

Beyond a Single Gig Class: How Material Dependence and Relational Power Shape Platform Workers' Politico-Economic Orientations

Yingqi Zhao

RCF Experimental School, Beijing, China
zhaoyingqi@rdfzcygj.cn

Abstract. Digital labour platforms have been commonly described as giving rise to a uniform class of precarious workers. However, there are significant differences between part-time freelancing online and earning one's living from debt-funded food deliveries on the one hand and the workers' dependence on platform income, ability to save, skills, access to other employment opportunities and influence over the working conditions on the other. This structured integrative review draws on 15 peer-reviewed articles from 2016 to 2026 to explore how the class position of platform workers relates to their politico-economic orientations and predisposition to action. Class position in the present study is conceptualised in two dimensions: the first concerns the material resources available to the worker (income and savings and thus his/her ability to sustain income losses and leave the platform), while the second refers to relational power (ability to influence prices, task assignments, data management, ratings and dispute resolution). High dependence coupled with low relational power makes platform workers particularly exposed to procedural injustice and may lead to more social protection orientation. Welfare preferences depend on skills, having the main job at the platform and the characteristics of national institutions. Workers might distrust the platform due to its algorithmic decisions, but not because of governmental institutions and regulators. Lastly, grievance does not necessarily entail collective action; mobilization hinges on the workers' communication networks, attributions, organizational assistance and acceptable levels of risk of income losses and deactivation.

Keywords: Platform work, Class position, Algorithmic management, Institutional trust, Collective action

1. Introduction

Digital labour platforms have reshaped the process of finding, allocating, controlling and remunerating employment opportunities. Ride-sharing, food delivery, home services and online freelance tasks share digital interfaces, but not necessarily the social locations of those doing the work. A software developer who uses the platform to occasionally find foreign customers has savings, a profession, an identity and multiple exit options. A courier who depends on a single app,

leases a car, has no social security coverage and lives paycheck-to-paycheck, could be in quite a different position. Hence, treating these people as part of the same "gig class" hides the very inequalities within platform-based employment.

The previous research has demonstrated that digital platforms are not neutral market intermediaries but rather organize transactions, establish rules and utilize ratings, data, and algorithmization to shape labour [1]. The studies of Uber drivers, online freelancers, and food delivery couriers have shown that formal flexibility does not mean control over prices, information and discipline [2, 3]. Algorithmic management can replace managerial intervention in terms of direction, evaluation, and punishment, transferring management from the individual to the system which cannot be examined or challenged [4]. Nevertheless, this situation is not the same for everyone. Economic dependency is a significant source of vulnerability, but those with additional sources of income or capital can utilize the same platforms in a selective manner [5].

The second body of literature focuses on political and collective actions of platform workers. According to recent surveys, platform workers are more likely to advocate an extended social safety net compared to regular workers, yet their preferences vary based on skills, primary type of employment, and welfare state [6, 7]. Ethnographic studies demonstrate that couriers and remote workers engage in various types of resistance, including strikes [8-10]. Yet, such observations are rarely associated with class-specific analysis where precariousness is considered a common characteristic and forms of exit, voice and mobilization are largely ignored.

Three questions are raised by this paper. The first one concerns the way class position among platform workers can be defined apart from income. The second question asks through which channels class position influences perception of fairness of the platform, preferences for social policies and institutional trust. The third one concerns the situation when dependence leads to collectivism and resistance. This paper proposes to understand class position in terms of resource-relational power combination. These aspects affect workers' risk exposure, fairness perceptions, and capacity for action. These elements do not predestine workers' attitudes because platform, skill, welfare state, and identity are other important boundaries.

