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Selling the self: Neo-normative control and the platform paradox☆

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ABSTRACT

The platform economy is an increasingly large segment of the contemporary economy that continues to attract workers, drawing on narratives of self-empowerment and entrepreneurship that are idolized within American culture. Yet, the realized lived experiences of workers are often anything but that of a flourishing entrepreneur, with many describing economic precarity, invasive and unpredictable algorithmic control, and demanding hours. What keeps people invested in returning to platform work? We label this observed contradiction the *platform paradox*, and we theorize how this paradox is continuously regenerated through neo-normative control, a modern form of workplace control that encourages workers to express their 'authentic' selves, individuality, and emotions in ways that align with organizational goals. Drawing on extant scholarship, we identify three neo-normative control mechanisms—framing self-as-product, whole self-integration, and hyper-gamification—that support platform workers in experiencing themselves as independent entrepreneurs while also increasing their control by the platform and its algorithmic management system. We illustrate how these controls collectively contribute to adverse consequences on two core work experiences: worker skill and worker time. We propose future research directions to further unpack this paradox and for the field of platform scholarship at-large, discussing implications for inequality.

Welcome to the era of homo digitalis! Artificial intelligence, algorithms, and digital platforms are entwined with our daily lives, and there is no more fitting exemplar of homo digitalis than the platform worker. In 2020 alone, there were more than two million platform jobs added to the U.S. economy (Garin et al., 2023; Zgola, 2021). As of 2022, platform work accounts for up to 12 % of the global labor force (Datta et al., 2023). Blending elements of the markets, hierarchies, and networks, platform organizations are a new organizational form that matches workers and customers in real-time to complete short-term tasks (Aneesh, 2009; Möhlmann et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2024; Stark & Watkins, 2018; Vallas & Schor, 2020). Underpinning digital platforms are algorithmic management systems that coordinate labor practices including hiring, firing, evaluating, and disciplining workers (Cameron, 2024a; Duggan et al., 2020; Hunt et al., 2025; Keegan and Meijerink, 2025; Kellogg et al., 2020; Sharkey et al., 2023; Stark and Vanden Broeck, 2024). Working under a digital boss in an algorithmic

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management system has radically changed the way work is organized, managed, and experienced.

Public policy discourse (Kuek et al., 2015; World Economic Forum, 2018, 2024), corporate reports (Dobbs et al., 2015; Griffiths et al., 2020; World Employment Confederation, & International Organisation of Employers, 2022), and platform companies themselves (DoorDash, 2023; Uber, 2018; Upwork, 2023) have celebrated platform work as a new, inclusive, and emancipatory labor market. In part, this is because of the platform economy's callbacks to individualism and entrepreneurship, much idealized concepts in Western culture. As Weber (1920) famously argued, these ideals were fostered from tenets of Protestantism, and over time, they became enacted throughout American culture. Stories of self-made millionaire entrepreneurs—real (John D. Rockefeller, Madame C.J. Walker, Andrew Carnegie) and imaginary (Horatio Algiers, Ragged Dick, Pip)—reinforced the notion that with hard work, perseverance, and ingenuity anyone, regardless of their background, could achieve financial success. Indeed, Uber's founding myth—that Travis Kalanick "just wanted to be a baller"—is emblematic of this social mobility narrative. Entrepreneurial discourse remains a common feature of the contemporary economy (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007; Vallas & Cummins, 2015), which has only been amplified with the decline of standard work arrangements (Davis, 2009; Hatton, 2011; Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017). Companies frame platform work as an opportunity for people to run their own businesses, calling workers entrepreneurs, service providers, partners, or "Uberpreneurs" (Pangrazio et al., 2023; Ravenelle, 2018). Advertisements appeal to workers' entrepreneurial ethos: "Maybe the best boss you've ever had is you" (Lyft), and "Work your way. Get paid. Make someone's day." (Instacart) (see Appendix, Images 1 and 2). The idea that workers should become "entrepreneurs of themselves" (Foucault, 2008, p. 226)—treating themselves as their own asset and source of income—encourages people to improve their skills, increase their value, and work harder. Indeed, people have described how platform work has allowed them to reclaim a sense of dignity, ownership, and pride, "building [themselves] up to a [real] person" (Cameron, 2022, p. 15) and becoming their "own man" (Griesbach, 2025, p. 507).

Embedded in this entrepreneurship dream is the idea that entrepreneurship is accessible to all. By providing flexible work opportunities with (seemingly) little risk and mobilizing already-held assets that allow widespread participation, platforms purport to "empower millions of individuals by connecting them to the right work opportunities in a much more seamless, personalized, and efficient way" (Dobbs et al., 2015, p. 16). In particular, these platforms promise inclusive entrepreneurship—i.e., to provide income-earning opportunities to populations historically marginalized in the labor markets because of their gender, race, ethnicity, immigration status, educational credentials, or history of interactions with the carceral state (Weigel & Cameron, 2025; McMillan Cottom, 2020; Ticona, 2022). For instance in the early public discourse, women were idolized as the ideal platform worker, with Anne Marie Slaughter (2015) writing in *Wired* magazine that the platform economy "can actually be great for women" because it provided schedule flexibility for household responsibilities that were not compatible with traditional full-time work.[1] And indeed, the platform workforce is manly (im)migrants and people of color (Anderson et al., 2021), groups that have overlapping economic and legal vulnerabilities. The ride-hailing company Lyft estimated that 72 % of its drivers are people of color (Lyft, 2023).[2] 45 % of U.S. platform workers are immigrants (Curbelo, 2025) and, overall, 18.5 % of immigrants in the U.S. engage in platform work (Liu & Renzy, 2025). These are global trends. In Australia and many countries in Europe, migrants make up a significant share of workers (McDonald et al., 2019; Van Doorn & Vijay, 2024) and in Brazil food-delivery drivers are mostly Black (CEBRAP & Amobitec, 2024; Hirabahasi, 2023).

In the past decade, the scholarly discourse around platform work as empowerment has radically shifted. Scholars have called platforms a "potent and dangerous pro-market fantasy" (Fleming et al., 2019, p. 488), questioning whether people can thrive through such work (Ashford et al., 2018; Gandini, 2019). Nearly one in seven platform workers earned less than the federal minimum wage, while three out of five reported lost earnings because of technical challenges with an app (Zipperer, 2022). These workers are twice as likely to earn less than their W-2 counterparts, and 30 % of these workers reported relying on food assistance benefits each month, a rate twice that of comparable service sector employees (see also Parrott & Reich, 2020, for similar statistics in Seattle). And when people turn to platform work for help during income disruptions, there are long-term negative impacts on their earning trajectories (Jackson, 2022; Reynolds & Kincaid, 2023). Outcomes are even worse for those the platform claims to be more inclusive of—that is, those who have been traditionally marginalized. Women and people of color who are platform workers report more customer abuse, sexual harassment, and feelings of unsafeness than white, male counterparts (Anderson et al., 2021; Caza & Reid, 2025; Kasliwal, 2023; Litman et al., 2020; Ma et al., 2022). Trends are similar outside the U.S., where 42 % of violent incidents against delivery drivers in Brazil were race-based (Cassiano & Nestlehner, 2024; UOL Notícias, 2024). Thus, while platforms make work possible for those who have historically been on the periphery of the labor market, they do so on predatory terms—a dynamic called "precarious inclusion" (Ticona, 2022, p. 1) or "exclusion by inclusion" (McMillan Cottom, 2020, p. 442; c.f., Charron-Chénier & Seamster, 2021 and Taylor, 2019 for examples in financial services and consumer credit markets).[3] Accordingly, some scholars have described platform work as a "losing game" (Sum et al., 2025, p. 1) and an accelerant to precarity (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018; Vallas & Prener,

[1] Whether women actually wanted these household responsibilities is a completely different question. In response to proliferation of artificial intelligence, author and videogamer Joanna Maciejewska stated, "I want AI to do my laundry and dishes so that I can do art and writing, not for AI to do my art and writing so that I can do my laundry and dishes" (Saidinesh, 2024).

[2] Estimating the composition and size of workers in the on-demand economy is difficult (see Collins et al., 2019 and Abraham et al., 2024 for rational). However, a nationwide Pew study (Anderson et al., 2021) point that Blacks and Latinx were more likely to work for ride-hailing (2x, 3x) and food delivery services (2.5x, 4x) than the white population. This same survey indicate that participation in the platform economy was higher among Black (20 %) and Hispanic (30 %) respondents than among White respondents (12 %). The Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System (2025) estimates that 79 % of platform economy workers are of color; however, they include a broader sample of gig workers (e.g., online sellers) than the focus of this manuscript. City-specific studies of platform workers revealed an over-representation of workers of color. In Minnesota, about 60 % of drivers are Black—largely from East Africa—and 61 % are foreign born (Parrott & Reich, 2024). In Seattle, 50 % of all drivers were Black, in comparison to only 5 % of all employees in King county, with similar proportions for other minority groups (Parrott & Reich, 2020). This study also found that 32 % of all drivers were of Hispanic, Asian, or another minority group background compared to 23 % of employees in King county. In New York City, over 90 % of app-based drivers were immigrants, primarily from the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh (Parrott & Reich, 2018). In San Francisco, 78 % of ride-hail drivers and food-deliver workers were of color and 56 % foreign born, compared to a population of 61 % and 32 %, respectively (Benner et al., 2020). In Los Angeles county, 23 % of ride-hailing drivers were Black, compared to 8 % of the population (Waheed et al., 2018).

[3] Relatedly, scholars have pointed out the combination of a racialized workforce and personalized algorithmically-determined wages creates racially-based wage discrimination that consistently pays groups of workers below the hourly minimum wage (Dubal, 2023, 2025; Schor, 2025).

2012).

The contradiction between the stated promise of independent entrepreneurship and the lived reality of hardship amongst platform workers is evident in recent events. During the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals who lost their jobs in the conventional economy flocked to platforms, but this did little to help workers financially (Reynolds & Kincaid, 2023; Wolf, 2022), particularly those with lower incomes to begin with (Auguste et al., 2024; see also Ravenelle, 2023). And in the past decade, many women have been attracted to platform work due to its promise of allowing them to balance professional and domestic responsibilities; while individuals sometimes experience this balance, they often express frustration at how platform work reproduces their marginalization (Milkman et al., 2021). Platform workers reported having less autonomy than expected, decrying the platform's "deceitful business model" (Alacovska et al., 2025, p. 7), that "guinea pig[ged] them again" and treated them like "lab-rat freelancers" (Rahman et al., 2023, p. 1809) as its algorithmic management system experimented with their ratings and pay, ultimately producing a "race to the bottom" (Schou & Bucher, 2023, p. 482). More broadly, platform workers report struggling with uncertainty, anxiety, and income precarity (Anicich, 2022; Cameron & Meuris, 2022; Kaine & Josserand, 2019; Ravenelle, 2019), especially those doing more generalized skilled (i.e., lower-skilled) work (Arnoldi et al., 2021; Koppel & Kolencik, 2018).

Given these contradicting narratives regarding platform work, in this review piece we focus on the following question: How do platforms generate workers' seemingly contradictory experiences of being independent entrepreneurs while at the same time exerting control over workers? We label this contradiction the *platform paradox,* a concept we introduce and develop in this paper. By the platform paradox, we refer to the tension between platforms' portrayal of the self-as-entrepreneur—-that is, the work as an independent entrepreneur who can forge their own path—and the often-contradictory realities of workers' lived experiences. Here we use the term 'paradox' in its colloquial sense, that is, to refer to a seeming contradiction that when studied is found to somehow be true (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.; Merriam-Webster, n.d), which is a similar usage with other recent management theorizing (e.g., Conzon, 2023; Sonnentag, 2018).[4] In addition to demarcating this paradox, we also theorize *how* the paradox is generated. In particular, we draw attention to the role of neo-normative controls. Neo-normative controls use the values of independence, individuality, and self--expression to subtly direct workers' actions toward achieving organizational goals (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, 2011). This is a distinctive form of control because control is achieved through defining how people think of themselves or as a certain sort of person (Fleming & Spicer, 2014). We describe three forms of neo-normative control in the context of platform work: framing-self-as-product (i.e., the person as the commodity or service being sold), bring your whole self to work (i.e., the promise that one can be one's entire self, and not just a 'worker,' while at work), and hyper-gamification (i.e., the incorporation of game-like elements into the act of work). Collectively, these controls construct the worker's experience as one of free choice, while the worker remains under the control of the platform.

While this paradox can be experienced in many ways, we select two prominent dimensions—skill and time—to illustrate manifestations of the platform paradox. We chose these two dimensions as they are often emphasized as positive outcomes of the highly lauded vision of entrepreneurship (Jennings & McDougald, 2007; Hwang & Phillips, 2024; Politis, 2005). For each of these, we describe how the promise of an improvement (in skill or time) may lead to, on the one hand, a sense that workers *do* have realized improvements on these dimensions, while on the other a real limitation of their lived experiences. For instance, workers may experience themselves as developing skills, but these skills might be platform-specific (e.g., how to 'game' or manipulate Uber's surge algorithm) or encompass relatively lower-level skills (e.g., writing a social media profile on TikTok), that are not transferrable to other platforms preventing easy movement between platfroms. Similarly, workers may feel they have flexibility in when they work, yet also are economically dependent on platform and tied to when it provides them with work. Lastly, the platform paradox serves as a springboard for future research, and we offer a broad set of potential future directions of work, including urging scholars to explore implications for inequality. We encourage scholars to expand beyond these dimensions to include broader social structures, such as cultural narratives and financialization, that contribute to the platform paradox. Moreover, as platform scholarship matures, we call on scholars to do more historical work to ground the platform phenomena to offer grounded perspectives that provide sharper insights about the platform economy and the future of work.

