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CHARACTERISTICS OF THE POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS IN THE DIGITAL LABOUR PLATFORMS

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Abstract

Digitalization has strongly influenced the functioning of all sectors of the economy, and consequently the development of the platform economy has led to a transformation of the labour markets. As there is no consensus among researchers on the impact of the increasing share of platform work on the economic status of individuals, some scholars argue that platform work acts as a stabilizer that narrows the gap in unequal incomes, while others argue that platform work increases employment insecurity. Regardless of one's point of view, it is a fact that in today's digital environment, the number of employees working through platforms is rapidly increasing. The aim of this paper is to find out why people participate in platform work and to determine the socio-demographic characteristics of workers who choose to work via platform. For this purpose, the results of a questionnaire conducted on 103 respondents in two Croatian counties (Dubrovnik-Neretva and Split-Dalmatia) in the period from August 2023 to August 2024 were used. The results of the study suggest that platform work is often an additional source of employment, but can also be a necessary solution for those who cannot find job in the traditional sectors of the economy. In terms of the socio-demographic characteristics that can be attributed to people who work via digital platforms, the results show that older people are significantly less interested in this type of work. Women are almost three times more likely to work on platforms than men, while people with a university degree are less likely to work on platforms compared to those with a lower level of education.

Keywords: *digital labour platforms, platform work, socio-demographic characteristics*

1. INTRODUCTION

A new business model, best described as the sharing economy (platform economy), is largely replacing the traditional business model of using factors of production to offer products or services on the market,



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which is often portrayed as over-regulated and inefficient. According to the European Commission's definition, the sharing economy refers to business models in which certain economic activities are promoted through collaborative platforms that generate an open market for the temporary use of goods or services, often provided by private individuals (European Commission, 2021). The sharing economy is not exclusively limited to transactions involving a change of ownership of a good. In most cases, the sharing economy involves transactions for profit, but it can also refer to actions that are voluntary. The new model relies on the use of digital and networked platforms to share physical goods with a large number of people – the focus is no longer on ownership, but on the direct experience of the provider and the service user. Companies that have integrated this model are now experiencing strong growth and are fundamentally changing the way we think about the consumption of goods and services, creating a new social phenomenon and approach and laying the foundation for future thinking about the sharing economy business model. Its influence is visible in the areas of transportation, accommodation, provision of various support services and provision of professional services based on the connection between users and service providers. Although the term "sharing economy" refers to the sharing of goods, the major digital platforms in this area are not based on sharing, but on the commercial coordination of numerous services offered by private individuals. This change allows employers to access a large number of workers when needed and changes the structure of the labour market. The new business models are based on private individuals carrying out small jobs in their spare time as independent contractors (Pouri and Hilty, 2021).

Over the past ten years, a variety of digital platforms have emerged for the profitable coordination of platform work, and the platform economy can generally be characterised as an online market with at least three parties involved. The platform provider acts as an intermediary and manages the supply and demand of the other two parties. This intermediary role allows the platform provider to shift a large part of the risks, liabilities and costs to the other two parties. As a rule, the platform provider does not have to bear any labour or production costs. The platform provider offers a completely virtual service, just a website or an app, and can therefore grow exponentially without production costs increasing proportionally, which means that it has very low marginal costs to bear. The platform provider is one of the three parties that has full access to and control over the platform's data, processes and rules. The unique software architecture of the digital platform leads to a systematic asymmetry of power and information. For most platforms, the more people participate, the more useful they become for all users. These so-called network effects favour the formation of monopolies and oligopolies, as it is advantageous from the user's point of view to choose only one search engine, one social network, one online retailer and one online auction house. The emergence of oligopolies and monopolies based on network effects, a centralised tripartite software architecture and the tendency towards power asymmetry is reinforced by the role of venture capital (Schmidt, 2017).

Although platform work can be categorised in different ways, a useful distinction is between cloud work (web-based digital labour platforms) and gig work (location-based digital labour platforms). The exchange of labour, skills and time for an income happens very quickly when individuals operate a web-based platform, while on location-based platforms people use their personal property or goods to earn money. The distinction between these two types of platform work shows that each is associated with a different type of rewards, income and social status (Hoang, Blank and Quan-Haase, 2020). The impact and importance of the sharing economy for economic development has also been recognized by the European Union. Due to the potential of the sharing economy to create jobs, rationalise household consumption through the use of shared goods, boost local economies and promote sustainable and more responsible consumption, on the one hand, and negative effects such as insecurity, on the other, the European Union wants to create uniform regulations for the sharing economy in all Member States. The main objective of adopting new regulations in this area is to guarantee the rights of those involved and to prevent monopolies and other practises that distort competition.