2. Review design and analytical framework

The literature review of this paper employs a structured integrative approach rather than a statistical meta-analysis or a systematic review. Searches targeting key themes on Google Scholar and in publisher databases utilized phrases such as platform work, gig work, economic dependence, algorithmic management, fairness, trust, welfare preferences, solidarity and collective action. Citation backward tracing was employed to identify key sources. The core group consists of 15 peer-reviewed English publications published between 2016 and 2026, including comparative surveys, ethnographic research, interviews and literature reviews. These include only those sources that have direct relation to the topic of resources, control relationships, and behaviors or attitudes of platform workers.

Synthesis is done in two dimensions of class position. Material resources comprise platform income share, income stability, household income, savings, debts, assets, insurance and alternative employment. These determine whether the employee can withstand interruptions and distractions from the platform. The concept of relational power encompasses the ability to set prices, accept tasks, rate others, have control over data, deactivating and dispute resolution powers, as well as marketplace and associational power. In addition, for each article country, platform type, full-time or side job, research methodology, workers' networks and the limitations admitted by the authors were recorded. Finally, mechanisms connecting the variables to platform justice, social policy

preferences, platform trust, political institutional trust and collective action are reviewed. Differences in the results obtained were retained without being averaged due to differences resulting from the platform architecture, the structure of welfare institutions, workers' occupational skills and organizational capabilities. Due to the fact that much of the literature is cross-sectional or qualitative, mechanisms and boundary conditions are offered. The selected literature is sufficiently heterogeneous to make a comparative analysis but not representative of all platform industries or regimes.

3. Class stratification within platform work

3.1. Platform-work heterogeneity

Platform work differs according to location, skill and employment function. Location-dependent workers have to do rides, deliveries and caregiving in particular locations, while remote workers can sell services around the world. While some workers undertake standardized micro-tasks, others engage in negotiating complicated projects. This is important because rare skills and direct client relations can give bargaining power to those lacking in workers whose tasks are easily substitutable. Wood et al. argue that the remote freelancers saw the necessity of flexibility and autonomy in choosing tasks, along with oversupply, unpredictable schedules, and algorithmic regulation [3]. In turn, Anwar and Graham show that for African digital laborers, there was a possibility of combining income sources and exposure to international competition [11].

The question of whether a worker has main job or side gig is equally significant. As shown by Schor et al., the dependency, and not platform affiliation itself, determines precariousness [5]. Workers who can afford themselves alternatives to platforms can refuse from unsatisfactory tasks or leave the platform, while dependent workers feel the platform regulations much more strongly. One must also comprehend assets from a complex point of view. Even though owning a car may appear like another asset, being in debt of the equipment leaves one even more reliant on the daily earnings. Class position of the laborers is hence dynamic and household-based.

3.2. Material resources and relational power

The cost of resistance is measured in terms of material resources. Savings, insurance, and alternative employment act as protection from weak demand, sickness, or deactivation. Absent this protection, flexibility appears as a restriction on choices. However, material resources by themselves do not show who controls the work. Information asymmetry is the means that allowed the platform to dictate the price and control the drivers, portraying them as self-employed individuals. In online markets, information asymmetry was identified by Curchod et al. as the method through which platforms' policies and ratings can control the sellers despite their tactical abilities [12]. This is one reason why relational power becomes a critical concept here. The platforms control pay, visibility, customers, and appeals. Algorithms intensify control by directing and assessing labour at all times [4]. In Chinese food delivery, Huang describes a digital managerial ecosystem where algorithms organize labour and delegate some aspects of supervisory control to customers, restaurants, and intermediaries [13]. But relational power of workers grows with rare skills, ability to jump to another platform, direct customer ties, or organization through physical and digital communities.

The following is a heuristic typology. Buffered supplementers are those who have other sources of income besides the one obtained from platform work and incur minimal exit costs. Therefore, they will be able to work on the platforms in a selective manner but will cease to be interested in

collective defense. Resourceful independents possess material advantages and have some power in the market but are limited by the costs that come with the fee and rankings on the platform. Asset-tied dependents possess equipment that is either bought or leased but must continue earning income. In this situation, it becomes just as difficult for that person to say no and plan ahead. The groups that have been highlighted here are not fixed. One can change their group depending on unemployment, debts, illness, policy changes or even changes in the design of the platform. These are not related to what occupation people are pursuing since two couriers working on the same platform will fall into two different groups depending on whether or not they have family backing or have a car loan.