This manuscript responds to the recent calls for management and organizations scholars to move beyond studying white-collar, professional, and other more 'elite' workers to the most marginalized members of our economy (Hwang & Phillips, 2024; Nkomo et al., 2019; Phillips & Ranganathan, 2025). Platforms are not neutral entities, but "contested terrains" (Edwards, 1979; Kellogg et al., 2020) through which faces of power are exercised (Curchod et al., 2020; Hunt et al., 2025; Rahman et al., 2024; Vallas & Schor, 2020). As such, platform work is problematic for all sorts of workers. However, it also creates a double jeopardy for those already experiencing marginalization on the basis of social identities, roles, and positions. Thus, to truly understand the future of work, we must shift our focus from the purely technical algorithmic components of platform work to include the social elements as well, especially as they affect the most vulnerable and marginalized workers. Because it is expressly this workforce to which platforms promise inclusivity, the paradox can be the most difficult for them to escape.

A new sort of work: digital labor platforms and platform work

In this section, we lay the groundwork for our theorizing of the platform paradox by first defining platform work and categorizing digital labor platforms. We define platform work as work that entails interactions and controls that are mediated in real time through an online digital platform *and* entails short-term work arrangements (i.e., not a standard employment relationship; Vallas & Schor, 2020; Rahman, 2021; Cameron, 2024a). Common examples of individuals engaged in platform work include drivers and food deliverers who receive requests through closed matching platforms (e.g., Uber, Instacart), task specialists (e.g., editors, carpenters) whom clients find and hire through open matching platforms (e.g., UpWork, TaskRabbit), and content creators on social media (e.g., Instagram, TikTok). Platform work can be contrasted with other forms of work, including what has been labeled standard work and traditional contract work. While platform work is a type of contract work (Cappelli & Eldor, 2023; Cappelli & Keller, 2013; Spreitzer et al., 2017), scholars have argued that platform work is

[4] Like other management theorists, we find the paradox concept helpful for theorizing how a complex empirical phenomenon comes about (for other similar uses of paradox and related terms in management theorizing, see Feldberg, 2022; Phillips, 2001; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989), including research which has noted that related phenomena—such as the sharing economy (Acquier et al., 2017; Laamanen et al., 2018; Schor, 2017), nonstandard work schedules (Epstein et al., 1999), careers (Anteby & Occhiuto, 2020; Sheehan, 2022), and digital work technologies (Anthony, 2021; Mazmanian et al., 2013; Prengler et al., 2025)—support such paradoxical experiences, as well as the broad observation that platforms and the platform economy can have unintended consequences (Fleming et al., 2019; Kost et al., 2020; Rilinger, 2025). This is separate from management scholarship that explicitly focuses on theorizing and studying the existence and maintenance of paradoxes as an abstract phenomenon (e.g., Smith & Lewis, 2011).

distinct because it entails market-related dynamics that are mediated through digital infrastructures and algorithmic management (Cameron, 2024a; Duggan et al., 2020; Hunt et al., 2025; Vallas & Schor, 2020).[5] Further, there is important variation between the lived experiences of platform workers as opposed to contractors-at-large. For instance, platform workers often have micro-sized contracts (e.g., the course of an hour or even less) which means they are continually looking for work and subject to more intense market forces. The average Uber ride is 25 min and the typical driver stays on the platform less than six months (Cook et al., 2018; Fraade-Blanar et al., 2021; Lippke & Noyce, 2020), as opposed to highly-skilled IT contractors who might stay in their projects for three years (Bidwell, 2009). As another example, platform workers often do not directly interact with managers or coworkers, unlike traditional contractors (Cappelli & Keller, 2013). One ride-hailing driver remarked that he only interacts with coworkers when he "check[*s*] the passenger app and see[*s* icons of other] cars" (Cameron, 2022, p. 235). Therefore, consistent with other scholars, we consider platform work as its own category of work.

Platform work is facilitated by digital platforms which coordinate transactions between workers and customers. For further context, in Table 1, we outline three types of platforms—open, closed, and social media—building from existing typologies of platform work.[6] We delineate how these platforms vary in terms of their services offered, sociotechnical scaffolds, and location components. Consistent with our definition of platform work above, Table 1 includes the combination of sociotechnical mediation and task segments that is unique to platform work. As we theorize below, these distinctive features of platforms generate the platform paradox in ways that would not be generated by other forms of work (e.g., traditional contracting).

The common theme across these platforms is that they rely on a) digital platforms for coordinating short-term work arrangements and b) algorithmic management systems that match, evaluate, and discipline workers. At the same time, there are key differences—location, services offered and sociotechnical scaffolds—between the three labor platforms, which as we discuss later, have implications for the three neo-normative control mechanisms. The first way work differs is by the location of the workforce. Work on open labor platforms can be completed in-person or virtually and, as such, a platform's workforce can be local, global, or a mix of both. An example of this is on the platform TaskRabbit: workers can be hired to complete tasks locally in-person (e.g., cleaning, furniture assembly) or virtually from a global labor pool (e.g., data entry, virtual assistant). In contrast, work on closed-labor platforms such as DoorDash and Instacart is typically completed in-person with local workers. And work on social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, is done remotely by workers across the globe.

The second way that work differs across the three platform is by the services offered. On open labor platforms the tasks offered are varied and often involve knowledge work (e.g., copy-editing, database design, fashion design, programming). The length of the tasks is variable, lasting from seconds (Amazon MTurk) to months (Upwork), as the length is set by the customer, and can be monitored by the platform, such as via automated screenshots (Upwork, n.d.). Workers may develop one of three relationships with customers—personalized, pseudo, or service (Gutek, 1999)—which result in varied worker interchangeability. A highly specialized task reflecting a unique skillset (e.g., dressmaking on Thumbtack) may create interdependence between the customer and the worker, spurring repeat interactions and a personalized relationship. In pseudorelationships, a customer returns to the platform for the same service, but may choose a different worker each time (e.g., furniture assembler on TaskRabbit). In service encounters, customers have one-off, impersonal interactions with different workers (e.g., Amazon MTurk).[7] In contrast to the open labor markets just described, on closed labor markets, tasks are standard and routine (e.g., driving, shopping). Most ride-hailing rides, for example, are complete within half an hour and deliveries within a similar time period. In these platforms, the worker-customer relationship is a pseudorelationship and as algorithms matches workers with customers, worker interchangeability is high (Gutek, 1999; Cameron, 2022). On social media platforms, tasks are both creative and standard. Workers post unique content, such as videos, pictures, music, and text; however, there is standardization in the creation of content processes (e.g., video editing, adding musical overlays). While the algorithmic matching system recommends content, consumers ultimately choose what content to engage with. Thus, consumers develop a parasocial relationship with content creators, feeling a sense of closeness and intimacy (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Pillemer, 2024). Reflecting this parasocial relationship, there is little interchangeability among workers.

Sociotechnical scaffolds are the third way that these labor markets differ. In open labor markets, the algorithmic matching system recommends workers to customers given various customer inputs (e.g., task, price range, location). Workers are rated by customers, both qualitatively and quantitatively, as well as by other metrics (e.g., response times, projects completed). As input into the algorithmic recommendation system, these ratings can be viewed by other customers and traceable in that the evaluations are visible via Internet search engines. In contrast, closed labor market platforms deploy an algorithmic matching system that matches workers to customers given various inputs (e.g., location, workers' ratings). Workers customer ratings, typically on a one-to-five-star scale, and other telemetric data (e.g., on-time delivery, acceleration, braking) influences matches. Workers can be penalized in the matching system for rejecting too many tasks or not keeping their ratings above a threshold. Workers' ratings are sometimes visible to customers during a transaction but are not traceable on the Internet. In social media platforms, the algorithmic matching system recommends content to consumers based on their past behaviors and other platform-wide factors (e.g., trendiness). Consumers evaluate creators' posts through comments, (dis)likes, (down/up) votes, and viewership. These ratings and comments are visible to content creators and other platform users and are traceable on the Internet at-large. Content creators also have in-depth access to these metrics through their own portals from which they can evaluate their own standing within the community. Having established this trifold typology of platforms, we

[5] A more detailed description of the differences between standard and contract work is beyond the scope of this article. For such comparisons, see Ashford et al. (2018), Ashford et al. (2007), Bidwell et al. (2013), Cappelli and Keller (2013), Kalleberg (2000), and Spreitzer et al. (2017).

[6] This three-way comparison is especially important, since social media platforms as a type of labor platform have been less studied in the organizational and management literature (see Birced, 2025 and Ghaedipour, 2022 as exceptions). There are some important distinctions with respect to social media platforms. Content creators produce content for their audiences who consume their content, but not all audience members are customers. Their earnings come from multiple sources, including from the platform company (per-views), brand sponsorships, and direct support from customers, who may offer donations or purchase goods or services. Thus, unlike the other two labor platforms, payment may not be entirely mediated by the platform. For the sake of readability, we will use the word customer when referring to all three labor platforms and use the word audience member or consumer when referring to social media platforms specifically. Notably, all three labor platforms are distinct from listing platforms, such as AirBnb, Etsy, and Ebay in which sellers list items for purchase. For other typologies of labor market platforms, see Cameron and Rahman (2022), Dunn (2020), Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn (2019), Kuhn and Maleki (2017), Maffie (2020), and Sutherland and Jarrahi (2018).

[7] One function of a platform company is to mediate the worker-customer relationship, such that a customer identifies more with a brand than an individualized worker, thus, pseudo or service relationships are ideal. Personalized relationships are less desirable for a platform company, because of the risk of the worker leaving the platform and working directly with the customer, i.e., disintermediation (e.g., Maffie, 2023a).

Table 1
Similarities and differences between digital labor market platforms[a].

	OPEN	CLOSED	SOCIAL MEDIA
LOCATION			
…of Work	Remote and in-person	In-person	Remote
…of Workforce	Global and local	Local	Global
SERVICES OFFERED			
…Tasks	Varied	Standard	Standard but precise content varies
…Work Content	Knowledge (mostly)	Routine	Creative
…Task Structure (Length and Segmentation)	Length varies, one-off or repeat interactions with customers that are segmented by customers and monitored by algorithms	Short, one-off interactions with customers; tasks are segmented and monitored by algorithms	Short, repeat interactions with audience members that are monitored by algorithms; tasks segmented by worker
…Worker-Customer Relationship and Worker Interchangeability	Personalized, pseudo, and service relationships; Variable interchangeability, customer chooses worker, but interchangeability depends on skills needed for specific task	Pseudo-relationships; High interchangeability, algorithms match workers to customers without their input	Parasocial relationships; Low interchangeability, audience members develop affinity to content creators based on personal interests
SOCIOTECHNICAL SCAFFOLDS			
…Algorithmic Matching and Customer Evaluation System	• Recommends workers to customers for a specified task • Quantitative ratings (typically one to five stars) and other metrics (e.g. availability); Open-ended qualitative comments • Low-ranking workers less visible in search results	• Matches workers to customers • Quantitative ratings (typically one to five stars) and other metrics (e.g. availability); Closed-ended qualitative comments • Low-ranking workers receive lower-quality matches or are deactivated	• Recommends workers' content to audience members • Quantified metrics (e.g., (dis)likes, shares); Open-ended qualitative comments; • Low-ranking workers less visible in search results; Shadowbanning
….Traceable Evaluations	Yes; Ratings visible to customers within platform and in search engine results	No; Ratings not shown to customers until after match and unavailable outside the service encounter	Yes; Ratings and comments visible to audience members within platform and in search engine results
…Other Metrics	Availability, responsiveness, bidding on projects, projects completed	Acceptance/decline/cancellation rate, on-time deliveries, telemetrics (e.g., speed, acceleration)	Views, (dis)likes, upvotes, comments
EXAMPLES			
	Global workforce, remote work: Upwork, Fiverr, Amazon MTurk Local workforce, in-person work: Taskrabbit, Thumbtack, Urbansitter	Uber, DoorDash, Instacart	Instagram, YouTube, OnlyFans

[a] Some labor market platforms combine elements of closed and open labor markets. Drawing from the retail and service industries, in which clopen refers to a work schedule where an employee closes a business one day and then returns to open it the next (Greenhouse, 2015), we define a clopen labor market as one in which workers can have tasks assigned to them as well as choose their own tasks (e.g., Shipt workers who can choose from open metro orders or be assigned orders from the algorithmic management system). For the sake of conceptual clarity in this article, we have focused our argumentation on open and closed labor markets distinctly.

now turn to theorizing the platform paradox.

The platform paradox

In this section, we theorize the platform paradox—that is, the tension between platforms' portrayal of the self-as-entrepreneur and the often-contradictory realities of workers' lived experiences. We first lay the theoretical foundation for our argument by describing three neo-normative control mechanisms that underpin the platform paradox. For each mechanism of neo-normative control, we show two consequences

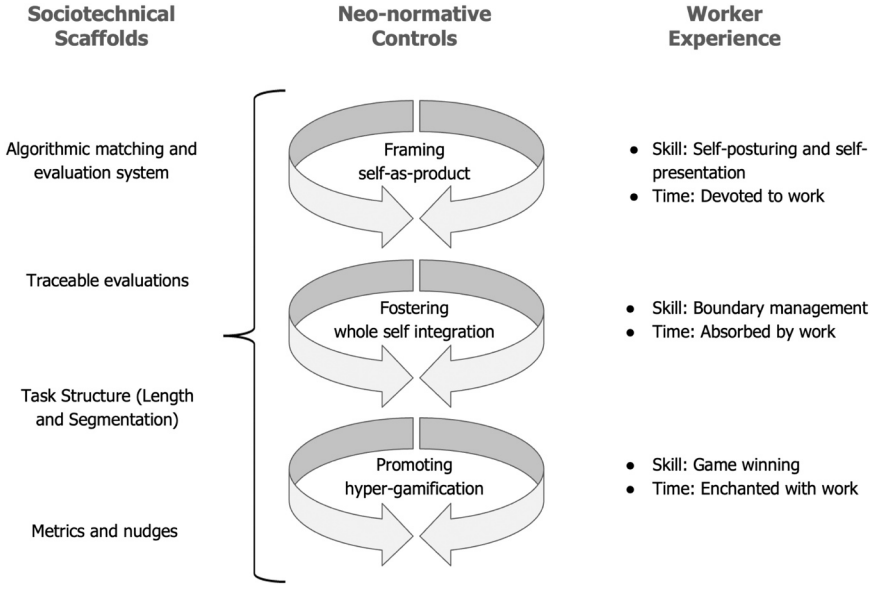

Fig. 1. The platform paradox.

for workers' experiences: skill and time. Fig. 1 depicts an abstraction of our argument.

