilitated by platforms.

Whilst the exceptionalism argument has been used by many different platforms, we found that care platforms in particular seem to legitimise their services offered through framing them as a solution to the crisis of social reproduction and therefore having societal relevance. With this, they contribute to normalising a neoliberal societal system that marginalises care work. They foster narratives of women's emancipation that imagine all adults as paid workers. Furthermore, they take it as a given that jobs

have unpredictable and extended working hours. In such a system, having food, cleaning, child and senior care ordered via platforms and delivered by external workers becomes a normality. We challenge this problematic imaginary of commodified care and call for developing alternatives that allow time for care.

While platforms are often operating in several countries around the world, local contextualisation is relevant as platforms remain embedded in local policies and societal discourses. Accordingly, our findings apply primarily to the Global North, and in particular to the German-speaking regions in Europe (Austria, Germany and Switzerland) in which the platforms in our sample are embedded.

2. Conceptualising platform labour

Platforms are defined as physical or digital spaces that enable or facilitate connections between two or more parties. Platform companies thereby provide an infrastructure to intermediate between different user groups with the aim of creating value for all (Srnicek, 2017a). This basic definition encompasses a wide variety of digitally mediated services, some of which take place solely online (crowdwork) and others 'in-person' (e.g., childcare). While some sectors are still dominated by self-employment, others have increasingly shifted towards waged employment (e.g., food delivery in Germany). The heterogeneity of work arrangements, which also vary depending on national regulatory frameworks (Thelen, 2018), has made it difficult to define clear boundaries of what constitutes 'platform labour', and how to evaluate its impact on workers and labour markets. Within academia (and beyond), there is much debate on whether platforms represent a continuation of long-term historical developments of precarisation – or a disrupting force that breaks with previous forms of work organisation and economic activity (Vallas and Schor, 2020).

Especially in the early days, platforms systematically used this self-perception as 'intermediaries' rather than traditional employers as a justification of their organisational models that outsource risk and responsibilities towards individual workers. Some platforms identified themselves primarily as 'technology companies' rather than e.g. food delivery, childcare or cleaning service providers. The workers were thereby often referred to as 'partners' or 'independent contractors' rather than 'employees' (Koutsimpogiorgos et al., 2023; Woodcock and Graham, 2020). This

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process has also been referred to as 'Uberization' of work, which "allows on-demand labour to be contracted by the task via online platforms": a fragmentation that "threatens to turn jobs into tasks, to the detriment of labour" (Davis, 2015: 502).

The goal of this classification was hereby to create as much distance to the 'standard employment relationship' as possible, which these platforms portrayed as outdated. The market, so they claimed, was calling for much more flexibilisation particularly against the backdrop of fast-paced technological development. Platforms would even frame regulators as "being anti-innovation: arguing that they are dinosaurs taking away services that the populace need" (Woodcock and Graham, 2020: 28). Since their first appearance in the global labour market, they have been notorious in circumventing national labour laws and finding regulatory loopholes. Fuelled by massive venture capital backing (Friederici et al., 2022; Netzer et al., 2017), platforms tend to expand rapidly by undercutting competitors and quickly building a consumer base. After having built a business in a regulatory grey area, the rapid expansion then allows these companies to confront slow-moving lawmakers with 'fait accompli' – while preparing to fight any attempts at after-the-fact regulations (Srnicek, 2017b; Törnberg, 2023): a business practise that followed the Silicon Valley motto: "don't ask for permission, ask for forgiveness" (Thelen, 2018: 939).

The companies' initial strategies to put pressure on the regulatory frameworks to adjust to their organisational models – instead of the other way around – is characteristic of 'platform exceptionalism': a socio-legal imaginary that implies impunity in face of outstanding non-compliance with the law (Van Doorn, 2020: 147). For some time, platforms could indeed benefit from their somewhat ambiguous status as 'exceptional', as local authorities and national governments struggled to keep up with the technological advances.

The labour platforms' – somewhat brash – entrance on European labour markets has posed a 'social dilemma' for workers and policymakers across the continent (Thelen, 2018; Boon et al., 2019). The extreme heterogeneity of work arrangements that broadly fall into the category of platform labour has created unique challenges in trying to regulate this sector, as variances seemingly exceed shared characteristics (Aloisi, 2022). Despite these difficulties, national governments across the continent have put pressure on these businesses to comply with the respective labour law.