4. How class position shapes politico-economic orientations

4.1. Distributional justice and welfare preferences

Justice in terms of distribution must be differentiated between platform and societal level. On one side, there is a question of whether pay, assignments, ratings, deactivations, and appeals are just. On the other, there is a question of whether the state should provide additional protection such as unemployment benefits, education, insurance, and money transfers. Opaque control links the two issues, but it is neither an argument nor a specific political stance. Workers who have high dependence and low relational power are continually subjected to decisions that cannot be checked or appealed. Information asymmetries can create perceptions of arbitrariness of variable pricing and automated evaluation makes the source of adverse decision-making less clear [2, 4]. Such experiences can undermine purely meritocratic explanations of income distribution and lead to higher demand for collective protection. The most solid evidence of this kind comes from recent surveys. Chueri and Busemeyer show that platform workers across OECD countries exhibit greater support for compensatory and social investment labour-market policies than regular workers, with generosity of the welfare state moderating the effect [7]. Bae and Haselswerdt similarly report greater support among US gig workers for expanding safety-net programs, with workers doing their main job being particularly deprived of benefits from employment-based coverage [6].

However, it needs to be acknowledged that preferences of the platform economy in terms of redistribution do not become homogenous. Side-giggers can be insured somewhere else or have money in their families. It allows to offset risks associated with income data. The high-skill freelance workers can care more about training, mobility and autonomy rather than unemployment insurance. In addition to that, there are workers who call themselves entrepreneurs and consider the forced contribution to be an interference in their flexibility and net pay. Furthermore, it is possible to talk about self-selection when it comes to preferences: the people who are interested in independence will work for the platform economy and encounter algorithm before it. Hence, the evidence shows that there is a conditional trend: dependence and exclusion may contribute to preferences of protection, but welfare, income, skill, occupation and beliefs can impact the policy preference of workers. It is important to note that "pro-worker" policy can create divisions among workers through income protection and schedule freedom restrictions.

4.2. Trust in platforms, regulators and government

The trust factor must also be disaggregated into different types. Platform trust involves trust in the predictability and explainability of the rules and algorithms. Institutional political trust includes competence and fairness of the governments and regulators. Workers might mistrust the platform but be willing to allow governments and regulators to interfere with the workings of the platform or

mistrust both because of the inability of the governments and regulators to enforce their rulings effectively.

A number of scholarly articles have explored the measurement of platform trust. Mustafa and Mansour, using a survey and interview data collected from four countries, report a high correlation between algorithm transparency and predictability and workers' trust and willingness to work through the platforms, whereas compensation uncertainty reduces trust [14]. These results support the findings of Curchod et al. and Huang in terms of rising power asymmetries arising from limited access to appeal process and vague penalties. Even though dependence on resources makes exiting more costly and decreases the likelihood of distrust, it is not always associated with lower levels of trust in a stable and fair governance environment [12, 13].

There is less evidence for the link between platform social class and institutional trust. The welfare-preference literature proves that workers of platforms are ready to make demands to the state, but support for intervention is not the same thing as trust in the institutions. Indeed, workers may demand more intervention precisely because the current enforcement is not seen as effective. However, on the other hand, the successful provision of portable benefits or an easily-accessible appeals system can lead to favorable policy feedbacks regardless of the improvement in platform trust. This all implies that according to what has been found by the previous researches, the following hypothesis can be cautiously stated: bad experience of the platform users may increase their expectations towards the regulators; however, whether their expectations turn into either trust in institutions or political cynicism will depend on accessibility of the policy and the users' initial political predispositions. The crucial part here is not to combine trust in the platform, regulators, and government in one scale.