Theoretical foundations: Neo-normative mechanisms of control in platform work

We theorize the self as becoming controlled by and being (re)produced by neo-normative control. Neo-normative control builds on the concept of normative control, that is, power resting on the allocation and manipulation of symbolic rewards (e.g., esteem, prestige) (Etzioni, 1961; Kunda, 1992). In neo-normative control, organizations leverage the ideals of independence, individuality, and self-expression to steer workers' behavior toward the organization's goals (Fleming, 2009; Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Neff, 2012; Sturdy et al., 2009; Vallas & Christin, 2018). Neo-normative controls are a common enactment of organizational power in contemporary capitalist society. For instance, call center workers are encouraged to attend parties, play in-office games, and dress not in a uniform but rather their own chosen attire to add a 'fun' element to work that is notorious for its strange hours and abusive customers (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009; Sallaz, 2019). Similarly, video game designers are encouraged to view extreme hours as an investment in their own career development and employability, with management framing long stretches of hours as 'work as play' and demanding commitment to meet short deadlines (Peticca-Harris et al., 2015).

In this same vein, neo-normative controls are central to platform work, appealing to workers' sense of freedom and authenticity in order to shape workers' behavior on the app (Purcell & Brook, 2022; Morales & Stecher, 2023). A stark reminder of neo-normative control can be seen in the advertisements of many platform companies. Uber tells workers they can "Earn like a boss"; that is, they will control their earnings (Appendix, Image 3). Fiverr encourages workers to "Look to *yourself* and turn the skills you already have into a business," (emphasis the authors') implying that self-reliance leads to success (Keenan, 2020). Rover tells workers they can "Get paid to play with dogs on your schedule" (Appendix, Image 4), suggesting that work is not only within individual control but also an enjoyable activity. Overall, these advertisements suggest that neo-normative control mechanisms play an important role in understanding the relationship between workers and platform organizations.

We theorize three specific neo-normative control mechanisms that underlie the platform paradox: framing self-as-product, whole self integration, and hyper-gamification. While other forms of work, including both standard work and non-platform contract work, may experience variations of these forms of neo-normative control (e.g., Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Vallas & Christin, 2018), the sociotechnical scaffolds involved in the platform economy are especially salient in generating the platform paradox. For each control, we describe its mechanism, underlying sociotechnical scaffolds that are unique to platforms (as opposed to other forms of work), and how it shapes workers' understandings of their skill and time in a way that reinforces their commitment to platform work (see Table 2 for a summary). In the final section, we relate the platform paradox to inequality. We focus on these two empirical manifestations of the platform paradox because platforms often appeal to and attract workers based on their promises to develop skills and free up time, akin to a 'true' entrepreneur. Uber markets that drivers can learn "soft skills" such as professionalism, people skills, and communication, which are transferable to "any setting and in a variety of positions, regardless of the type of work" (Uber, 2016). With respect to time, Amazon Flex promotes schedule flexibility: "Deliver when you want, as much as you want" (see Appendix, Image 5). However, as we describe below, these promises of worker skill development and time improvement cannot be fully realized by workers. In the final section, we relate the platform paradox to inequality.

Table 2
Neo-normative controls underpinning the platform paradox.

	Framing Self-as-Product	**Fostering Whole Self Integration**	**Promoting Hyper-Gamification**
Mechanism	Platforms focus workers on selling themselves as a service or good to the customers	Platforms frame one's self on-the-platform (i.e., the "work" self) and one's self off-the-platform (i.e., the "non-work" self) as a united whole	Platforms present the work experience as an enticing game
Sociotechnical Scaffolds	• Algorithmic management and customer evaluation system • Traceable customer evaluations	• Algorithmic management and customer evaluation system • Task structure (length and segmentation)	• Algorithmic management and customer evaluation systems • Metrics and nudges
Implications For:			
Skill	Self-posturing and Self-presentation	Boundary management	Game winning
Time	Devoted to work	Absorbed by work	Enchanted with work

Framing self-as-product

Mechanism. We label the first core normative control in relation to platform work as *framing self-as-product*. By this, we refer to how the platform focuses workers on selling themselves as a service or good to the client. Workers tend to experience this in one of two ways, which are sometimes overlapping. The first form of framing self-as-product occurs when people see themselves as a particular brand, product, or lifestyle. This is common for content creators on social media platforms, such as Instagram and YouTube (Birced,Forthcoming; Duffy, 2017; Hödl & Myrach, 2023; Trittin-Ulbrich & Glozer, 2024; Wohl & Cameron, 2025; c.f., Biggart, 1989). A worker on OnlyFans notes she intersperses sexual content with non-sexualized personal content where "it's just exemplifying my personality and getting people to like me" (Mears et al., 2025, p. 14). Similarly, an Instagram influencer comedian strives to connect with this audience through injecting humor, "My sense of humor gets really put out there [on Instagram]. In terms of my content, my story content… People get a really kind of a gateway window into what I really think is funny. And people connect with that" (Ghaedipour, 2022, p. 91; c.f., Anteby & Occhiuto, 2020). These affective displays help build the parasocial relationship, such that audience members develop a sense of intimacy and connectedness with content creators. In their profiles and self-presentations, workers "give the value proposition of [them]" to prospective clients (Vallas & Christin, 2018, p. 19). These displays of the self are examples of how workers may enact "authenticity signals that are aligned with both what is true to themselves and what is contextually appropriate" (Pillemer, 2024, p. 1654). The second way that platform workers often experience framing self-as-product is when their labor is sold as the core service. This often occurs in open and closed labor markets where the emphasis is on being the 'ideal worker' professional, deferential and ready-to-work (Cameron et al., 2021; Reid, 2015; Williams, 2001). For instance, people on UpWork or TaskRabbit may present themselves as always available and customer-focused both in their profiles and through maintaining high metrics (e.g., responsiveness, Muñoz et al., 2023). This neo-normative control, which frames the self as a product, demands that workers continually market and present themselves in ways that appeal to both the platform and its customers.

Sociotechnical scaffolds. Through algorithmic matching and evaluation systems, platforms emphasize the importance of workers framing the self-as-product, and the algorithmic evaluation system allows workers to instantly "see" their success. On social media and open labor

platforms, workers are recommended to customers by the algorithmic management system, with workers' profiles reflecting their own self-branding efforts. Workers are well aware of these algorithmically-mediated filtering mechanisms, often modifying the content of their profiles to enhance their visibility to the algorithms and, hence, customers. On social media platforms, creators make sure their content is visually appealing and aligns with their self-brand or, on open labor platforms, workers may use easily recognizable buzz words in their profiles (e.g., #londonmunch, #londonfoodies for food/restaurant content in London) (Mears et al., 2025; Miguel et al., 2024). Customers then pursue workers' profiles, choosing who to engage with (e.g., (dis) likes, comments). Thus, customers are not choosing to interact with an undifferentiated worker, but with a particular person—'Marissa the master IKEA furniture assembler,' 'Nawaf the glitzy graphic designer,' or 'Amelia the stylish tradwife influencer'—that has successfully framed themselves as a product. The platform's algorithmic matching system relies on instantaneous feedback, meaning that any deviations from customers' expectations (e.g., in terms of framing self-as-product) have immediate consequences for future assignments. On open and closed labor markets, customer ratings and other metrics are quantified indicators if workers meet ideal worker standards, with anything less than perfect often hurting workers. A digital marketing professional on an open market labor platform said: 'Somebody who maybe gave a 4.2 out of 5 stars and that's bad … that's not really that bad but people look on [and] they want you to have 90 % or above [on your job success score]" (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2023, p. 1005). Responsiveness, availability, and number of tasks completed are all metrics that indicate whether a worker is 'ideal.' On closed labor platforms, workers that do not maintain the requisite customer ratings are 'deactivated,' a euphemism for firing (Rosenblat et al., 2017; Shapiro, 2018) while on social media and open labor market platform workers with low ratings are at the bottom of search results (Rahman, 2024). The visibility of customer evaluations is also a core scaffold to the framing of the self-as-product. The digital traces of workers on social media or open labor markets platforms are visible through Google or LinkedIn searches, beyond workers' direct control (Rahman, 2024; Fichman, 2025). Rohan, a worker on the open-labor market platform TalentFinder, was used to customers finding his profile on Google, but due to inactivity his profile was set to private which meant that "people outside of TalentFinder won't be able to find [him]" (Rahman, 2024, p. 166). Consequently, workers may feel committed to stick with a particular platform because of the weight of that platform's ranking in Interent search results and the potential for this ranking to affect future work opportunities. Thus, the need for workers to provide and maintain the self as a high-quality product or service is reinforced.

Implications for skill. In this process of framing self-as-product, the worker does develop skills, but these skills are narrowly focused on platform-specific self-posturing and presentation. Their skills focus on appropriately transforming themselves—often through self-study and continuous learning (Herrmann et al., 2023) into attractive workers that will please customers. This includes skills such as knowing how to categorize one's audience to create 'instagrammable content'; i.e., content that is both relatable, such as wearing popular brand-name clothing, and aspirational, such as posting photos with celebrities (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Similarly, on closed-labor markets such as Uber, to maximize their income, drivers develop the ability to know where and when to wait for customers, categorize customers to know when to exert more emotional labor to increase tips, and develop elaborate tracking spreadsheets of surges and travel patterns (Cameron, 2022; Vertesi & Enquirez, 2025; c.f., Davis, 1959). In another implication for skill, on the open-labor market platform TaskRabbit, workers perfected understanding customers' risk profiles during the COVID-19 pandemic, artfully maintaining their own personal safety boundaries while ostensibly complying with customers' (Cameron et al., 2021). And on social media platforms, content creators learned how to fine-tune their skills, balancing both the platform's and customers' preferences by showing just the right amount of sexualized content to get the audience's attention while not getting penalized by the platform's censors (Mears et al., 2025). While these skills are essential for workers to develop and do well on the platform, they remain narrowly focused on the platform itself and its specific customer set. Thus, these skills are not easily transferable outside the specific platform context and dampen the possibility of generalizable skill-building that platforms promise.

Implications for time. Framing self-as-product changes workers' experiences of time; while they still remain formally able to choose when they work—leaving open the possibility, perhaps, of setting aside time for non-work activities—they often end up devoting substantial time to being available for or working on the platform. While not officially required, there is a need for platform workers to be constantly available because work is only available when there is customer demand, and when this demand will occur is uncertain (Lehdonvirta, 2018). Fanny describes her experience of harriedness on two open labor market platforms that require her to be available 'around the clock': "… if we lower our responsiveness, the algorithm likes us less and puts us less in the front [of clients on the app]" (Riemann et al., 2024, p. 9). Indeed, there is often higher pay at the times when most people do not want to work—lower labor supply drives higher wages—which, in turn, might lead to people working atypical hours, including when they would otherwise prefer not to work (Shevchuk et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2018). And, at other time, workers must cluster their work hours during high-demand times, such as commuting hours or meal times. Additionally, workers must engage in substantial unpaid labor. For example, workers on open labor markets and social media platforms must carefully craft a customized personal profile to attract customers, sleuthing for the best attention-grabbing key phrases (Muñoz et al., 2023). On closed labor markets in which workers are matched to tasks, people must wait for work, which is unpaid, and time is experienced as slow. A full-time delivery driver, Susan explained: "[Sometimes] there's no order for half an hour, or something … 45 min and there's no reasonable order…. This is insane…. And I've sat here [i.e., in front of a restaurant] for, like, 20 min now. What's going on? What is the actual algorithm that, you know, decides who gets this order? Because I'm sitting right here" (Attoh et al., 2024, p. 3839). While there is a lack of systematic research on how platform work shapes work time as compared to alternative forms of work, research suggests that workers may end up devoting more time to work as they manage and maintain the self-as-product.

Fostering whole self integration

Mechanism. A second central neo-normative control mechanism in the platform economy is *fostering whole self integration*. By this, we refer to how the platform posits one's self on-the-platform (i.e., the "work" self) and one's self off-the-platform (i.e., the 'non-work' self) as a united whole. In other words, platform work fosters workers to see themselves not as segmented selves—as a worker *or* a mother—but as an integrated self—as a worker *and* mother. There are two ways that platforms foster workers to be a whole self. First, and similar to what was described above in framing self-as-product, workers are encouraged to infuse parts of their personal self into their work role. The manifestation of this aspect of whole self integration is different based on the particular labor platform. On social media platforms, workers are encouraged to be authentic in their self-presentation, with perceived authenticity being linked to higher audience engagement (e.g., likes, views, comments,

klout score) (Ghaedipour, 2022; Vallas & Christin, 2018) and platform-derived income and earning opportunities (e.g., brand sponsorship or fan funding) (Birced, 2025, Forthcoming; Blyth et al., 2024; Duffy, 2017; Siciliano, 2020).[8] A comedian content creator on Instagram explained the relationship between whole self integration and creating connections with his audience: "I just am continuously me, I'm unapologetically myself. The less I think about it, the less—the more I just do it is where it gets really more well-received" (Ghaedipour, 2022, p. 162). Creators mix personal and professional content, deciding which facets of their personal life to showcase to customers. A worker said "[on] Instagram…I do a lot of family travel stuff, and it's very easy for me, when we're doing some traveling with the family to snap a picture, write about [it] …" (Duffy et al., 2017, p. 6). On open and closed labor platforms, workers may mention their aspects of their personal lives to connect with customers in the hopes of receiving higher customer ratings or tips. Workers may decorate their cars with meaningful objects that are conversation starters (e.g., crystals, social justice flyers) (Cameron, 2022), drop personalized messages in shopping bags (Thompson, 2022), and create funny emojis greetings (Cameron et al., 2022). Others described platform work as 'freeing' because they were able to bring up personally meaningful topics, such as race (Cameron, 2022), could combine platform work with other enjoyable activities, such as riding a bike around the city (Goods et al., 2019), or understood platform work, overall, as a leisure (Stewart et al., 2020) or pro-bono (Cameron et al., 2022) activity.