Some types of platform labour are suited for collective organising and/or are confronted with powerful competitors in the respective labour markets (Thelen, 2018). Examples include strikes, collective interest representation, and successful court cases in the food delivery sector (Orth, 2022; Vandaele, 2022), which have led to improvements for food delivery riders in Germany. Whilst their working conditions still remain problematic in many aspects, some riders are now employed on open-ended, fixed term, or mini-job contracts and paid the minimum wage (Leschke and Scheele, 2024). Another example worth mentioning in this context is the British food delivery company Deliveroo, which has (in)famously classified workers as 'self-employed': an arrangement that is seemingly compatible with UK law, but has led to a number of court cases across the EU, which ruled this practise as a misclassification (Defossez, 2022). Although Deliveroo has not disclosed the exact reasons for its departure from, e.g. the German labour market in 2019 (Altenried, 2021), it seems as if the discrepancy between its 'exceptional' organisational model and national labour market regulations was a decisive factor.

In contrast to the food delivery sector, other forms of platform labour take place mostly in the domestic sphere of clients. Collective organising is notoriously difficult, as cleaners and/or childminders tend to work in very isolated settings. These fields have, furthermore, been traditionally dominated by informal work arrangements that often 'go under the radar' (Koutsimpogiorgos et al. 2023). Large parts of this highly feminised workforce consists of migrant women, who offer their services on an individual basis: a setting that leaves them vulnerable to exploitation. This is an important aspect to consider when differentiating forms of platform labour. As mentioned before, Uber was seen as a disrupting force in an established field (Seibt, 2024), which provoked a harsh backlash by powerful opponents. This is different in the case of, e.g., cleaning platforms, as they entered a field that has always been largely unregulated. These platforms often advertise their services as providing a more formalised infrastructure by taking care of certain bureaucratic issues (e.g., insurance for workers), which are commonly neglected in purely informal work arrangements. That being said, many platform workers in this field continue to work on a, sometimes informal, self-employed basis, carrying the vast majority of risks and responsibilities. Their wages and shifts are less regulated than those of e.g. food delivery riders, which puts them in a precarious position (Pulignano et al., 2023a).

While it is important to remain sensitive to the various processes of platformisation (Seibt, 2024), and the different regulatory challenges depending on the field, policymakers on EU level have worked on a unified, supranational legal framework to counteract the misclassification and exploitation of platform workers (Aloisi, 2022). The most prominent initiative is hereby the recent EU Platform Work Directive (European Parliament, 2024; Veale et al., 2023), which was designed to counteract bogus self-employment, limit the control of algorithms, and improve workers' data protection. Furthermore, it aims to strengthen workers' rights and limit the use of casual contracts (Aloisi, 2022).

Scholars have challenged platforms' status as exceptional by highlighting how their seemingly unique features have predominantly negative repercussions for workers (Fleming, 2017). When reviewing the social scientific literature on the platform economy, it is notable that much of the discourse is dominated by a critical comparison between 'gig work vs. the standard employment relationship' (Flanagan, 2019). Research has documented how platforms circumvent labour protection laws at workers' expense (De Stefano and Aloisi, 2018; Drahokoupil and Vandaele, 2021; Koutsimpogiogos et al., 2023). This leads to increasing precarisation and insecurity, which can take form in financial difficulties, unpaid labour, the blurring of boundaries between work and free time (Pulignano et al., 2023b), as well as (mental) health issues (Gregory and Sadowski, 2021). For this, platforms draw on a gendered, racialised and marginalised workforce that often has very limited alternatives on the labour market (Van Doorn, 2021; Van Doorn and Vijay, 2021).

The amounting evidence discrediting the positive portrayal of platform exceptionalism, along with an increased public awareness of these issues (Rubert, 2023; Umney et al., 2024), have put additional pressure on both lawmakers and service providers to take action. In consequence, some companies (e.g. Lieferando) have shifted their business models away from using self-employed riders towards employment contracts (Scheele et al., 2023). Batmaid, one of the largest platforms for domestic cleaning services in Switzerland, also reacted to the increasing pressure and switched from self-employed cleaners to employment contracts. Their CEO announced this as a change of strategy, stating: "We say goodbye to uberisation" (authors' translation, cited in Städeli, 2020, np).

In response to this shift in business practices, some commentators have openly questioned whether "tech's self-declared exceptionalism is coming to an end" (Waters, 2019 in the Financial Times). So far, there is no conclusive answer to this. Researchers seem divided in the question of how to study issues relating to the platform economy: Can it still be classified as something novel or distinct from other forms of low-paid labour?