4.3. Collective-action orientations

Dependence on economic ties creates a paradox of mobilisation. Weak control and unpredictable payments cause dissatisfaction, but they also raise the stakes for deactivation. Risks of deactivation, dispersed sites of work and limited time available make it impossible to mobilise people despite their dissatisfaction. Collective action therefore needs a collective understanding of injustice as well as sufficient resources for coordinating action.

Architecture of the platform plays an essential role in the formation of the conditions. According to Lei, Chinese food-delivery platforms varied in the combination of their technological, legal and organisational controls [8]. While one configuration suppressed the grievances of workers and fragmented them, another configuration both increased exploitation and provided spaces to identify problems and organize actions. Likewise, Liu and Friedman present less conspicuous examples of organization in China's delivery sector and prove that resistance may occur below the level of trade unions and open strikes [15].

The evidence in favor of the importance of social infrastructure is also available. In the opinion of Tassinari and Maccarrone, couriers in Italy and the UK have built up solidarity through worker practices, meeting places, and organizational networks even in spite of individual contracts [9]. As regards the example of remote freelancers, Wood and Lehdonvirta suggest the term "subordinated agency" [10]. Although workers may retain an entrepreneurial relationship with the client, they will be able to make joint claims to the platform about its fees and competition. Thus, the status of self-employed person does not preclude conflict.

The class position defines both the level of grievances and of action potential. Buffered workers are safe to de-activate and may have fewer motivations for doing so. The level of dependence may lead to higher feelings of injustice but fear to lose income immediately. Mobilisation is most

probable in case when there is a shared attribution of grievances to platform's policies, possibility of communication, resources provided by organizers or trade unions and reduced risks of retaliation. Action therefore should include not only protests but also petitions, coordinated log-offs, switching of the platform, online mutual help and rule avoidance.

5. Discussions

The review reveals three main conclusions. Firstly, the platform work is not the class position itself. Economic resources determine the extent of economic dependence, while relational power shows whether workers can influence or leave the platform work rules. The former or the latter alone is insufficient. There can be a courier with a car but still debt-dependent and skilled freelancer who earns irregularly but has alternative options of clients and platforms.

Secondly, the politico-economic orientations result from multiple mechanisms. While the existence of platform's injustice might foster pro-social protection sentiments, the transformation is not automatic. The position of the main job, skills, existing benefits, national welfare systems affect the type of workers' demands. Similarly, platform's distrust cannot be used as an indication of distrust in the political institutions. Limited evidence about the government's trust is an essential finding.

Thirdly, grievance is not the same thing as capability. Algorithmic control makes people dissatisfied, but it also makes them more likely to take action. Communication channels, shared attributions, organizational resources, and architecture play an important role in translating dissatisfactions into solidarities. This is why those who have the greatest risk economically are not always those who are most visible. The link can be curvilinear. Although some insulation is normally necessary to cover the costs of activism, too much insulation takes away the motivation. Hence, the theoretical contribution of the paper lies in bridging the theory of stratification in platform work with political behavior literature on the basis of two-dimensional notion of class position. In addition, the class position in question is treated as changeable, not fixed one. The practical contribution of the framework is in differentiated policy: dependent workers need social protections and appeals; asset-based workers need protections from debt and costs; skilled independents need data portability and fair fees; and everyone needs transparency, access to data, and channels for collective expression.

6. Conclusions

The central question posed by this review concerned how the class position of platform workers could be defined and how it is associated with politico-economic orientations and collective action. The literature reviewed implies that class position can be defined as a combination of material resources and relational power. On the one hand, material resources determine the possibility of coping with income disruptions and leaving the platform; on the other hand, relational power determines the influence on prices, distribution, information and conflict resolution. Thus, these two parameters indicate the extent to which workers are vulnerable to coercion and can counter it.