Second, platforms afford whole self integration through collapsing the boundary between work and family, in that workers can seamlessly move between work and family responsibilities (c.f., Occhiuto, 2017). This aspect of whole self integrations happens in the same way across all three labor platforms. A father can deliver meals to customers with kids in the family van (Barnard, 2021) and an Airbnb host can welcome guests into their spare room in order to gain extra income while caring for their invalid mother in the adjoining room (Airbnb, 2018). Such activities take a space formerly identified as private and reimagine it as a place of commercial activity. Further, many types of platform-mediated work offer the opportunity for the entire family to be involved. Together, families fill multiple shopping carts and couples team up to complete food or package deliveries, with one driving, the other dropping off packages on stoops, and a child playing on an iPad in the backseat (Fortin, 2021; Wells & Stratta, 2025). Such activities not only allow parents to save on the costs of childcare, but enable workers to create family businesses. An advertisement from Lyft highlighted the importance of whole self integration for their workers, acknowledging they are "more than just drivers," and also "caretakers" and "aspiring architects" (Appendix, Image 6).

Sociotechnical scaffolds. Platforms foster whole-self integration in two principle ways. First, as already described in the section on framing self-as-product, digital labor platforms integrate customers into the work process through the algorithmic management system matching and evaluation processes. This rating system allows customers to evaluate platform workers on the basis of whatever criteria they deem important. Among these implicit criteria on social media platforms is authenticity, which thus reinforces and supports the concept of bringing the whole self to work. Content creator Katelyn shares photos of her boyfriend online, knowing that her followers liked couples content and always "want[ed] more" (Heeris Christensen et al., 2024, p. 583). Thus, workers are encouraged to insert more of their 'authentic' selves into the work. Second, segmentation via the platform's algorithmic management system structures the work into small pieces that can then be intermingled with non-work activities. Tasks like "finding jobs, chasing people, chasing invoices, [and] admin work" (James, 2024, p. 524) are segmented and can be intermingled with non-work activities. Workers can log into an app, pick-up a food delivery, pause to do school pick-up, and then return to work by hopping back on the platform. A worker describes: "I was working early in the morning while the kids ate breakfast and [I] sent it [project] off, job done." (Alvarez de la Vega et al., 2023, p. 19). Segmentation also reduces the spatial separation between work and home, since workers can work in spaces traditionally reserved for non-work activities (e.g., a content creator posting photos of their kids at a park; shopper checking for orders in the kitchen). The blurring of boundaries encourages drivers to experiment with new spatial arrangements such as makeshift sleeping arrangements in parking lots during periods of high-demand for rides (Crain et al., 2020; Rosenblat & Cameron, 2020; Cameron et al., 2022).

Implications for skill. Like framing self-as-product, fostering whole self integration does lead to the development of skills, but these skills often focus on boundary management (i.e., the managing work and non-work demands). James (2024) writes of mothers on digital labor platforms learning to deftly navigate working at home while managing the demands of small children; the women develop talents in creatively weaving in short, segmented platform tasks between caring for children and performing household chores, such as "picking jobs that I can do when my daughter's sleeping" (p. 527). An immigrant mother, who had significant household responsibility, described how she managed cleaning her home, doing the laundry, and prepping meals: "I have the food ready [to go] … so that if I know a delivery [is needed]….I just put in the dish and go" (Webster & Zhang, 2020, p. 121). Fitting small, routine tasks between algorithmically timed activities becomes a learned skill of managing everyday life. For others, incorporating work and non-work activities extends beyond the immediate demands of work and home, with implications for future aspirations such as developing skills to balance platform work with school work, licensing exams, or other side businesses (Maury et al., 2024; Mathurin et al., 2025). Thus, fostering whole self integration does lead to some skills, but those skills are centered on boundary management (i.e., managing work and life demands) rather than the actual performance of work.

Implications for time. As bringing the whole self to work blurs work/non-work boundaries, the border between work/non-work time is collapsed; while workers retain formal control over when they work, work time becomes less separate and distinguishable from non-work time. First, workers may devote more time to work instead of other activities that they might find valuable (e.g., spending time with family, leisure activities), as it comes to overlap and intertwine with other core identities (Conzon & Huising, 2024; Mazmanian & Beckman, 2020). When content creators see responsiveness to customers as a core part of who they are as people (i.e., caring and responsive individuals), they may end up overworking, working seventy-plus hours a week (Ghaedipour, 2022). Paired with this quantitative shift in the use of time, there is a related qualitative change; workers may now view work time as the cultivation of a 'best self' which, is aspirational and unattainable, leading to feelings of frustration when they cannot realize this ideal (Ravenelle & Kowalski, 2023). Second, this neo-normative control often entails people performing work and non-work activities back-to--back as they attempt to maintain extensive availability for work while also attending to home demands. In the same study of mothers working on platforms described above, one woman explained she was "checking on my phone at the park with the kids" and "working in the car during my daughter's dance class"; work and non-work boundaries become blurred, creating feelings of being "time squeezed" or "time starved" (James, 2024, p. 524). While workers are given a formal choice over how time is allocated, this neo-normative control transforms the work/non-work temporal boundary such that people may be more drawn into work.

[8] We are making a distinction from *selling* oneself as compared to *being* oneself. That is, in the first neo-normative control the self is the commodified entity, whereas in the second the focus is on the being of a *whole* self (regardless of if that self is actively commodified or not).

Promoting hyper-gamification

Mechanism. The third neo-normative control mechanism central to platform work we label *promoting hyper-gamification*. By this, we refer to how the platform can be experienced as a game, which workers find enticing, absorbing, and even addictive (Iazzolino & Varesio, 2023; Krzywdzinski & Gerber, 2021; Manriquez, 2019).[9] Across all three types of labor platforms, metrics translate into badges, compliments, and other rewards that keep workers engaged. On social media platforms, workers can view their own metrics (e.g., views, likes, time-watched on target) in their analytical portal as well as easily compare their standing against other creators (e.g, views). Illustrative of the "competitive individualism that permeates the influencer industry" (Stoldt et al., 2019, p. 8), creators often competed against one another on who could attract more followers, create more popular (viral) content, or generate greater revenue for their brands. On open labor markets, workers earned badges for completing a certain number of projects, quickly answering a client, or logging in every day (Schörpf et al., 2017). On the closed labor market platform, Instacart, workers compared shopping to a scavenger hunt and the gameshow SuperMarket Sweeps, while another noted the motivating aspects of work fused with play: "It's like a little competition with myself, trying to meet my goal or [give] the best customer service I can to customers" (Cameron et al., 2022, p. 7). Another ride-hailing worker described how the platform's language—such as using the word 'Quest' to describe a multi-day incentive—fueled his addiction: "The experience of this job feels like an addiction because it feels nice at first then it's really bad. Suddenly, you are accepting Quests that aren't worth the work and Uber Pool trips you normally would not take" (Vasudevan & Chan, 2022, p. 875, c.f., Griesbach, 2025). Part of this enrapturement is the possibility of winning the game. That is, when work is a game, workers want to win and become captivated with the idea of viewing themselves not just as workers but also winners. Seeing himself as a 'winner in life' a driver said, "For me, I am the boss of myself. I don't have to explain anything to anyone. If I don't want to work, I stay at home. If I want to, I'll go. If I don't, I won't earn. If I leave [home], I earn money." (Mika & Polkowska, 2025, p. 1818). This experience of gamification relates to recent arguments on the difference between visibility and transparency. While the metrics of the game is often very *visible* to workers (e.g., nudges, chimes, lights) how the work is gamified and how it serves the platform company is often not *transparent*; that information is held by the platform company (Flyverbom et al., 2015; Leonardi & Vaast, 2017; Kumar et al., 2018).

Sociotechnical scaffolds. Through their metrics and algorithmic management systems, platforms support gamification as a neo-normative mechanism of control. First, the metrics that the platform values, such as responsiveness, availability, and completion rates, are tracked on leaderboards and can be compared to other workers or prior individual performance. Ethnographer-cum-driver Susan Mason (2019) describes her personal experience attempting to complete the "Power Driver Bonus (PDB)" ride challenge by Lyft, which required her to complete a specific number of rides. Focused on the game, she "sometimes worked more than 50 h per week trying to secure my PDB, which often meant driving in unsafe conditions, at irregular hours and accepting nearly every ride request, including those that felt potentially dangerous" (p. 9). Loyalty programs such as UberPro, SummitSeeker, and Lyft Rewards illustrate gamification practices by transforming work into a points-based system of progression and rewards, with the rewards (perversely) enabling 'winners' to work more (e.g., free afternoon coffee for drivers).[10] Through mechanisms such as tiered status levels, visible progress markers, and exclusive benefits, the platform mirrors game dynamics of leveling and achievement, thereby sustaining worker engagement and platform-specific loyalty. Moreover, elements of the user interface such as lights, sounds, and images (e.g., the word money in the color green, pleasant chimes each time an order is assigned) create a gamified app experience that is super 'sticky' in that workers return to the app repeatedly fostering a stay-on-call culture (Chen et al., 2018; Sun et al., 2023). This dynamic reflects Vieira's (2023) finding that workers internalize self-exploitation by adopting the platform's entrepreneurial ethos as their own; with gamified incentives leading workers to see overwork and risk-taking as necessary choices.

Second, algorithmically-mediated nudges further this focus on the game. Nudges encourage work at particular times, in specific places, and at certain wages. Beyond this, ranking systems pit workers against one another to obtain tiered status that come with money-boosting rewards such as priority matching at the airport. Several Chinese food delivery platforms link workers' pay with their achievement on various criteria (e.g., number of fulfilled orders, on-time rate, five-star reviews); the higher the rank, the higher the piece rate (Van Doorn & Chen, 2021). As opposed to other forms of workplace games which foster solidarity and group cohesion (e.g., Burawoy, 1979; Sherman, 2007), solitary games can heighten competition between workers further alienating workers (Kost et al., 2020). Thus, workers may experience themselves as opting into the game, but the game can be beguiling.

Implications for skill. Hyper-gamification leads workers to develop a set of skills related to playing and winning the game of the app, rather than developing more generalizable and transferable skills. For instance, when drivers 'study' how surges work (e.g., the time of day they occur) they develop the ability to time work on a particular app rather than a more generalized set of transferable skills. The game of "shuffling" is an example:

> When you get a request at the airport and notice the passenger is at the curb rather than across the street at the ride-hailing staging area, I will wait four minutes then contact the passenger to ask where they are. I'll tell them where to go, but by the point they arrive, I've shuffled the trip and gotten my cancellation fee. (Vasudevan & Chan, 2022, p. 877).

These skills are often platform-specific. In this example, the driver can time where to wait and when to call down to the minute, but it is not obvious how this skill would help on another app that might, for instance, manage cancellation fees differently. Van Doorn and Chen (2021) describe how the games of food delivery apps are distinct, with some being emphasizing more probabilistic reasoning (e.g., like Deal or No Deal) and others emphasizing speed and rhythm (e.g., like Grab-and-Stack). Content creators must discern how the platform's algorithms decide which content to show to their users to increase their chances of going viral and winning the metrics war (Cotter, 2019). Effort must also be put towards staying up to date with one's game playing skills, as platforms often change algorithms and, by extension, the rules

[9] We are drawing on two related concepts that inform people's feelings that work is a game within platform work: organizationally-designed gamification and worker-designed games. Organizationally-designed gamification is when organizational rules and rewards are embedded in the software app's interface to improve workers' affective experiences and to boost productivity (Deterding et al., 2011; Mollick & Rothbard, 2014; Scheiber, 2017; c.f., Schüll, 2014). In contrast, workplace games are organic and bottom-up, resulting from interactions between workers, customers, and the app (Burawoy, 1976; Cameron, 2022; Manriquez, 2019; Vasudevan & Chan, 2022). In both systems workers' rankings, either to themselves or others, determines their status in the game and potential rewards. Both gamification and workplace games produce similar positive emotional states of joy, engrossment, and flow.

[10] The goals of loyalty programs are twofold: to encourage drivers to sign-on and work in the short-term, at peak demand, and long-term retention. Unlike consumer loyalty programs, such as an airline rewards program, loyalty programs affect workers' interactions with the work itself and their economic livelihood. In addition to material discounts, drivers may get additional information that lessens the information asymmetry inherent in platform work (e.g., for ride-hailing this includes the customer's destination and priority matching).

of the game (Irani & Silberman, 2013; Martin et al., 2014; Rahman et al., 2023). Overall, game playing skills are platform specific, and not easily transferable, undercutting the generalizable skill-building that platformspromise.

Implications for time. The neo-normative control of hyper-gamification has implications for workers' time, producing a sense of enchantment with work. A worker's attention becomes focused on playing the game, in part, because it creates a flow state; this pulls a person's time and attention away from other non-platform activities (e.g., a hobby). MTurk workers often think of their work even when formally not working, to the point that family members point out that they are neglecting their household responsibilities (Lehdonvirta, 2018, p. 23; see also Cameron, 2022). Similarly, Vasudevan and Chan (2022, p. 876) described how workers would lose track of time as "drivers sought to conquer the new surge … by playing a game they described as 'Mario Karting,'" or moving between surge zones as quickly as possible to maximize pay. As workers who experience flow may devote more time to work (Cameron, 2024a; Csíkszentmihályi, 2014), this qualitative change of the experience of time (to flow state) contributes to the shift in the allocation of time to work versus alternative activities. While workers are seemingly opting into playing the game, the neo-normative control of gamification ends up intensifying and increasing time worked as individuals are "enchanted" (Endrissat et al., 2015).

Inequality

While maintaining their sense of entrepreneurial independence, the platform paradox creates a series of negative implications for workers' lived experiences of skill and time. In this section, we highlight how this degradation may increase inequality in skill and time.