In this paper, we critically examine how gig platforms in the care sector use historical continuities and other seemingly 'normal' features of this type of work as a way to legitimise their organisational models. To understand these legitimation strategies further, we need to pay closer attention to the services they actually offer, namely domestic and care work, and how these tasks are embedded into Western European societies.

3. Conceptualising the organisation of social reproduction under financialised capitalism

The increase in domestic care work mediated through digital platforms is tied to societal developments which Nancy Fraser summarises as the crisis of social reproduction in contemporary financialised capitalism (Fraser, 2022). She argues that households increasingly lack the time for their own social reproduction. The term social reproduction encompasses the intricate web of processes through which individuals, households and societies maintain themselves (Dowling, 2021; Federici and Jones, 2020) and is the prerequisite for traditional waged labour under capitalism (Fraser, 2022). Social reproduction is understood as both domestic work like cleaning or cooking and care work like raising children or building communities. These everyday tasks have historically been carried out by women for little or no pay. They thus have been subject to feminised devaluation (Hester and Srnicek, 2023).

The current crisis of social reproduction has been emerging as a result of the complex local and global interplay of social, economic, and political factors as well as the connection between capitalism and patriarchy (Fraser, 2022; Huws, 2019). The crisis manifests differently depending on societal context and individual situation, with households and individuals with caring responsibilities being especially affected. In the last decades, policies in Europe have increasingly shifted away from the ideal of the

female homemaker/male bread-winner model and the family-wage towards an "adult-worker model" (Lewis, 2001), in which every adult of working age is assumed to participate in the paid workforce. This shift has been particularly salient in German-speaking countries: Due to rather conservative gender norms, the female homemaker/male breadwinner model has long been dominant. It has been upheld through e.g. tax regulations like married couples splitting their income for tax benefits, general mini-job regulations, and free health insurance for spouses with low or no income (Lutz, 2010). Up until today, women do twice as much housework as men (Achleitner, 2022). As a consequence, almost half of the women in Germany, Switzerland and Austria are employed only part-time, especially those above 35 years old (Bundesamt für Statistik, 2014; Destatis, 2024; Statistik Austria, 2023), with mothers in particular remaining in part-time employment for long stretches of time to balance care responsibilities with paid work. However, the shift towards the adult worker model pushes them to increase their hours in paid work. Gabriele Winker (2015) illustrates for Germany that households only receive state support for caring activities if economic participation would otherwise be impaired. Many social benefits like child care and benefits are linked to (previous) employment, obliging everyone to seek (full-time) work. This puts households in an increasing "domestic time squeeze" (Huws, 2019: 123). As women continue to carry out the bulk of care tasks in addition to their paid work, they have to perform a "second shift" (Hochschild, 2012). In addition to the transformation towards the adult worker model, increasing demands due to project-based work and results-driven management expect workers to put in extra hours and face work commitments spreading beyond the traditional working day (Ecker et al., 2021; Hester and Srnicek, 2023). Employees increasingly work unpaid overtime to meet deadlines or achieve performance goals (Huws, 2019). These developments have dramatically reduced the time available for social reproductive tasks within families and are part of the ongoing care crisis (Dowling, 2021).

In consequence, families with sufficient means outsource parts of grocery shopping and cooking, household cleaning and caring for children and seniors to the market. This outsourcing takes place along the intersectional power hierarchies of gender, class and migration status, so that migrant and poor women in particular take on this work for often low wages and appreciation (Federici, 2020). In the German-speaking countries, migrant women from Eastern Europe are the majority in the formal and

informal care labour market, especially in the domestic cleaning and care sectors (Aulenbacher et al. 2024).

In this context, digital platforms mediating domestic labour promise to revolutionise the way domestic care services are accessed and delivered, offering convenience and flexibility (Altenried et al., 2021). To customers, platforms offer relief from the time squeeze and flexibility to manage their demanding everyday lives. To workers, platforms propose themselves as opportunities "to reimagine themselves as entrepreneurial units" (Flanagan, 2019: 68) and offer pathways into paid work for those with limited access to regular labour markets like migrants or mothers who provide child care (James, 2024; van Doorn, 2017, 2020). With many customers and workers being women, platformised care services are "even construed as conducive to female empowerment within the confines of financialized capitalism" (Dowling, 2022: 114). Within a 'progressive' neoliberalism that celebrates "diversity, meritocracy and emancipation", social reproduction is thus outsourced to the market (Fraser, 2022: 69). Emancipation is redefined in market terms, and care work is treated as a "backwards residue" that has to be overcome "en route to liberation" of women (Fraser, 2022: 70).