Dependent workers with insufficient material resources experience higher coercion by algorithms and need social protection. However, platform workers' preferences are different due to varying levels of skills and job types. While skilled, side-job or buffered workers need to consider investments, portability or freedom of choice, dependent workers should care about compensation and insurance. In addition, platform trust and governmental trust develop along different paths: even taking into account that opacity in the management system has negative effect on the former, there

are no grounds for saying that it is harmful to the latter. Collective action requires some prerequisites: it will take place only in case of collective communication and shared problem framing.

It is worth mentioning that this systematic review is limited by the usage of English literature and small sample size. Future research may benefit from incorporating cross-national panels, distinguishing between primary and secondary employment, analyzing trust in platform versus government separately, and employing natural experiments through alterations to algorithms and regulations. Also, it would be interesting to explore class position as related to gender, migration status, indebtedness, and family responsibility.

References

- [1] Vallas, S. P., & Schor, J. B. (2020). What do platforms do? Understanding the gig economy. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 46, 273–294. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-121919-054857>
- [2] Rosenblat, A., & Stark, L. (2016). Algorithmic labor and information asymmetries: A case study of Uber’s drivers. *International Journal of Communication*, 10, 3758–3784.
- [3] Wood, A. J., Graham, M., Lehdonvirta, V., & Hjorth, I. (2019). Good gig, bad gig: Autonomy and algorithmic control in the global gig economy. *Work, Employment and Society*, 33(1), 56–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017018785616>
- [4] Kellogg, K. C., Valentine, M. A., & Christin, A. (2020). Algorithms at work: The new contested terrain of control. *Academy of Management Annals*, 14(1), 366–410. <https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2018.0174>
- [5] Schor, J. B., Attwood-Charles, W., Cansoy, M., Ladegaard, I., & Wengronowitz, R. (2020). Dependence and precarity in the platform economy. *Theory and Society*, 49(5–6), 833–861. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-020-09408-y>
- [6] Bae, J., & Haselswerdt, J. (2025). The safety net and the gig economy: Policy attitudes and political participation. *Perspectives on Politics*, 1–20. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592725103411>
- [7] Chueri, J., & Busemeyer, M. R. (2025). Different status, same demands? The social policy preferences of platform workers in OECD countries. *Competition & Change*, Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10245294251318440>
- [8] Lei, Y.-W. (2021). Delivering solidarity: Platform architecture and collective contention in China’s platform economy. *American Sociological Review*, 86(2), 279–309. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122420979980>
- [9] Tassinari, A., & Maccarrone, V. (2020). Riders on the storm: Workplace solidarity among gig economy couriers in Italy and the UK. *Work, Employment and Society*, 34(1), 35–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017019862954>
- [10] Wood, A. J., & Lehdonvirta, V. (2021). Antagonism beyond employment: How the “subordinated agency” of labour platforms generates conflict in the remote gig economy. *Socio-Economic Review*, 19(4), 1369–1396. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwab016>
- [11] Anwar, M. A., & Graham, M. (2021). Between a rock and a hard place: Freedom, flexibility, precarity and vulnerability in the gig economy in Africa. *Competition & Change*, 25(2), 237–258. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1024529420914473>
- [12] Curchod, C., Patriotta, G., Cohen, L., & Neysen, N. (2020). Working for an algorithm: Power asymmetries and agency in online work settings. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 65(3), 644–676. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839219867024>
- [13] Huang, H. (2023). Algorithmic management in food-delivery platform economy in China. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 38(2), 185–205. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ntwe.12228>
- [14] Mustafa, S., & Mansour, S. (2026). Algorithmic management practices, trust, and gig-worker continuance: A mixed-methods study of platform work. *Technology in Society*, 87, 103394. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2026.103394>
- [15] Liu, C., & Friedman, E. (2021). Resistance under the radar: Organization of work and collective action in China’s food delivery industry. *The China Journal*, 86, 68–89. <https://doi.org/10.1086/714292>