Implications for skill. The relatively narrow and limited transferability of skill development supported by platform work has direct implications for inequality. On all three platform, suceeding requires learning platform-specific skills, often through forms of unpaid labor. Workers must first devote time to learn platform-specific skills, such as overcoming the 'cold-start' problem to get to begin working on a given platform (Gussek & Wiesche, 2024; Kim & Sawyer, 2023; Rahman, 2024). Learning these skills come at both a time and opportunity cost for workers to develop transferable skills. Skills division has been noted by scholars as a source of stratification, and are often aligned with ethnic and racial boundaries (Vallas, 1990).Platform work can intensify these existing inequalities along lines of migration and citizenship status (Lam & Triandafyllidou, 2024; Van Doorn & Vijay, 2024), socio-economic status (Brawley Newlin, 2024; Schor et al., 2020), and gender (Kim et al., 2025; Tandon & Rathi, 2024; Ticona & Mateescu, 2018). While platform workers perform tasks for those who hire them, their labor simultaneously frees up customers to develop more marketable and career-advancing skills. For example, domestic help hired from a platform provides these higher-income families with more time to devote to work outside the home (Tandon & Rathi, 2024). Similarly, college students hiring platform workers to move furniture between dorms can devote more time to studying for their exams and building career-related skills (Copes, 2025). In each of these cases, the outsourcing of 'lower-skilled' work to platform workers allows the 'higher-skilled' customers to accumulate more resources (e.g., time) to devote to developing their own skills. Taken together, platforms' demands for platform-specific skills can create greater inequality between workers and customers.

Implications for time. The platform paradox not only degrades platform workers' experiences of time, but it also has direct implications for inequality. Specifically, the time cost of platform work is unequal along lines of socio-economic class (Anicich, 2025; Vallas & Schor, 2024; Warren, 2021), race (Dubal, 2022, 2023; Neves et al., 2025), caste (Amrute, 2025; Bhallamudi, 2025), gender (Anjali Anwar et al., 2021; Churchill & Craig, 2019; Cook et al., 2021), immigration status (Maury et al., 2024; Rodríguez-Covarrubias & Álvarez-Figueroa, 2025), citizenship (Rani & Furrer, 2021), ability (Sannon & Cosley, 2022), and other 'ghost variables' (Cameron, 2025a). How these time inequities unfold also depends on how particular social identities intersect with the platform type. Content creators on social media platforms who are members of historically subordinated groups (e.g., deaf community), for instance, may experience an increase in positive affirmation—what has been referred to as "identity baiting" (Ghaedipour, 2022)—such that they become more temporally devoted, absorbed, and enchanted by the work on the platform. As already mentioned, platforms do often improve experiences of time for customers. Customers save time, for instance, by having someone else wait in line for tickets or pick up groceries; this time can then be used by customers for developing more skills (as described above), spending time with family, or resting—activities that might otherwise be less possible for workers themselves, as they face increasing expectations of overwork (Conzon & Mellody, 2025). This is a sleight of hand as the time burden shifts from these (often wealthier) customers to workers, reproducing inequalities along the lines mentioned above. Adding an important cross-national component (Hinds et al., 2011), platform services marketed as 'time-saving' in the Global North are dependent on hidden labor in the Global South (e.g., verifying driver's real-time pictures on a ride-hailing app) (Cameron, 2025b; Gent, 2024; Gray & Suri, 2019; Shestakofsky, 2024b), raising questions about whose time is worth saving. This time burden has implications for worker well being: less job satisfaction (Reynolds & Kincaid, 2025), more work-family conflict (Anderson & Warren, 2011; Warren, 2021), and longer and more intensive hours leading to greater physical and psychological harm (Gray & Suri, 2019; Roberts, 2019; Sun, 2019). Similar to the risk shift from corporations to individuals (Beck, 2009; Hacker, 2008), few of these platforms are saving time for all parties involved, and instead simply transfer the burden of time onto less privileged workers, further reproducing inequality.

In summary, we have identified and described how three neo-normative control mechanisms—self-as-product, whole self integration, and hyper-gamification—maintain the platform paradox: the tension between the worker as an independent entrepreneur who can forge their own path and the often-contradictory realities of workers' lived experiences. For each neo-normative control, we outlined the overarching mechanism, accompanying sociotechnical supports provided uniquely by the platform, and implications for the core worker experiences of skill and time. We completed the section by linking the two dimensions of skill and time to inequalities. In the next section, we provide a future research agenda to extend the research of the platform paradox and platform scholarship at-large.

Directions for future research

It is clear the platform economy is here to stay. In this article, we introduce and develop the concept of the platform paradox. By the platform paradox, we refer to the tension between platforms' portrayal of the self-as-entrepreneur and the often-contradictory realities of workers' lived experiences. The ability to be an independent entrepreneur is a narrative at the heart of American society at-large, and platform capitalism in particular, but extensive research identifies this narrative is far from the lived reality of many, including those who are members of marginalized groups and to whom platform work is often attractive. The platform paradox offers an analytical lens to understand work in the platform economy as self-perputating, foregrounding how workers' conflicting experiences support attachment to platform work.

By introducing and theorizing the platform paradox, including bringing the platform literature into explicit conversation with research on neo-normative control, this manuscript also lays a framework for future research. We go beyond previous theories and examples of how platforms limit what and how workers do to focus on developing an explicit framework on *how* this comes about through a variety of mechanisms that are deeply embedded within contemporary capitalism. Of course, no research is built from scratch; we stand on the shoulders of

scholars who have pointed in this direction, while aiming to add theoretical nuance through delineating core underlying neo-normative mechanisms in a developed framework. In this discussion, we first present future research ideas for more fully exploring the platform paradox and then provide implications of the platform paradox. (See Table 3 for summary of future directions). Then, we offer broader suggestions for platform scholarship and conclude with a cautionary methodological note for platform scholars.

Examining the platform paradox more fully

In this first section, we lay out a research agenda that focuses on furthering our understanding of platform work via unpacking the platform paradox.

Differential experiences of the platform Paradox

We have theorized a relatively uniform experience of the platform paradox, both in terms of workers' individual characteristics as well as the particularities of the platform. At the same time, there are differences between individual workers and labor platforms. Workers vary on several dimensions including motivation (e.g, voluntary or involuntary, Bellesia et al., 2019; Dunn, 2020; Ravenelle, 2019), economic dependence (Cameron et al., 2022; Glavin & Schieman, 2022; Schor et al., 2020), risk profile (Cameron et al., 2021; Ravenelle, 2023; Schor et al., 2023), career history and skill (Cameron et al., 2022; Sutherland et al., 2020; Tirrell, 2023), and social identity (Alacovska et al., 2025; Cameron et al., 2025; Muñoz et al., 2023; Webster & Zhang, 2022). Moreover, workers are differentially embedded within the platform economy, meaning that that their structural position in the broader social order shapes how the platform paradox is experienced (Schor, 2017; Schor et al., 2024). For middle-class earners, platform work often serves as a culturally sanctioned way to supplement income—a 'side hustle' that reinforces rather than undermines their class identity (Hill, 2000). In contrast, those from lower-income backgrounds may experience such work as degrading (Vallas & Schor, 2024). Future research should further examine how differences in axes of inequality shape workers' experiences of and orientations toward the platform economy.

We focused on how the platform paradox was informed by sociotechnical scaffold variation across three platform types (open, closed, and social media). Here, we add to the chorus of scholars (e.g., Ashford et al., 2018; Cameron & Rahman, 2022; Veen et al., 2020) that urge for more studies across different types of platforms. This means moving beyond the most common platform settings (Amazon MTurk, Uber/Lyft, Upwork) as well as conducting more comparative studies. The platform paradox may manifest differently depending on how platforms are configured. Table 1 highlights how platform structure shapes the enactment of neo-normative control mechanisms; future research might extend this comparative lens. One possibility for future research on the platform paradox is to examine more in-depth how its consequences differ across open, closed, and social media platforms. For instance, skill may be developed differently on platforms; on open labor platforms, workers may have an opportunity to develop what one typically considers as specialized skills, such as a new programming language, that are complimentary to their core skills. In contrast, on closed labor market platforms in which workers develop a singular core skill (e.g., driving), workers may develop more orthogonal skills, such as how to connect to and impress customers. Variations within platform types may also change how the platform paradox is enacted. Uber and Amazon Flex—both closed labor markets—structure time differently with Uber assigning tasks on-demand and Amazon Flex assigning tasks within fixed time blocks. Research could explore how these variations change the platform paradox, such that workers' time is experienced differently.

Other dimensions of the platform paradox

In this article, we focused on two dimensions of how the platform paradox is experienced: skill and time. While skill has been central in extant platform research, and time more secondary, both have received attention in extant platform work and thus informed our theory development. However, other dimensions of platform workers' have received less attention and thus are posed as important future directions for scholars to examine in furthering research on the platform paradox. We highlight two specific dimensions for future research: the body and space.

The body. The body has received some, albeit limited, attention in platform studies to date (Bissell, 2022; Schor et al., 2020). However, broader management theorizing makes clear that the body is core in understanding workers' experiences, including that of control (Lawrence et al., 2023; Michel, 2011, 2023). In platform work, people are given choiceover how their body is subjugated—if/when they work, the sort of work they do, and so forth. But in actuality, the sorts of work that are available to platform workers are often types that harm the body. TaskRabbit workers move heavy pieces of furniture while in the confines of customers' homes. Food deliverers on scooters and bicycles risk harm in the midst of everyday traffic, especially in inclement weather. Even online platform work has negative effects on workers' posture, sedentariness, and exhaustion from screens. Neo-normative controls also act through workers' experiences of the body as they perform platform work. One could imagine drawing on Foucault's (1977) theories of embodied controls to examine how the simulations involved in the driving of a car, for instance, become an embodied gamified control in ways that can lead to enjoyment and flow (Cameron, 2022, 2024a,b) and perhaps overwork (Bailyn et al., 2025; Creary & Locke, 2022); future research should look at how platform workers manage boundaries so as to mitigate this negative well-being consequence. As another example, the gendered, racialized, and queered body seems to serve as a primary springboard for the self-as-product normative control, as workers display their bodies to attract customers and followers, such as in the case of beauty influencers and cam girls (Christin & Lu, 2024; Duffy, 2017; Ghaedipour & Conzon, 2025; Wohl and Cameron, 2025). Yet contrary to the rhetoric of fairness and democratization often promoted by digital platforms, these dynamics reproduce racial and other hierarchies (Christin & Lu, 2024; Duffy et al., 2019).

Emotions live in the body and much research has focused on the positive emotions and bodily sensations that may accompany platform work (e.g., flow). However, emerging research has highlighted the emotional toll of platform work, particularly when it involves the commodification of one's identity and private life (Ghaedipour & Karunakaran, 2024; Glavin et al., 2021; Heeris Christensen et al., 2024). Perversely, this very anxiety and fear may also act as a driving force that keeps people engaged in platform work; similar dynamics have been observed in other forms of precarious work (Endrissat & Islam, 2022; Mielly et al., 2023; Petriglieri et al., 2019). Future research can also explore whether greater data transparency from platforms and public awareness of how platforms use workers' attention and bodies might help curb patterns of overwork and exhaustion. As research increasingly highlights the physical and psychological harm caused by digital overwork, the body itself emerges as a key site of exploitation within platform labor.

Space. The spatial dimension is also an important area for future research on the platform paradox. Similar to the body, space has received some, but limited, attention in the platform scholarship (Graham, 2020; Wood et al., 2019b). However, broader management theorizing argues that space matters in understanding core organizational processes as well as workers' experiences (Beyes & Holt, 2020; Faraj & Sayegh, 2025; Lawrence & Dover, 2015; Stephenson et al., 2020). Platform workers might experience themselves as having choice in space when, at the same time, their usage of space is limited. This tension is especially pronounced on platforms, where work is performed in person, for instance, in the ride-hailing industry. Workers seem to exercise choice over when to drive and which rides to accept, yet their movements are often determined by algorithmic nudges that channel

Table 3
Important Research Questions on Platforms as a Guide for Future Research.

Examining the Platform Paradox More Fully
Differential experience of the platform paradox
• How do workers experience and negotiate the 'self-as-entrepreneur' across different platform types?
• How do workers' class positions further entrench them within or distance them from the platform paradox?
Other dimensions of the platform paradox (body and space)
• How does attention to the body extend our understanding of the platform paradox? How do the pressures of the platform paradox for overwork harm the body? What is the role of emotions, both positive and negative, in sustaining the platform paradox?
• How are contradictory experiences of space generated by the platform paradox? How do tensions of visibility, belonging, and safety shape an individual's experience of platform work?
How social structures shapes the platform paradox
• How do narratives from capital-intensive and non-capital-intensive cultures inform the platform paradox?
• What cultural narratives undermine or challenge the platform paradox?
• How does venture capital's imperatives for rapid growth shape the dynamics of the platform paradox? How might non-speculative forms of financing shape and the platform paradox?
How inequality is reproduced by the platform paradox
• How does platform work impact the experiences of the platform paradox for workers of marginalized social identities, roles, and positions? How do theories of intersectionality help us to better understand these experiences?
• How does the platform paradox generate and shape gaps in income, health, and well-being between platform workers and other members in the platform ecosystem (e.g., customers, counterpart W2 employees)?
Additional mechanisms underpinning the platform paradox
• Under what conditions, and with what consequences, might platform workers responsibilization shift from the self to the platform company and/or state?
• To what extent do platforms mitigate, reproduce, or exacerbate social reproduction crises (e.g., housing, healthcare), and how are these impacts distributed across marginalized workers?
• How do workers, customers and other platform users acquiesce to or resist platform decay?
• What insights can we draw from other disciplines to examine the platform paradox?
Charting the Future of Platform Studies
How platform work compares with standard and other forms of contract work
• What are the similarities and differences between platform work and other forms of standard and contract work? How do definitions of a 'good job' versus a 'bad job' differ across traditional, contract, and platform work, particularly in relation to job security, pay, market exposure, tenure, contact with management and other dimensions?
• What are the work trajectories for those in the platform economy long-term? How do platform workers display their skill growth and stretch for new assignments? How do these trajectories relate to and differ from those in other career pathways (e.g., deconstructed jobs, multiple job holders)?
The historical origins and future trajectory of the platform economy
• How do platform organizations compare to other organizational forms? What assumptions are made explicit by these comparsions?
• How do different historical framings highlight various assumptions about the platform economy?
• How might the scaling of platforms affect workers in different regions of the world with varying histories of (neo)colonialism and types of capitalism?
• Are there region-specific policy cures or collective actions that might address the power asymmetries inherent in platform work?
The role of other actors in the platform ecosystem
• How are platform actors outside of the typical triadic exchange (i.e., worker, platform, customer) but that interact with the app reshape power dynamics within the platform ecosystem?
• How do platform actors outside of the platform's labor process enable platforms to operate and expand?

them toward high-demand areas such as airports and concert halls (Wells et al., 2023). Workers' lack of control over the spaces they inhabit can be dangerous. For example, Black workers delivering packages for Amazon Flex have reported harassment, fear, and racial profiling when entering predominantly white neighborhoods (Gurley, 2021; Johnston et al., 2023). These cases raise important questions about how tensions of visibility, belonging, and safety shape workers' experiences of the platform paradox in public and contested spaces. Neo-normative controls also transform how workers perceive space in that spaces that previously were private (e.g., a bedroom, a car) become extensions of the workplace and a site of self-presentation and managerial oversight. Future research can examine how platforms capitalize on spatial dynamics in ways that both reinforce the platform paradox and intersect with social hierarchies. In doing so, scholars can better understand how control over space—and movement through it—has become a defining feature of the platform economy and a key axis of labor inequality.