The aim of this paper is to find out why people participate in platform work and to determine the demographic characteristics of workers who choose to work via platform. For this purpose, the results of

a questionnaire conducted on 103 respondents in two Croatian counties (Dubrovnik-Neretva and Split-Dalmatia) in the period from August 2023 to August 2024 were used. The results of the study suggest that platform work is often an additional source of employment, but can also be a necessary solution for those who cannot find job in the traditional sectors of the economy. In terms of the socio-demographic characteristics that can be attributed to people who work via digital platforms, the results show that older people are significantly less interested in this type of work. Women are almost three times more likely to work on platforms than men, while people with a university degree are less likely to work on platforms compared to those with a lower level of education.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Digitalization has strongly influenced the functioning of all sectors of the economy, and consequently the development of the platform economy has led to a transformation of the labour markets. As there is no consensus among researchers on the impact of the increasing share of platform work on the economic status of individuals, some scholars argue that platform work acts as a stabilizer that narrows the gap in unequal incomes, while others argue that platform work increases employment insecurity (Cirillo, Guarascio and Parolin, 2023). The platform economy has numerous positive effects, both for employees and for consumers and employers. Working through the platform offers the possibility of additional earnings (Drahokoupil and Jepsen, 2017), and employees can choose when, where and how much they work, allowing for a better work-life balance (Kenney and Zysman, 2019). On the other hand, platform work is often associated with precarious working conditions. For example, employees who work via a digital platform are not entitled to all the benefits of employees who have a standard employment relationship, and these jobs are characterized by insecure income and limited social protection (Muntaner, 2018; Vojinić and Bečić, 2004).

Regardless of one's point of view, it is a fact that in today's digital environment, the number of employees working through platforms is rapidly increasing. Among a number of positive aspects resulting from working via digital platforms, which have been recognised in various studies and analyses, one of the main advantages is flexibility, since workers can determine their own working hours, place of work and type of work. Flexibility allows them to better balance their professional commitments with their private lives and is particularly useful for people who have difficulty accessing the traditional labour market, such as people with disabilities, students or people living in remote areas (Hall and Krueger, 2018; Peticca-Harris, Degama and Ravishankar 2020; Dunn, Munoz and Jarrahi 2023). In addition to flexibility, digital platforms allow workers to use their skills and free time to earn extra money, which can improve their financial situation and standard of living as they have the opportunity to develop additional sources of income. Digital platforms also enable workers to be more innovative as they have the opportunity to propose new services or products, test business ideas and adapt quickly to market changes. This dynamic approach can lead to the development of new business models and an increase in competitiveness (Trabucchi and Buganza, 2020).

Despite the many positive aspects of platform work, it is important to point out that this form of work is considered precarious and entails certain challenges. This precariousness manifests itself in job insecurity and a lack of social protection, which requires adequate regulation and protection of workers' rights. Many platform workers are often classified as self-employed and therefore have an unclear employment status. They often have no access to social protection, including health insurance, pension contributions and unemployment benefits. This situation can lead to financial insecurity and make it difficult for workers to plan for the future (Schor, Attwood-Charles, Cansoy, Ladegaard and Wengronowitz, 2020). In addition, they are very often unable to take advantage of employment rights such as minimum wage, guaranteed holiday and paid annual leave (Rogers, 2016).

In this paper, we will rely on the explanation offered by the theory of horizontal sectoral segregation, as this research identifies the socio-demographic characteristics of workers interested in working through a digital platform. According to sectoral segregation theory, organised social groups are unequally distributed across different occupations or across different positions within the same

occupation. Unequal access to higher and better-paid positions within the same occupation is a feature of vertical segregation, while horizontal segregation refers to the concentration of certain groups in specific sectors or occupations. Sorting and self-selection are two important mechanisms that influence the distribution of workers across different sectors and positions. Sorting refers to the process by which the labour market or employers target certain groups of workers to specific sectors. This can be the result of structural factors (e.g., discrimination, market demands, education systems) or unconscious bias in employment. Therefore, the articles by Krueger (2018) and Barzilay (2019) make a theoretical contribution to uncovering the role of platforms in perpetuating and institutionalising gender inequality. The process of self-selection can be influenced by education, socialisation, cultural factors and experience (Ayers, Banaji and Jolls, 2015) and refers to the situation in which individuals choose their occupations based on their own beliefs, social norms or expectations.