Similar to other employment settings in the sector of care and domestic work, which are often feminised and precarious in themself, platform-mediated care workers often face precarious working conditions, lack of job security, and limited access to social benefits (Altenried, 2021; Van Doorn, 2017; Wiesböck et al., 2023; Woodcock, 2021). Additionally, migration scholars have highlighted how European labour platforms build on existing and new visa regimes and care chains both to the Global South and within Europe itself, exploiting vulnerabilities and power hierarchies linked to migration trajectories (Altenried, 2017; Orth, 2023; van Doorn, 2017, 2020). This makes it harder for workers, especially for female workers, to ensure their own social reproduction, as well as that of their families regarding time, energy and money (Kwan, 2022). Furthermore, the commodification of social reproduction obscures how all humans are constantly in need of care, not only those who can afford to outsource it (Dowling, 2021; Saltiel and Strüver, 2022). The fundamental problem of the unjust social organisation of social reproduction therefore remains unchanged.

4. Methodology: Discourse analysis of interviews with platform entrepreneurs and platform websites

In the empirical part of this paper, we employ a discourse-analytical methodology to explore how platform entrepreneurs legitimise their organisational models, labour conditions, and societal relevance. Following Margaret Wetherell and colleagues (2001a, 2001b), we understand language as a tool through which individuals construct reality, drawing on "interpretive repertoires" (Wetherell, 1998) or "narratives" (Tamboukou, 2008). These narratives converge into discourses that may become dominant in shaping understanding. Our aim is to identify and describe these discourses and reflect whose interests are thereby served.

Our data consists of interviews with platform entrepreneurs, advertising texts from platform websites, and social media posts. We began by conducting a web search to identify all platform companies offering domestic care services (childcare, senior care, cleaning, and food delivery) in Hamburg, Zurich, and Vienna. These cities were chosen because of their large populations, high density, and roles as innovation hubs, which allowed us to capture a variety of platform businesses in the German-speaking regions of Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. We conducted interviews with representatives from eleven platforms, including founders, managing partners, and press spokespersons, and supplemented these interviews with advertising and social media materials. Data collection took place between spring and summer of 2023, and the interviews were conducted both in person and online.

The interviews were conducted as problem-centred expert interviews (Döringer, 2021), recorded, and transcribed. We focused our interview questions on the founding histories of the platforms, their organisational models, the types of labour they employ, and their views on platform labour more broadly. In the data analysis (of both the interviews as well as our additional data from websites and social media) we applied our discourse-analytical perspective (Wetherell et al. 2001a, 2001b). With this methodology, we build on a long tradition of using interview data in discourse analytical studies (O'Rourke and Pitt 2007). As suggested by Waitt (2016) and others, our analysis proceeded in two rounds. First, we coded all material inductively to identify key themes such as labour practices and the societal impact of platforms. We discovered that the platforms in our sample used very similar narratives of normalising their organisational models, labour conditions and services provided. To understand

those better, our second round of analytical coding focused specifically on how certain organisational practices, the forms of work as well as the consumption of the offered services were argued as normal.

In the presentation of our results, we make visible that the data does not reflect what platforms actually do, but how platform entrepreneurs who are used to serve as a spokesperson for their companies and are well versed in communicating and legitimising their companies' strategies present their platforms (orally, as well as on their websites and social media channels). In line with our discourse analytical approach (Waitt (2016), we describe and interpret these narratives (section 5) and reflect their implications (section 6).

5. Results: The normalisation discourse

Regardless of the type of domestic care services they offer, the platform entrepreneurs in our sample use what we have termed a 'normalisation discourse'. In sum, they emphasise that they are no different than any other non-platform-based company. They use this discourse by stating that their organisational models (section 5.1), the modes of work (5.2), and the services they offer (5.3) are 'normal' rather than exceptional.