How social structures shape the platform paradox

Another important area for future research is how social structures shape the platform paradox. Here, we focus on two social structures: cultural narratives and financialization.

Cultural narratives. Culture is a legitimating structure in that it provides shared values, norms, and beliefs that make certain actions, decisions, and institutions seem correct; thus, understanding how it relates to the platform paradox is of utmost importance. As we described, platform companies were incubated against the backdrop of Protestantism-fueled capitalism that has exalted individualism and 'rags-to-riches' narratives that symbolize possibility of social mobility through small business ownership. Another cultural narrative to consider in future research that may contribute to the platform paradox is hustle culture. Hustle culture, or performative busyness, is a set of cultural attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that valorize hard work and endless ambition (Griffith, 2019; McMillan Cottom, 2020; Ulfah & Nurdin, 2022). Popularized through hashtags and memes, this cultural movement draws on Silicon Valley's entrepreneurial ethos celebrating overwork, and has been identified as an underpinning of platform work in particular and the gig economy more generally.[11] Jasmine Hill, (2020, 2025) argues that the term "hustler" operates as a racialized script—one that evokes entrepreneurial skill in response to precarity, marks Black urban survival strategies, and normalizes a labor regime that segregates workers into racialized forms of precarity (cf. Janssens & Zanoni, 2021). Similarly, framing work as a passion (Cech, 2021; Jachimowicz & Weisman, 2022) or valorizing people as heroes (Cameron et al., 2022; Rapp et al., 2024; Rogers et al., 2023; Yang & DiBenigno, 2025) can serve to legitimate more precarious forms of work, especially among workers with marginalized identities. Examining cultural narratives from less capitalist-intensive cultures such as "juche" (North Korean, radical self-reliance), "swadeshi" (India, self-sufficiency on local resources), or "ubuntu" (South African, selfhood realized through community), can provide rich insights on the relationship between national

[11] For more on how the countercultural narratives of 1960s and 1970s, such as the human potential movement and cybernetics, shaped the Silicon Valley cultures of self-optimization, bio-hacking, and techno-optimism and California ideology more broadly see: Barbrook and Cameron (1996), Daub (2020), Neff (2012), and Turner (2011).

culture narratives and the platform paradox.

Relatedly, it is also important to examine cultural movements, such as the contemporary movements of scientific skepticism and post-truth (Anteby & Iannucci, 2025; Huising, 2023; McIntyre, 2018), that may undermine the recognition of the platform paradox. For all their ubiquity and power, the inner workings of platforms and their algorithmic management systems are notoriously opaque (Pasquale et al., 2015; Rahman, 2024; Ziewitz, 2016). Similar to Big Tobacco, Big Oil, and Big Pharma (Michaels, 2008; Oreskes & Conway, 2022; Wailoo, 2021), Big Tech and, specifically, platform companies have been accused of suppressing research, spreading misinformation, and obscuring facts (Berg & Johnston, 2019; Dubal, 2020c; Isaac, 2019; Maffie, 2023b; Reichman, 2020; Rosenblat, 2018). The production of ignorance, agnotology, and the manufacturing of doubt can obscure the recognition of the platform paradox and the binds workers may find themselves in (Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008; Proctor & Schiebinger, 2025). For example, in the recent AB-5/Prop-22 referendums, cultural narratives of freedom and autonomy were mobilized by platform organizations to influence gig workers to vote against being classified as employees and, instead, remain independent contractors, a vote that many concluded was counter to workers' self-interest (Dubal, 2020b, 2022). In another example of workers being mobilized to act against their own interests, Gurley (2020) reported that Instacart shoppers were instructed to place leaflets in customers' shopping bags encouraging the adoptions of Prop-22. This follows from broader research which argues that even when people are presented with disconfirming evidence of an idea it reinforces their belief in the idea, further entrenching misinformation (Marwick, 2018; Weigel & Gitomer, 2024; McLoughlin et al., 2024). Future research should continue to examine how the platform paradox could be alleviated or even flipped to be in the interests of workers through public policy interventions and media campaigns. Ultimately, examining these legitimating cultural narratives reveals how platform labor is sustained not only through economic necessity, but also through deeply embedded ideological narratives that shape the very meaning of work, freedom, and social progress.

Financialization. Similar to cultural movements, financial logics and investment patterns are a legitimating structure that may serve as the basis of the platform paradox and serve as an important area for future research (Bailey & Leonardi, 2015; Rahman & Thelen, 2019; Shestakofsky, 2020, 2024a). A rich tradition of literature has documented how the interests of capital drive the implementation of technologies in corporations, such as eye-trackers and monitoring systems in trucking (Levy, 2024; Viscelli, 2016), algorithmic systems to allocate retail workers to periods of high demand (O'Neil, 2016; Van Oort, 2019), and counters and trackers to increase the efficiency of warehouse workers (Delfanti & Frey, 2021; Ranganathan & Benson, 2020) with the goal of boosting share prices to reward investors. A speculative form of financing, venture capital investors build portfolios of high-risk and potentially high-reward firms, expecting that a small number of 'big hits' will deliver exponential returns and that the remaining firms will fail (Nicholas, 2019). Moreover, the majority (80 %) of investors are men which provides a "male lens" on which ventures are funded that shape the culture, products, and services that are produced by start-ups; for example, femtech products (i.e., products that focus on women's health and wellness needs, such as fertility tracking) typically have a harder time securing funding (Wajcman, 2025).

In an ethnography of a venture capitalist funded tech start-up, Shestakofsky (2017, 2024a) outlines how investors' logic structured managers' and workers' everyday life. Managers had to engage in continual experimentation—often at the expense of deteriorating work conditions for the most expendable part of their workforce—in order to achieve rapid growth at all costs. Other start-ups such as Theranos and WeWork failed, in part, because of the poor managerial decisions driven by investors' pressure and capital to scale quickly (Carreyrou, 2018; Wiedeman, 2020). Future research should investigate how venture capital's imperatives for rapid scaling contribute to the platform paradox, simultaneously creating the conditions for platforms to attract users and investors, while undermining the stability and sustainability of the very systems on which they depend. Changes in financing structures—for instance, privately owned platforms or worker-owned platform cooperatives—may also affect a firm's technology choices and the dynamics of the platform paradox. Such firms face fewer external pressures to maximize profits and may be more likely to innovate in ways that stabilize and increase workers' income (Lingel, 2020; Scholz, 2016; Scholz & Schneider, 2017). These patterns indicate that the platform paradox is inseparable from financial logics, calling for further research on how both dominant and minority financing structures interact with the platform paradox.

How inequality is reproduced by the platform paradox

Inequality is core to platform work. The platform economy is predicated on the idea that there is a servant class—to fetch the groceries, give rides, provide care—to the master class.[12] And among workers themselves, rewards in the platform economy are distributed unevenly: for example, the top 1 % of content creators capture over 80 % of overall revenue (Jin, 2020). These underlying hierarchies spotlight how platforms reproduce and legitimize broader social and economic inequalities. Throughout this review, we have emphasized how the platform paradox is often a generator of negative outcomes for workers who by dint of their labor market position are marginalized. In this section, we elaborate on how future research can analyze the platform paradox through workers' social identities to explain how platforms reproduce existing inequalities.

Workers' marginalized social identities, roles, and positions clearly matter for workers experiences of and outcomes related to platform work. Existing research finds that customer ratings, which impact what tasks workers are matched with and overall earnings, are biased by race and gender (Abraham et al., 2024; Jahanbakhsh et al., 2020; Teng et al., 2023). These findings build on the bulwark of research that has, to this point, emphasized the often poor outcomes for marginalized workers who join the platform economy and the additional labor they must undertake to succeed (Anderson et al., 2021; Auguste et al., 2024; Muñoz et al., 2023). Incorporating such identities further into the platform paradox is essential. An intersectional lens (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Smith et al., 2019) is also warranted, examining not just the experiences of women but also Black or Dalit women, for instance. People of double-marginalized identities report being subject to disparate treatment, such as Black women shoppers being penalized by racially biased reporting (Human Rights Watch, 2025) and Dalit women beauty stylists being required to sanitize themselves or work from balconies or other spaces that segregate them from their clients (Bhallamudi, 2024). Here, considerations of the sort of platform–open, close, social media–and the nature of work tasks also matters, as each platform's particular features may magnify or limit inequalities. In commercializing certain aspects of their social identity (e.g., deafness, body size) content creators may open them up to hate speech and pigeonholing themselves in the market, lowering their earning power (Ghaedipour & Conzon, 2025). Reflecting the precarity that emerges at the nexus of work and citizenship (Anderson, 2010; Goldring & Landolt, 2012), many (student) workers with precarious visa status find themselves relying on delivery work on closed labor platforms to survive, as it requires minimal language skills and limited customer interactions (Goyette, 2024; Maury et al., 2024; Orth, 2024). Platforms seek to extract as much labor as possible from migrants, while migrants try to use platforms to circumvent employment restrictions to survive. Thus, the cycle of exploitation

[12] In many ways, the technical wrapper or condom-like nature of digital platforms, which creates psychological and spatial distance between the worker and customer, helps contribute to its popularity in the U.S., which, because of the historical legacy of slavery, is uncomfortable with the idea of servants and servanthood (Flanagan, 2019; Van Doorn, 2017).

persists, as platform work often attracts individuals from marginalized groups precisely because of the existing inequalities they face in society.

A related question to ask is: How does the platform paradox encourage workers to regulate their own behaviors? For example, platform work promises a particular sort of freedom in the expression of gender, while reproducing traditional gender roles. An example is the immense popularity of #broculture and #tradwife content: influencers are hypothetically able to act out their gender freely via influencing work when they are in fact being entrained by algorithms to curate content that often fits people's pre-existing narrow understandings of gender, reinforcing social inequality (Duffy, 2017; Mattheis, 2021; c.f., Taylor & Tyler, 2000 for a similar example among female call center workers). Clearly, this is deeply tied to the neo-normative controls that craft people's experiences of being independent, free actors while at the same time subjecting them to controls.

Additional mechanisms underpinning the platform paradox

Although research on the platform economy has grown rapidly, much remains unknown. To some extent, such uncertainty reflects the inchoate nature of the phenomenon itself: platforms operate between markets and hierarchy, promising autonomy to the same people they must control. Accordingly, much management and organizations research to date has focused on the technical elements of algorithmic management and the interplay between autonomy and control. In the management literature in particular, platforms have sparked a resurgence of interest in long-standing debates around autonomy, control, and surveillance (Cameron, 2022, 2024a,b; Cameron & Rahman, 2022; Curchod et al., 2020; Chai & Scully, 2019; Gandini, 2019; Rahman, 2021, Rahman et al., 2023). Theories of the sociology of work, especially labor process theory, have been in the spotlight. While highlighting these theories has been tremendously valuable and insightful, their focus on managerial control leaves little room for understanding how culture, identities, or social dynamics shape the execution of work and the platform economy. To spark insights beyond the control debate, in the remainder of the section, we propose three different theories that shed light on the platform paradox.

Responsibilization of self. The responsibilization of the self refers to the neoliberal process by which individuals are made accountable for managing risks and failures that are largely systemic in origin (Foucault, 1977; Fleming, 2017; Neff, 2012; Rose, 2005; Sharone, 2014). Instead of attributing problems like unemployment or insecurity to institutions or the state, people internalize blame and view shortcomings as evidence of personal failure, producing shame, anxiety, and pressure for workers who must undergo constant self-optimization. In Ofer Sharone's (2014) cross-national (U.S. and Israel) comparative study, *Flawed System, Flawed Self,* he finds that U.S. job seekers interpret rejection as evidence of them not working hard enough or presenting themselves well enough to potential employers, leading workers to a constant cycle of self--optimization (see also Griesbach, 2025). It is possible to consider, then, how the platform paradox may be sustained not only by normative controls but also by the responsibilization of workers who are encouraged to view structural barriers as personal shortcomings. This dynamic is particularly evident in the platform economy, where workers are urged to bring their authentic selves to work, making private identities public and rendering success or failure an individual responsibility. Future research could investigate under what conditions might workers' responsibilization shift from the self to the platform or the state. Following Sharone's comparative cross-national approach, studies might explore how workers in societies with stronger traditions of class solidarity or collective organizing construct alternative narratives of accountability and resistance

Social reproduction. Social reproduction theory examines the seemingly non-economic background conditions that enable economic production and indeed all forms of social cooperation—or, in other words, the 'work that makes the worker' (Bhattacharya, 2017; Vogel, 2013). The tendency of capitalism is to treat such background conditions as external to capitalism itself, which provokes periodic social reproduction crises as the drive for unlimited capital accumulation destabilizes the very activities on which capitalism depends (e.g., because workers can no longer afford food or childcare) (Fraser, 2016). These crises disproportionately affect the most marginalized members of the labor force, such as women, immigrants, and persons of color, as they are often at the periphery of the labor market. Part of the platform paradox is a claim by platforms that they solve the crisis of social reproduction by giving workers more control over their schedules, tasks, and earnings (Weigel & Cameron, 2025). In this way, platforms pitch that working for them is compatible with workers' existing identities and responsibilities, such as women who can embrace the traditional gender division of labor when working on shopping platforms (Milkman et al., 2021). Governments may encourage the adoption of platforms in that they purport to solve their issues of un(der)employment, formalize internal work, increase the taxation base, and generally improve the quality of human capital (Surie & Huws, 2023). In this sense, platforms are understood as a "portable infrastructure" for emerging economies (Cameron & Weigel, 2025, pg. 1). What other social reproduction crises (e.g., housing insecurity, healthcare breakdowns, education strains) do platforms purport to solve, and how do platforms deliver or fail to deliver on said promises? Future research should examine the extent to which platforms actually mitigate, reproduce, or exacerbate broader social reproduction crises while interrogating how these dynamics differentially impact marginalized workers.