Gender segregation in platform work has been the subject of numerous research studies that have shown how digital work platforms often reflect and sometimes even reinforce traditional inequalities in the labour market (Gerber, 2022). Fuster Morell (2022) examines how digital platforms perpetuate existing gendered patterns where women are predominantly freelancers, taking on micro-tasks and providing on-site services such as domestic and care work. She emphasises that a gendered perspective must be taken when analysing platform data in order to grasp this dynamic. Furthermore, Kampouri (2022) addresses theoretical and methodological implications for gender inequality and emphasises the need to adopt a gendered perspective to fully understand the complexity of platform work. The results of studies looking at relationship between the age and interest in working via digital platforms are inconclusive and show that the age demographics of participants vary by study and region. Overall, these studies suggest that while platform workers are often younger than the traditional workforce, there are significant age differences between participants that are influenced by factors such as the nature of the tasks and regional labour market dynamics (Cherry, 2019).

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The research is based on the results of a survey conducted among respondents in the Dubrovnik-Neretva and Split-Dalmatia counties. The survey was conducted in the period from August 2023 to August 2024. The first part of the questionnaire was formulated to collect information on the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents (age, gender, employment status, education). The second part of the questionnaire was formulated to gather information about respondents' views on digital platforms for work, how often and why they use them, and whether they work or intend to work via a digital platform.

Table 1 Sample descriptives

	Percent
Female	52
Age	
- 15-20	3,9
- 21-25	15,5
- 26-30	41,7
- 31-35	21,4
- 36-40	4,9
- 41-45	6,8
- 46-50	1,9
- 51-55	3,9
Education	
- High school	23,3
- Higher vocational education	36,9
- University degree	39,8
Employment status	83

Source: authors' calculations

The sample consists of 103 respondents, of whom, 52% are women and 48% men (Table 1). Age was a numerical variable, but for descriptive purposes we coded it as a variable with eight categories: “15-20 years old”, “21-25 years old”, “26-30 years old”, “31-35 years old”, “36-40 years old”, “41-45 years old”, “46-50 years old”, and “51-55 years old”. The majority of respondents belong to the 26 to 30 age group (41.7%), followed by 31 to 35-year-olds (21.4%). A smaller percentage belong to the younger and older age groups. Education was coded as “High school”, “Higher vocational education”, and “University degree”. The majority of respondents have a university degree (39.8%), 23.3% have completed high school and 36.9% have a higher vocational education. 83% of respondents are employed, while 63% search for jobs online.

To measure the dependent variable whether respondents are interested in working via a digital labour platform (WDP), we rely on this yes-or-no question: “Are you interested in working via a digital labour platform?” Independent sociodemographic variables included in our model are: gender, age, education and employment status. Based on a descriptive analysis, we first determine why people participate in the platform economy and then perform a binary logistic regression to determine the characteristics of people who work or want to work via a digital labour platform. The binary logistic regression is performed because the dependent variable WDP has two possible outcomes (yes/no), and the model is as follows:

$$WDP = \log\left(\frac{p}{1-p}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Age + \beta_2 Gender + \beta_3 Education + \beta_4 EmploymentStatus + e \quad (1)$$

In logistic regression, we are primarily interested in the odds ratio ($p/(1-p)$), which indicates how often one event is more likely to occur than another. Exponential coefficients show the odds ratios of a change in the dependent variable:

$$Odds(WDP) = \frac{p}{1-p} = e^{\beta_0 + \beta_1 Age + \beta_2 Gender + \beta_3 Education + \beta_4 EmploymentStatus + e} \quad (2)$$

The IBM SPSS Statistics software program was used to carry out the binary logistic regression.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Less than 10% of all respondents stated that they work via a digital labour platform. Table 2 shows the reasons why individuals choose this type of work. The majority of platform work participants use platform work as an additional source of income, while a smaller proportion do so for reasons of flexibility or due to a lack of other employment opportunities. This data suggests that platform work is often an additional source of employment, but can also be a necessary solution for those who cannot find work in the traditional sectors of economy.

Table 2 Reasons for platform work participation

Additional earnings	Flexible working hours	Inability to find work elsewhere
56%	22%	22%

Source: authors' calculations

Almost half of all respondents (49.5 %) are interested in working via a digital platform. The results of the binary logistic regression are shown in Table 3. Based on the results, we can conclude that age is a statistically significant factor and that the probability of being interested in working via a digital platform decreases with increasing age ($\text{Exp}(B)=0.819$). More specifically, each additional year of age decreases the likelihood that a person is interested in working via a digital platform by 18.1%. This result is in line with our expectations and previous studies. Platform workers are younger than the working population as a whole. For example, platform workers in the United States, Europe and Russia are on average 10 years younger than workers in regular employment, and age decreases with increasing intensity of platform employment (Annarosa, Cesira, Enrique, Federico and Ignacio, 2018;

Chernykh, 2021). In the European Union as a whole, the average age of all employees is 42.4 years, while the average age of those who work for a platform at least once a month is 33.9 years. The average age of employees worldwide is also 39.5 years, and that of those who work on online platforms is 33.2 years (ILO, 2022).