5.1 Normalisation of platform companies' organisational models

The narrative that their platforms are an entirely 'normal' company with a conventional organisational model is present in three central and recurring arguments:

First, interviewees highlight the normality of their platform company by comparing their organisational models with more conventional, non-platformised forms of service provision, often without explicitly acknowledging the differences. An entrepreneur of a food delivery platform, for instance, claims that their business is no different from "logistics companies" or the "postal service" (P1). Thereby, interviewees repeatedly compare their for-profit businesses to established (public) services to claim normalcy. To underline this further, the interviewee emphasises historical continuity, as "delivery restaurants have been around for 30 years" (P1). With statements such as these, they indicate that their platform company is not exceptional. But not only the possibility of buying food via digital platforms is claimed to be something completely normal. The

narrative also appears with regard to cleaning and home care services. Interviewees argue they are "like when someone orders an electrician, quite usual, quite conservative" (P11). In the context of care for children and (older) adults, interviewees compare their digital platforms to both other digital forms of care mediation such as Facebook groups as well as offline forms such as advertisements in newspapers or on notice boards. Consequently, the mediation of these domestic care services is presented as something that has always existed and is therefore not understood as exceptional: "[t]he university can't help it if you find a wrong or a bad tutor on the notice board. Then […] nobody would go to the rector's office and say, 'But you had such a bad tutor on your notice board'" (P8). This comparison allows the interviewees to position themselves as neutral mediators without responsibility for the quality of service delivered nor for the conditions under which these services are provided. Moreover, the interviewee does not acknowledge that – in contrast to a university notice board – they generate profit from the mediation they offer.

Second, interviewees repeatedly attempt to set their own platform apart from other platforms by highlighting aspects of their business model that resemble conventional businesses. For example, one co-founder of a cleaning platform emphasises that the way in which they arrange gigs "sets us apart from many platforms" (P4). A nannying platform writes on their website that "[i]n contrast to other providers on the market, our prices and wages are openly declared, and our mums [i.e. the care workers] can choose their own workload and working hours" (P11). Analogously, a food delivery entrepreneur states "[un]like other online food portals, our platform has its own courier centre and its own courier staff" (P12).

Thirdly, interviewees trivialise the feature of the digital online platform as a central characteristic that distinguishes their companies from conventional businesses. On the one hand, they downplay technological aspects to portray digital platform companies and their business models as any other 'normal' business, like this interviewee of a food delivery platform: "Yes, the algorithm is always such an urban myth [...]. Well, it's not so algorithmic or fully automated" (P1). On the other hand, they highlight the importance of human interactions and the personal relationships between the platform staff and the care workers. One interviewee of a cleaning platform characterises the labour mediation on their platform as "still a very human business. [...] There is still a lot of [...] manual work involved" (P4). By downplaying algorithmic management and emphasising the necessity and importance of human interaction,

the interviewees once again describe their business models as completely 'normal' and conventional.

5.2 Normalisation of platform labour

A second legitimation strategy that feeds the discourse of normalisation of digital platforms is based on the normalisation of platform labour and the often-critiqued working conditions.

First, the rhetorical tool of comparison is also used in this context, comparing platformised labour and its characteristics with traditional, non-platform-based working conditions. One interviewee emphasises that freelance labour is by no means specific to the platform economy. With reference to food delivery platforms, he argues: "the profession of bicycle couriers has probably always traditionally been a profession of freelance professionals, freelancers and so on" (P1). With regard to their own riders, the interviewed person points out that "[o]ur working model is nothing new: we have employed drivers, just like the post office has probably had them since 1949" (P1).

An additional strategy of normalising platform labour refers to the cleaning sector and goes hand in hand with the previously mentioned aspects. The commodification of cleaning work in private households is not generally new. It has a long tradition as undocumented work (Wiesböck et al., 2023). Building on this, the studied cleaning platforms normalise their digital mediation of labour by highlighting their contribution to the formalisation of this kind of work, thereby finally making it a 'normal' job. While one cleaning platform entrepreneur points out that their form of work mediation contributes to "working conditions in the domestic work sector finally become better and more transparent" (P11), another company states even more clearly on their website that they "fight against undeclared work in the cleaning industry" and "are revolutionising the cleaning industry" by moving "away from undeclared work and dumping prices […], towards fair and legal payment" (P14).

5.3 Normalisation of platformised care services

In the third and last dominant narrative, interviewees normalise the consumption of platform-mediated care work in times of the crisis of social reproduction. They argue that in our society – with nearly all adults in working age engaged in paid work – relying on marketised domestic care services has become a normal thing to do. On the one

hand, interviewees argue that relieving women from care responsibilities offers them the chance to participate in the labour market. On the other hand, they foreground their key role in offering work to women and thereby giving them access to the labour market. In this sense, they see their form of work mediation as contributing to female emancipation.