Platform decay. Platform decay theory, or enshitification, explains why users' experiences on a given platform tend to get worse over time while prices also tend to rise over time. Cory Doctorow (2023) describes the process as: "First, they are good to their users; then they abuse their users to make things better for their business customers; finally, they abuse those business customers to claw back all the value for themselves. Then, they die. (pg. 1)" Platform decay is possible when a platform has a monopoly or near-monopoly status in its sector and its user base becomes accustomed to its services, such as rural Amazon shoppers or commuters who ditch their cars for Lyft. With a captive audience, platforms have the freedom to change the terms and conditions of their agreements—"digital boilerplate creep" (Rahman, 2024)—to secure more value. Moreover, due to platform-specific reputational metrics, workers report being locked into a platform even as service quality degrades (Rahman et al., 2023; Sum et al., 2024; Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2023; Maffie & Hurtado, 2025). Social media platforms are particularly susceptible to platform decay, as anyone who has recently looked at a cluttered Facebook or Instagram feed, stuffed with advertisements and bot-generated content, has experienced. How do workers, customers and other platform users acquiesce to or resist the enshitification of platforms? When might workers (mistakenly) take responsibility for the decay of platforms, and when might they realize it is a feature of the system? Future research should explore the relationship between platform decay and the platform paradox in different platform types. Exploring these topics will offer insights about limits of choice within monopolized digital markets, especially for those who lack viable alternatives outside the platform ecosystem.

Other disciplinary perspectives. These are only a few of the possible additional theoretical explanations for the persistence of the platform paradox. Other theories may provide insights into why the paradox exists in the first place. Research on platform governance suggests that because of insufficient overlap between top-down and bottom-up accountability frameworkers (Rahman et al., 2024) and incentives (Chen et al., 2022), there is an intractable conflict between the platform's objectives and what is in the best interest of workers (Hunt et al., 2025). Thus, explanations for the paradox may not lie in our disciplinary homes, but in the interstices as well as within other disciplines altogether. Fields such as communications, media studies, and computer science—especially the human-computer interactions and computer supported cooperative work subfields—tend to be more 'quick reaction,' as their emphasis on conference proceedings as outlets often produce

timely research that is close to the phenomena at hand. Moreover, because of its novelty, much research on the platform economy tends to rely on qualitative approaches. As the field matures, other methodologies would allow scholars to address more nuanced questions. Experience sampling studies, for instance, would allow for the analysis of how workers' emotions fluctuate while experiencing the paradox. Representative samples and longitudinal surveys would also provide more insights about workers' experiences and their outcomes. Only by broadening our theoretical and methodological toolkit beyond the usual suspects, will scholars capture the complexity of the platform paradox and generate more timely and nuanced explanations for its persistence.

Moving beyond the platform paradox: Charting the future of platform scholarship

Over the past 15 years, scholars have investigated the platform phenomena from various angles: as a business model, infrastructure, organizational form, and management model. Indeed, the platform has been studied across a variety of fields. This includes management and organizations scholarship, such as organizational theory (Curchod et al., 2020; Rahman, 2021; Cameron, 2024a), organizational psychology (Caza et al., 2022; Cropanzano et al., 2023; Wu & Huang, 2024), management and information systems (Cameron et al., 2023; Möhlmann et al., 2023; Sundararajan, 2016), and strategy (Jacobides et al., 2018; Kapoor & Agarwal, 2017; Nagaraj & Piezunka, 2024). It also includes broader social sciences such as sociology (Lei, 2022; Shestakofsky, 2024a; Wood et al., 2019a), economics (Rochet & Tirole, 2003; Evans & Schmalensee, 2005; Tadelis, 2016), political science (Thelen, 2018; Rahman & Thelen, 2019; Culpepper & Thelen, 2020), communications (Duffy, 2017; Boczkowski et al., 2018; Christin & Petre, 2020; Vaccaro et al., 2020), media and culture studies (Nakamura, 2025; Ticona & Mateescu, 2018; Weigel, 2025), geography (Gregory & Maldonado, 2020; Graham, 2020; Wells et al., 2023), and anthropology (Gillespie, 2010; Jensen et al., 2022). And beyond the confines of traditional social socience in more applied disciplines such as labor and industrial relations (Maffie, 2022, 2024; Yao, 2019), human-computer interactions (Lee et al., 2015; Irani & Silberman, 2013; Kameswaran et al., 2018), legal studies (Dubal, 2020b; Calo & Rosenblat, 2017; Racabi, 2021) and medicine (Hermes et al., 2020; Kanter & Gaynor, 2025). Research on platfroms have broadened methodological inquiries (Christin, 2020; Bonini & Gandini, 2020; Nieborg et al., 2020) and opened up new lines of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary thought (Aidinoff et al., 2024; Doctorow, 2023; Poell et al., 2021; Schüßler et al., 2021; Weigel & Cameron, 2025) as well as having important legal and policy implications (e.g., Dubal, 2021, 2023; Cameron, 2024b; Prassl & Risak, 2015). This enthusiastic 'horizontal' study of platforms has sparked the need of more vertical integration, birthing a new inter- and multi-disciplinary SAGE journal, *Platforms and Society*. The journal's mission is "to be a home for a heterogeneous and innovative field of study … intent on fostering critical discourse on platforms and how they could be (imagined) otherwise" (Chen et al., 2024, p. 1). In the spirit of contributing to such a bold vision, in the following section, we offer some general insights for management and organization scholars to consider as scholarship on platforms continues to develop.

How platform work compares with standard and other forms of contract work

As the study of platforms continues to mature, there remains questions about the distinctions between platform work and other forms of work, particularly standard work and contract work (Ashford et al., 2018; Cappelli & Eldor, 2023; Cappelli & Keller, 2013; Spreitzer et al., 2017). Scholarship has variably argued these forms of work are like and unlike platform work, making it challenging to conceptually differentiate between these categories and establish greater coherence. Existing research has focused on the legal classification differences between standard and non-standard (contract) workers (e.g., Cappelli & Eldor, 2023), but it is important to recognize that aspects of a worker's experience can be remarkedly similar. Certain forms of platform work may exhibit features more akin to standard employment, such as reliance on a single organization, ongoing relationships with clients, or regularized patterns of work (e.g., Rahman & Valentine, 2021; c.f., Connelly & Gallagher, 2006). Similarly, some standard work arrangements—such as in retail and manufacturing—share the same poor work conditions with platform work, including irregular schedules, variable income, abusive management, capricious customers, and hazardous environments (e.g., Griesbach, 2025; Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016; Lefcoe et al., 2024). Inversely, as employees take on more temporary assignments within their home organization they can experience flexibility in schedules, routines, connections, and purposeful identity creation, similar to what platform workers experience (Rogiers et al., 2021). And while traditional contractors are supposed to have discretion in their work activities, they are increasingly subject to more intensive managerial control practices such as contracts that specify their duties in-detail, incentive pay and "tattleware software" that monitors their activities (Cappelli & Eldor, 2023), similar to platform workers.

In contrast, there remain important distinctions between the experience of more traditional contract work and contemporary platform work that are often downplayed. While ostensibly contractors are 'self-managed,' research shows that line managers often play an important day-to-day role in contractors' work lives, as they are often physically co-located (Barley & Kunda, 2004; Cappelli & Keller, 2013), in contrast to platform workers who will often never physically meet any manager— algorithmic or human (Glavin et al., 2021; Meijerink et al., 2022). Moreover, contract workers are often embedded in occupational communities (Barley & Kunda, 2004; Osnowitz, 2010), while platform workers typically lack this type of professional support. Building off Kalleberg (2011), a possible future direction of research could distinguish between a "good" and "bad" platform job, examining variables such as skill (specialized versus generalized), pay (amount and variability), market exposure, and involvement of algorithmic management (c.f., Hatton, 2015). Overall, it is necessary to understand the similarities and differences between platform work and these other forms of work to build more robust empirical and theoretical models. Such distinctions would help identify the underlying dimensions when scholars compare the 'old' and 'new' world of work.

There are also important differences in how people construct portfolios across types of work. While work had been organized relatively consistently over the past century, the rise of platform work opens up new avenues to explore how work trajectories are constructed over a person's life course. Traditionally, individuals built careers moving within or across organizations (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Dokko & Jiang, 2024; Hall, 2002), stretching themselves to learn new skills (Evans et al., 2004; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006). Emerging research suggests that platform workers may not be experiencing the same sorts of potential career growth, but are stymied by algorithmic constraints (Duggan et al., 2022) and often continue in lower-paying jobs longer than planned (Ravenelle et al., 2021). Indeed, the promise of boundaryless careers in the platform economy—represented through a lack of formal organizational support, opportunities for work across organizations, and a lack of hierarchical and geographic constraints—is often undermined by the complex controls this form of work brings to bear on workers (Kost et al., 2020). What are the work trajectories for those building a long-term relationship with digital platforms? Some kinds of platform work lend themselves more to the traditional label of self--employment and entrepreneurship, such as a content creator who builds a brand, amasses followers, and offers an array of services. In contrast, a Lyft driver will have limited opportunities to build an upwardly mobile career and earn substantially higher income on the platform. Future research should explore these varying trajectories and how they relate to the platform type. What unanticipated benefits and challenges do platform workers encounter compared to people in other work configurations? More and more individuals are holding multiple jobs (Campion

et al., 2020; Caza et al., 2018; Sessions et al., 2021) and organizations are deconstructing jobs, breaking down formal roles into discrete tasks that are then matched with workers' skills (Collings et al., 2025; Rockmann & Ballinger, 2017; Rogiers & Collings, 2024). How do work trajectories in the platform economy compare to these other ways work is being organized? Given the growth of the platform economy and gig-like jobs in traditional organizations much more research is needed in these areas.

The historical origins and future trajectory of the platform economy

The Akan concept of *sankofa*—that to move forward, one must first understand the past—is a useful lens to understand the platform economy. To grasp the present and anticipate the future of platform work, it is essential to trace its historical roots. Scholars have located the origins of platform labor in pre and early industrial labor practices (Dubal, 2020a; Gray & Suri, 2019; Woodcock & Graham, 2020), early forms of Taylorism (Gandini, 2019; Noponen et al., 2023; Wood et al., 2019a), the sharing economy (Ravenelle, 2019; Schor & Vallas, 2021; Sundararajan, 2016), the logistics and retail revolution (Weigel, 2023; Vallas, 2019), and franchise and multi-level marketing businesses (Cameron & Weigel, 2025; Weigel & Cameron, 2025). In particular, work in multi--level marketing organizations and franchises has its own flavor of neo-normative control in that these jobs are framed as aspirational and entrepreneurial yet distributors are ranked against one another (Bradach, 1997; Pratt, 2000; Weigel & Cameron, 2025). Each of these origin perspectives highlights a distinct dimension of the platform economy while revealing points of continuity and rupture across time and organizational forms. Future research should clarify the baseline assumptions and comparison criteria that guide these theoretical framings. Historical framings may also vary by platform type; social media platforms, for example, have many similarities to legacy media outlets and other media platforms (e.g., Facebook). Ultimately, situating platforms within a longer historical lineage offers a clearer view of how the past continues to structure the present day possibilities of digital labor.

Another important question to grapple with is how platforms are shaping late-stage capitalism. Scholars are divided over whether platforms and the algorithms underpinning them represent a continuation of long-standing changes in work and technology (Ravenelle, 2019; Shestakofsky, 2017, 2024; Jacobs & Karen, 2019) or an inflection point in how work is organized (Aneesh, 2009; Barley, 2020; Cameron, 2024a; Kellogg et al., 2020; Stark & Vanden Broeck, 2024). A third perspective sees platform technologies as transitional—an intermediate step on the path toward total automation (Vertesi et al., 2020; Vertesi & Enriquez, 2025). Others debate the growth and longevity of the platform economy, with some highlighting the expansion of fluid organizational boundaries—what Davis (2016, 2022) terms "Uberization"—across diverse industries (Srnicek, 2017; Stark & Vanden Broeck, 2024), while others contend that the platform economy is a dangerous fantasy that will remain a small part of the overall labor market because it fails to effectively coordinate labor (Azzellini et al., 2022; Cappelli & Eldor, 2021; Fleming et al., 2019; Monteiro & Adler, 2022). While these debates may never—and perhaps should never—be fully resolved, continued engagement will deepen our understanding of how platforms both reflect and reshape the dynamics of late-stage capitalism.