Table 3 Binary logistic regression on Interest in working via a digital platform

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Age	-,199	,051	15,100	1	,000	,819
Gender	1,032	,560	3,400	1	,065	2,806
Education			10,027	2	,007	
Education (1)	-1,096	,866	1,600	1	,206	,334
Education (2)	-2,576	,899	8,203	1	,004	,076
Employment status	-1,076	,831	1,678	1	,195	,341
Constant	6,683	1,859	12,927	1	,000	798,364

Source: authors' calculations

From the regression results, we can conclude that women are 2.8 times more likely to work via digital platforms compared to men - gender is statistically significant at a significance level of 10. This result is in line with expectations, as platform work is considered precarious and precarity is highly gendered due to the traditional division of housework (Gerber, 2022). Webster and Zhang (2020) found that gender roles are deeply entrenched in digital labour platforms, as evidenced by the dominance of female workers on home cooking platforms. In contrast to these findings, the research by Hoang et al. (2020) shows that highly educated, middle-aged men are the most represented on digital labour platforms. However, our results do not take into account the wage structure associated with the different types of platform work. Statistical discrimination can be the basis for explaining the gender imbalance on digital work platforms. There are studies (Bogliacino, Codagnone, Cirillo and Guarascio, 2020) that show that women are subject to statistical discrimination and are less likely to be employed in jobs that are predominantly held by men (e.g., programming) and more likely to be employed in jobs that are predominantly held by women (e.g., customer service).

For the *Education* variable, respondents with a high school degree from the reference category. Since the estimated parameters for the two education categories are statistically significant, the results indicate that people with a university degree are 92.4% less likely to be interested in working via digital platforms than people with a high school degree. Although the coefficient for respondents with higher vocational education is not statistically significant, the results indicate that people with a higher level of education have a lower propensity to work via digital platforms. This finding is not entirely consistent with previous findings. According to the ILO report (2022), platform workers in the European Union and worldwide have a higher level of education than other workers. In some cases, there is even a mismatch between the level of education of workers and the work they do for platforms.

If the parameter for the employment status variable were statistically significant, this would indicate that employed participants are less likely to be interested in working via a digital platform compared to unemployed participants. These results are to be expected, as people who offer services via digital platforms very often do not have to go through a recruitment process, but instead become self-employed (e.g., transportation service providers). For this reason, but also because of the flexibility of the work, unemployed people are more likely to be interested in platform work.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the introduction to this study, we emphasised that platform work has both positive and negative effects on the labour market. In light of these facts, the European Commission is considering how to encourage the development of new and innovative services and the temporary use of goods offered by the collaborative economy, while ensuring adequate consumer and social protection. Based on the research findings, we found that certain socio-demographic characteristics are associated with participants in digital labour platforms. If we look at platform work as a separate sector, we see that different social groups are not equally involved in platform work. This finding is important because it indicates that while digital labour platforms can be used to improve the economic status of many social groups, not all of them benefit equally. Apart from this, the research findings suggest that the majority of platform work participants use platform work as an additional source of income, while a smaller proportion do so for reasons of flexibility or due to a lack of other employment opportunities. The data suggests that platform work is often an additional source of employment, but can also be a necessary solution for those who cannot find work in the traditional sectors of the economy. In terms of the socio-demographic characteristics that can be attributed to people who work via digital platforms, the results show that older people are significantly less interested in this type of work. Women are almost three times more likely to work on platforms than men, while people with a university degree are less likely to work on platforms compared to those with a lower level of education. These findings can help labour market policy makers develop measures to regulate non-standard work on platforms and protect the most vulnerable groups participating in this form of work. The findings are also important because, based on the positive and negative impact of the sharing economy on the labour market and the economy as a whole, the European Commission is looking at how it can encourage the development of new and innovative services and the temporary use of goods offered by the collaborative economy, while ensuring adequate consumer and social protection.

The present study has several shortcomings that provide a basis for future research. First of all, the sample size is limited to two Croatian counties. In order to draw generalized conclusions and compare the results for Croatia with existing studies in other countries, the study needs to be conducted at the level of the entire country. Both the structure and the content of the questionnaire need to be improved. For example, although respondents were asked whether they had participated in the work through a digital platform and whether they intended to do so, they were not asked which digital platform they were referring to. For this reason, we were unable to distinguish between crowd-work and gig-work. Furthermore, for future research, it is necessary to include a larger number of socio-demographic characteristics in the questionnaire in order to draw more accurate conclusions about the characteristics of people involved in platform work.

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