The narrative of platforms providing emancipatory support for women is particularly prominent with regard to mothers and families. One interviewee argues that their service of delivering ready-made meals and groceries to the front door "solve[s] this problem, when both adults are employed full-time in busy jobs and have kids" (P2). In particular, their service should provide "relief for families […] in which household tasks are distributed unequally" (P2) and "really makes everyday life easier for people" (P1).

When talking about emancipation, they thus envision parents in full-time jobs with the bulk of care work assigned to the mother. In the context of child care platforms, the opportunity of accessing care services quickly via digital platforms is seen as helping women to juggle paid and unpaid work: "You can't take your child to the childminder or to daycare if it's sick. This causes endless problems for the employer because the mother is constantly absent […] With the nanny at home, I have of course provided for all eventualities" (P7). In this sense, one interviewee argues in the context of childcare that if women want to both do wage labour and care for their children, an on-demand nanny is the way to go. This is justified with the children's well-being because "it is much better and much nicer for the kids if they can stay at home, especially if the parents are working" (P7). The interviewee adds that home-based childcare is a necessity, "because otherwise [...] [the mother] would go to work and come home and there [...] would start again from zero" (P7). Interestingly, fathers were not explicitly mentioned as potential carers in any of the situations above. This underlines the prevailing idea of care work being women's responsibility. In consequence, easy access to childcare via platforms is framed as an opportunity for women to emancipate themselves from their ascribed roles as homemakers by pursuing paid work and having a nanny look after their children while they are gone.

The same argument reoccurs in interviews with cleaning platforms, who frame cleaning as an unpleasant activity that everyone has to endure and which – by being outsourced to platforms – makes people's lives easier and gives them time for other things. As interviewees understand women still as mainly responsible for unpaid care

work, this emphasis on the potential to outsource care work thereby also serves the narrative of female emancipation.

The emancipatory potential of care work platforms is brought up not only for female customers, but also for female platform workers. This includes, for instance, the opportunity to use digital platforms to find work as a childminder. As childcare in daycare centres and kindergartens is particularly expensive in Switzerland, the ease of finding work as a childminder through a digital platform is seen as an emancipatory opportunity for women with low incomes. The founder of a platform for childminders argues that "if she [a woman] has a salary that is not too high, then the childminder concept is also worthwhile financially, because then you […] don't have any childcare costs and you can earn 2,000 Swiss Francs a month relatively easily if you look after two daycare children" (P5). The idea here is that they can gain financial independence while staying at home.

Furthermore, interviewees argue that platform-mediated work allows for balancing paid and unpaid labour better than conventional working relationships. In this sense, their platforms create jobs for "people who […] have to work more flexibly because they have private commitments such as children or caring for seniors and so on" (P2). As this work is still predominantly attributed to women (see above), interviewees understand their platforms as an emancipatory opportunity for women. By offering opportunities for working part-time and having flexible working hours, a platform for various care tasks advertises on their website how it "enables mothers and housewives to re-enter the world of work" and thereby "empowers women to achieve financial independence" (P11).

6. Discussion: Reflecting platform entrepreneurs' narratives

Rather than references to exceptionalism, our interviews with platform entrepreneurs disclose a discourse of 'normalisation'. This discourse is present in different narratives that refer to the organisational models, the modes of work and the services offered (i.e. food delivery, cleaning and care for children/seniors). Regardless of the domestic care service they offer, the interviewees omit or downplay characteristics that distinguish their digital platforms from conventional companies.

At the same time, they were intent on highlighting potential benefits of their services for the wider society, particularly for women's emancipation. They promise 'giving people back time' by outsourcing reproductive labour, and thereby moderating the acute "domestic time squeeze" (Huws, 2019: 16) in many families. In this, they position themselves as a solution to the crisis of social reproduction. They argue that their offered domestic care services have become necessary for their customers to engage in the current labour market with its demands for availability around the clock.

6.1 Everything normal – everything good?

What are the implications of this discourse of normalisation rather than exceptionalism? Nils van Doorn (2020: 139) defines platform exceptionalism as "a socio-legal imaginary that treats platform companies as unique business entities and enables them to engage in regulatory arbitrage". Against this backdrop, the narratives visible in our interviews can be interpreted as a way through which the focus is to deflect from persistent problems and structural shortcomings in platform labour. In other words, it seems as if the platform entrepreneurs we interviewed have come to perceive it as more beneficial to present themselves both to researchers as well as in their marketing material as being compliant to regulations, instead of defending their initial status as exceptional. This indicates that the negative associations of being an 'exceptional' entity on the labour market outweigh any positive characteristics, which may have once given them a competitive edge in e.g. attracting venture capital. Instead of promoting their organisational models as exceptional, it seems like nowadays platforms' main focus lies on being perceived as normal and thereby keeping a low profile.