Many clues about what the future of work can be found in the Global South (Ong & Collier, 2008; Connell, 2007; Hinds et al., 2011), in line with the adage often attributed to William Gibson: "The future is already here; it's just not evenly distributed." Although many of the largest platform companies were founded in California, the resulting business models do not always translate smoothly across geographic contexts—particularly in countries with more informal economies and less robust physical and digital infrastructures. Core design assumptions—such as constant internet connectivity, a digitally legible urban landscape, and workers' access to specific technologies (e.g., phones, cars)—often do not hold in these settings, and many of the benefits that platforms promise, such as safer transactions for drivers who no longer need to carry cash, can be untenable in cash-based economies. As a result, we see adaptions in platform operations in the Global South. The overarching question is then: How does the process of geographic scalability intersect with digital scalability? Emerging research has begun to explore how varied forms of capitalism imprint on the organization of labor, capital, supplies, and information communication technologies, creating different organizational forms, or "varieties of Uberization" (Davis & Sinha, 2021, p. 1; see also Cameron, 2025a; Rahman & Thelen, 2019). Research should continue to explore how national contexts and domestic institutions change platform organizations and the experience of platform work. There are other opportunities beyond those we listed above. In more informal economies, for example, platform companies are facilitating workers' access to resources that assist with access to and staying on the platform, such as vehicle financing, payday loans, and instant payouts (Haque et al., 2021; Cameron, 2025a; Posada, 2024; Manriquez, 2025). These adaptions may foreshadow developments in the Global North, such as new financing and leasing arrangements such as Uber's relationship with Tesla in the U.S. These developments raise critical questions about how such arrangements affect organizational control, worker autonomy, and the broader labor process. Scholars should also examine whether region-specific policies or collective actions can address emerging power asymmetries. To advance this agenda, researchers can draw on multi-sourced, longitudinal data—including archival materials, long-term surveys, and representative national samples—to better trace historical shifts and assess the evolving trajectory of platforms and their effects within the broader political economy, both in the U.S. and globally.

The role of other actors in the platform economy

Prior research has mainly described platform work as a triadic exchange between the platform, customers, and workers (Cameron, 2024a; Maffie, 2022; Schüßler et al., 2021). Workers' relationships with customers are extremely important on open labor and social media platforms, as these relationships tend to be more involved, personal and of a longer duration than on closed labor platforms (e.g., Birced, 2025; Rahman & Valentine, 2021). Emerging research has begun to explore the contradictory role of consumers, showing how customers can serve as resources for workers—forming alliances to improve working conditions (Goods et al., 2023; Cameron et al., 2025; Healy et al., 2020; Healy & Pekarek, 2024)—while also constraining regulatory interventions as their dependence on platform's low-cost services grows (Cameron & Mayberry, 2024; Culpepper & Thelen, 2020; Thelen, 2018). Future research should continue to explore how evolving worker–customer dynamics reshape control, accountability, and solidarity both on platforms and in the broader regulatory environment. Scholars should also explore how these dynamics vary across different types of platforms as each has a unique worker-customer dynamic.

Emerging research emphasizes that platform work is more multisided than previously considered, with platforms coordinating actions between many other actors including merchants, fleet providers, and retail store employees (Rahman et al., 2024; Cameron, 2025b). Store employees surveil Instacart and other platform shoppers, reporting to platform companies any behaviors they deem problematic, which in turn affects workers' standing on the platform (Maffie, 2024). Restaurants and retail stores become economically dependent on platformsas their orders make up a larger portion of their revenue, locking them on the platform even as demands on their staff grow and their margins shrink (Cameron et al., 2025). Similarly, leasing agencies that rent cars to ride-hailing drivers are dependent on platform companies offering fares to drivers at high enough rates that they can repay their loans (Prinsloo, 2025). There are also additional actors involved in platform work who are not engaged on the app but are still instrumental in the functioning, repair, and maintenance of platform work. These people work behind the scenes to sustain the functioning of platforms, such as moderators who review the language of content creators (Gillespie, 2019), software programmers who build apps that help workers snag

lucrative tasks (Posada, 2022), or housekeepers cleaning short-term rentals (Goyette, 2024). How are these 'outside' actors woven into the labor process, and by what means is control garnered and autonomy granted (Conzon & Zantye, In Press)? And how do they enable platforms to geographically scale? Future studies should continue to theorize platforms as dynamic, multi-sided systems, exploring how interactions among diverse actors—workers, consumers, merchants, intermediaries and so forth—collectively reconfigure the organization of work and reshape power dynamics.

Practical Implications: Breaking the Platform Paradox

As debates about automation, AI, and digital labor accelerate, the stakes for the future of work have never been higher. Diane Bailey (2022) urges us "[t]o remind ourselves that technology will not dictate the future of work and society unless we choose to let it do so (p. 528)." Bailey's reminder foregrounds a crucial insight: the future of platform work is not technologically predetermined but socially and politically constructed. Accordingly, in this section we identify some promising avenues for how to break the platform paradox, both conceptually and practically.

There are deep asymmetries in the knowledge production of platforms, which has, to date, privileged the experiences, voices, and epistemologies of scholars located in North America and Western Europe who often are studying in their own backyards. An aim of this article is to improve epistemic justice, that is, the fairness and equity in how knowledge is produced, shared, and valued (Fricker, 2007; Kotsonis, 2023), which entails, importantly, including marginalized voices within the platform economy. In doing so, this article makes not only theoretical contributions, but also raises core practical implications related to an important question: how can workers escape the platform paradox? We propose several ways forward for both workers and institutional actors (e.g., government, academia) which might help workers break the platform paradox.

First, the implementation of technologies that are financed by actors beyond platform companies themselves may serve as a welcome intervention. Tools mandated by the government or other regulatory bodies that allow workers to more accurately track their hours could help them understand their real-time commitment and hourly wages. Technical changes that challenge the status quo and increase transparency, such as hacker apps, red-teaming (i.e., hacking), and other forms of design activism can reduce information asymmetry and help workers secure more profitable gigs (e.g., Dalal et al., 2023; Harrington et al., 2024). Academic–worker partnerships such as Fairwork and the Worker Observatory document and evaluate working conditions in the platform economy, advocating for improved labor standards while generating data that foregrounds workers' experiences and informs policy debates. Any intervention must be complex, multi-pronged, and attuned to contingencies in the platform economy. For instance, one seemingly straightforward possible mandate could be a minimum amount of earnings based on how long a worker is online; however, because individuals can work on multiple apps, it would be necessary to be able to measure workers' effort across apps. In markets in which there are super-apps (e.g., Gojek in Southeast Asia), the consolidator application could be responsible for inputting this information, while in other cases workers could track their activities on a third-party app such as Gridwise or Everlance.

Second, alternative models of worker ownership and collective action have attempted to combat platform workers' precarity (Benkler, 2016; Schneider, 2018; Scholz, 2016, 2023). Most mainstream unions remain constrained by hierarchical models that struggle to engage fragmented, app-based workforces that are classified as independent contractors (Bertolini & Dukes, 2021; Però, 2020). However, some grassroots efforts have been successful in organizing platform workers, emphasizing collective decision-making, mobilization, and representation. Stocksy United, a platform cooperative, created better economic conditions for its photographer members (Sulakshana et al., 2018) and Drivers Cooperative, a ride-hailing collective, formed a national coalition that enabled shared profits, collective decision-making, and advocated for regulatory changes (Davis, 2024). Platform workers have yielded significant market power by withholding or switching their labor to another platform (Maffie, 2023a; Mayberry et al., 2024; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020), or by experimenting with new forms of collective representation (Cini & Goldmann, 2021; Vandaele, 2018). Recent developments such as California's 2025 decision granting Uber and Lyft drivers collective bargaining rights suggest new possibilities for collective action, although platform resistance remain strong (Katzenberger, 2025). Scholars interested in worker-led movements should also pay attention to organizing in the Global South, particularly India and Brazil, where collective organizing and mutual aid groups have already challenged platform power and garnered better working conditions (e.g., Chintala, 2023; Grohmann, 2021; Lei, 2021). In more informal forms of collective organizing, delivery drivers in Indonesia and Mexico gather at roadside rest stops and informal waiting areas to share information, repair bikes and phones, and strategize about how to navigate the algorithmic management system (Qadri, 2020: Manriquez, 2019; Qadri & D'Ignazio, 2022). While these solutions might not fully address the inherent power and asymmetry inherent in platform worke, scholars should stay attuned to these movements towards greater worker power and how they differ and coincide with traditional union arrangements.

Third, stronger regulatory frameworks—whether through policy or public investment—could provide more stable, equitable foundations for platform work in cities (Short et al., 2022). Due to policy and legal reforms in many European countries, platform workers are being classified as employees which entitles them to stronger labor protections, due process safeguards, and more insight into algorithmic management systems (Aloisi & De Stefano, 2024; Countouris & De Stefano, 2025; Haeck, 2024).[13] Stronger protections for whistleblowers—like anti-retaliation laws, more channels for anonymous reporting, and independent oversight boards over platform companies—could help encourage reporting and protect workers, as whistleblowers alert the public and workers to changes in the app that may disadvantage workers. Notably, in 2022, a whistleblower revealed that Uber had lobbied governments, exploited regulatory loopholes, and neglected safety concerns from drivers (Lewis et al., 2022; Cattel, 2025). Independent agencies or publicly funded watchdog bodies can also provide more comprehensive support services for whistleblowers including legal counsel, psychological assistance, and safety protections. Particularly given the ongoing consolidation of platform power, future research should continue to pay attention to how collective strategies, changing regulatory frameworks, and government interventions may address the inherent power asymmetry.

All this must be paired with greater oversight as platform organizations often comply with the letter, but not the spirit, of laws and regulations. Without such oversight, regulations may falter. For instance, in response to minimum wage regulations passed in New York City, ride-hailing companies began blocking workers from logging onto the app

[13] While efforts to classify platform workers as employees in the U.S. have mostly stalled, there have been some improvements in labor conditions, such as minimum pay rates in Seattle, New York City, and other cities (Office of the Mayor of New York City, 2025; Seattle Office of Labor Standards, 2025). Dubal, (2022, 2023), notes the creation of a third category of workers systematically disadvantages people of color in a 21st-century version of 'racial codes.' This argument refers to specific exclusions set forth by the National Industrial Recovery Act and its successor, the Fair Labor Standards Act, in the 1930s and 1940s. These legal carve outs mostly affected formerly enslaved Africans, who worked primarily in agriculture and domestic service. By omitting these workers from NIRA/FLSA, U.S. labor law institutionalized a two-tier wage system that was racially stratified—a racial wage code.

which meant they could not earn the guaranteed wage (Fadulu, 2024). Stronger regulations that not only specify wages but also address conditions around logging on and off the app and a dynamic lawmaking approach that can respond to these and other platform workarounds would better address these issues.

A Methodological Caution for Platform Scholars: Recognizing the Complexity of the Platform Paradox

Cultural narratives and advertisements supporting the platform paradox may not only influence workers but also scholars. First, some researchers may interpret the platform economy as an extension of the sharing economy, which promises to promote resource-sharing and reduce consumption (Botsman, 2013; Schor & Vallas, 2021; Schor, 2020), and in doing so may miss the more nuanced elements of digital mediation and algorithmic management and control. As already described, platform organizations deploy powerful cultural narratives that are meant to draw in users and manufacture doubts about any counter-platform claims (e.g., Zanoni, 2019). And even those who are critical of the platform's messaging have a (perverse) investment in the power of the object, because of the need for the object they are critiquing to be both important and powerful. Second, from our position as academics, we may miss the complexity of the platform paradox. Similar to the tension often present in community–university partnerships (Sum et al., 2025), academics, and their social circle, tend to occupy more privileged economic and demographic backgrounds than platform workers. Indeed, one of the appeals of platform work is that entry does not require elite credentials such as university education for entry or success. So the people most likely to partcipate in platform work are unlikely to show up in our classroom, live in our neighborhoods, or knock on our research door, making it more challenging to study this line of work. In an insightful essay, Hwang and Phillips (2024) note a similar phenomenon in the management's field pre-occupation with 'elite' entrepreneurship; in that partly because of scholars' class position they miss 'non-elite' entrepreneurship which composes more than the majority of entrepreneurial activity.[14] And even when we do interact with platform workers, we must be careful as scholars to impugn our own moral judgements and biases onto others' experiences. Third, as time-poor consumers, scholars, alongside much of the middle class, are invested in the continuance of the platform economy. How many late-night deadlines have been supplemented by a meal delivered by DoorDash? Or a rush to a conference presentation by Uber? Or a last minute babysitter found on Care.com? Given the time and economic pressures of modern life and the increasing pressures on the middle class—the group most likely to be customers —suggests that this group of actors will be vested in low-cost services and the longevity of the platform economy. Platform companies are well-aware of the time and economic pressure placed on citizens today and, hence, have often lobbied for governance by public referendums because of (the assumed) tacit allegiance from customers who rely on their services (Culpepper & Thelen, 2020). Given these concerns, it is important to maintain sustained and deliberate attention to our social positions as academics while conducting our research. Overall, studying the platform paradox, digital platforms, and its algorithmic management systems requires researchers to stay close to platform workers and associated data and remain actively engaged in data collection and analysis rather than outsourcing it elsewhere (Kulkarni et al., 2024; Bechky & Davis, 2024).

[14] In a related phenomenon, platform companies tout that the majority of individuals signed up on the app work minimal hours and see this work as a peripheral 'side gig' or hustle, reinforcing the perception that these workers are part-time and peripheral. However, most of the tasks completed on platforms are often done by a minority of individuals who are economically dependent on the work and/or work full-time equivalency or more (e.g., Pareto's principle, Koch, 1999; Anderson et al., 2021; Cameron, 2024b).

Conclusion

Platform work is rapidly becoming a pillar of contemporary life, fundamentally changing the socioeconomic landscape of our modern economy. The platform paradox is a representation of this change, illustrating workers' contradictory experiences of autonomy and control. Through neo-normative mechanisms that frame the self-as-product, integrate personal identity with work, and gamify work, platforms transform entrepreneurial aspiration into a mode of self-governance. Ultimately, the platform economy endures because the ideals that attract workers—autonomy, flexibility, and authenticity—are transformed into subtle instruments of control making empowerment and exploitation two sides of the same coin. As the platform economy continues to grow and mature, its significance demands that we, as scholars, continue to address this critical phenomenon alongside its intended and unintended consequences.

During the preparation of this work the authors used ChatGPT to strengthen the logic and smooth the writing of certain sections. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and we take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Laura Lam: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Vanessa M. Conzon:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Cameron Lindsey Denise:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supporting information

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Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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