Our interviewees were skillful in creating an image of normalcy by highlighting some characteristics of their organisational models, and downplaying or omitting others. Some narratives give the impression as if the problematic elements of platform labour have already been solved and taken care of, thereby portraying common criticisms as outdated. In the case of the food delivery sector, for instance, several interviewees stressed how they have employed their riders on permanent contracts paying them at least minimum wage plus tips. A closer look at their business models reveals, however, how large parts of their revenues are generated through partnerships with restaurants who hire their own riders: a significant workforce, whose working conditions the platforms deem outside of their control. The use of subcontractors is, furthermore, still

quite prevalent in this sector. With this, food delivery platforms outsource responsibilities for workers, including payment and safety issues (Defossez, 2022; Ecker and Strüver, 2022). In the context of childcare and cleaning platforms, representatives commonly pointed to historical continuities which we understand as an attempt to normalise problems that had already existed in pre-digital times. They thereby presented themselves as a traditional mediator (such as a blackboard), whose responsibility for what happens in the interaction between clients and workers is limited. But the platform entrepreneurs only emphasise historical continuities that fit into their argumentation; other continuities that are perpetuated by the platforms, such as the continuous devaluation of care work by paying extremely low wages are mostly left out in their argumentation.

Their narratives disregard that platforms provide an infrastructure that is often characterised by invasive control mechanisms such as ratings, surveilling response times, etc., which limit workers' autonomy in e.g. choosing their assignments and hourly rates. Nils van Doorn (2020: 50) argues that "these techniques are intended to foster trust on the clients' side, the dynamically hierarchical display of 'an abundant and always-available pool of workers' presents a novel market interface that may nevertheless exacerbate the deeply unequal power relations that have historically marked domestic work". As such, platforms cannot be classified as some neutral, non-profit mediator between workers and customers, but must be recognized for building on power relations linked to the feminisation and racialisation as well as the societal devaluation of care and domestic work.

When addressing common criticisms revolving around algorithmic control, it was notable how our interviewees firstly downplayed the importance of the latter – even reducing it to somewhat of an 'urban myth'. Particularly on childcare and cleaning platforms, the providers claimed that much of the allocation of jobs is still done 'by hand' and is not fully automated – an argument aimed at creating a level of trust for both workers and customers of these services. The second line of argumentation we could identify is an attempt at 'normalising' algorithmic control, by pointing to the ubiquity of such business practices that are not confined to the platform economy. Given the incredible speed in which technological advances have changed many segments of the labour market, it seems as if platform representatives can distance themselves from criticisms revolving around algorithmic control – as this is no longer limited to platforms but can according to their narratives also be found in more

traditional service companies such as private providers of postal services. The question remains, however, whether the ubiquity of such practices justify their use?

In sum, platform entrepreneurs have adopted a two-fold strategy of normalisation through which the gap between platforms and conventional companies or ways of working is bridged. Highlighting historical continuities our interviewees tried to show their compliance to labour law. We understand this as a way to establish familiarity and trustworthiness. Another strategy involves 'normalising' elements such as algorithmic control and de-standardised working conditions, which had formerly almost exclusively been associated with their realm – but can nowadays be found in many other sectors as well. Both narratives can be interpreted as a way of, intentionally or unintentionally, deflecting blame and diluting responsibility by pointing the finger to others. Thus, the discourse of normalisation serves the interests of platform companies in further establishing themselves as conventional service providers.

6.2 Platformised domestic care work as a solution to the crisis of social reproduction?

Simultaneously to claiming normalcy, platform entrepreneurs highlight the societal relevance of their services offered and present themselves as emancipators of women and their services as a solution to the current crisis of social reproduction. What do they envision as emancipation? And how do they 'solve' the crisis?

First, their vision 'emancipates' women by creating opportunities to engage in the labour market via outsourcing some of the unpaid domestic care work to (again mostly female and often racialised) platform workers on call and on minimum wage. In this, all adults are understood as workers and domestic care responsibilities are passed down along the lines of social inequality. As Ursula Huws (2019), Emma Dowling (2021), Nancy Fraser (2022) and others point out, this creates a two-tiered system of social reproduction: Those who can afford it outsource parts of their care work to the market. Platform companies do not challenge this two-tiered system, but rather generate profit out of it. So, we (and other researchers) ask: But what about the social reproduction of platform workers themselves (Keller and Stingl, forthcoming; Kwan, 2022)? And what about all others who cannot afford to buy domestic care services? For them, the crisis of social reproduction remains unresolved. With regard to their

narratives, platforms do little to change this, but use the current crisis of social reproduction to justify their social relevance.

Second, the commodification of domestic care services not only legitimises the precarious working models of platform workers in the care sector, but also the extended and often unpredictable working hours of platform customers. In our interviews, scenarios were repeatedly outlined in which platforms help households in emergencies and when they struggle with an overwhelming workload. They jump in when work takes longer than originally assumed, when a child is sick and one does not want to create problems at work by staying home. In this, platforms address only the symptom of working conditions that have become ever more demanding (Dowling, 2022), but they do not contribute to solving the underlying problem of unpredictable working hours and prevalent overwork.

Third, even though some of our interviewees emphasise their desire to improve working conditions by, for example, formalising often informalised care work like cleaning, platforms do not create new, appreciative narratives around care work. In both interviews and on the websites and in the adverts, housework is framed as a burden to be passed on to others. This devaluation of care work – be it paid or unpaid – is linked to the feminisation of these activities in capitalism (Fraser, 2022). In our society, work that is attributed to women has been devalued and exploited, regardless of whether it is done by men or women.

This low appreciation of care is also evident in the societal development towards the adult-worker model. Care work is framed as something that needs to be done within minimal time in order for all adults to be available for the labour market full time. Most interviewed platform entrepreneurs do not challenge this devaluation of care. On the contrary, they strengthen the assumption that care work is a private rather than a public responsibility and best outsourced to market-based actors like their platforms. Neither do platform entrepreneurs fundamentally challenge the feminisation of care responsibilities. They see it as a contribution to emancipation to relieve women of some of 'their' care burdens, but disregard that the bulk of this platformised care work – cleaning and care for children and seniors in particular – is again done by women, many of them poor and/or racialised, and under precarious conditions.

7. Conclusion: Alternative imaginaries of organising care

Although the platform entrepreneurs we interviewed offer different types of care work – grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, childcare or seniorcare – and at first glance appear to use different organisational models, they all position themselves as a solution to the crisis of social reproduction. Why does this argument work so well and what is problematic about it? In a society that expects nearly all adults of working age to be engaged in paid work, there is simply not enough time for social reproduction (Fraser, 2022). In times of this societal crisis, platform entrepreneurs present themselves as a necessary service. They frame domestic care tasks as something best outsourced to the market. However, they do not mention that this can only ever work for middle- and upper-class households who have the funds to pay for these services. For all others – and for the platform workers in particular – the crisis of social reproduction remains unsolved. The 'normalisation' discourse thus serves to sustain the current two-tiered organisation of care that addresses merely the care needs of the well-off.

We suggest that instead, we need to work towards a fundamental reorganisation of paid employment and care work (Dowling, 2021; Fraser, 2022; Federici 2020). Recognising the emancipating potential for women to participate in the paid workforce, instead of being limited to being a housewife, we do not suggest reverting to the gendered male-breadwinner/female-homemaker model that prevailed in the German-speaking countries in the second half of the 20th century. Rather, we are inspired by the growing body of literature that develops alternative imaginaries of "caring democracies" (Tronto, 2013) and "caring humans" (Tronto, 2017). It conceptualises a societal organisation in which there exists ample time and resources for social reproduction (Hester and Srnicek, 2023), because it is perceived as a societal rather than an individual concern. It envisions equal opportunities for adults of all genders and social classes to pursue both paid employment and unpaid care work. Apart from a redistribution of care work between the genders, this requires reclaiming time from waged work – for example by reducing standard working hours (Dowling, 2021). Furthermore, it includes (re)building collective and public infrastructures that take on care work (Hester and Srnicek, 2023). As Ursula Huws and colleagues (2017: 24) suggest, digital platforms may well play a role in this: "there is no reason in principle why the technologies on which platform services are based could not be used in ways that contribute to the improvement of working conditions [… and] the quality of local services". This would mean including them in public service provision and bringing

them under democratic control to guarantee that the domestic care work is valued with adequate salaries and decent working conditions for those who take on this work in a paid capacity.

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