



Promotion of Self-employment: Manager Justifications for Online Labor Platform Operations¹

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of online labor platforms (OLPs) has raised concerns about the treatment of platform workers and the legality of OLPs' contractual relations and control. This study examines how managers (CEOs/founders) justify OLPs' contractual relations and market control within the frames of critical platform work discussions and the Finnish labor market model. By using justification theory and market control classification as analytical tools, this qualitative study reveals that managers justify OLPs' control and contractual relations by referring to critical discussions and features of Finnish labor market model. In justifications, managers either adopt the normative features of the model or criticize the societal neglect of self-employed workers. The model's emphasis on full-time employment and legal questions around the platform economy seems to challenge the legitimacy of all OLP companies on some level. Despite OLPs' operational differences, all managers justify OLPs with the idea of promoting self-employment within the Finnish labor market.

KEYWORDS

CEO / control / justification / legitimacy / manager / online labor platform / platform work / self-employment / the Finnish labor market model

1. Introduction

Online labor platforms (OLPs) are for-profit companies that serve as intermediaries for temporary, paid work tasks, and services offered on demand, known as platform work. Besides various means of utilizing data, the businesses of OLPs are based on the mediation of tasks and projects between clients and workers via digital platforms (ILO 2021; Keegan & Meijerink 2021; Kuhn & Maleki 2017). Due to the significant growth of OLPs, their impact on labor markets and society has attracted growing interest among researchers and administrative entities, not least in the Nordic countries (e.g., ILO 2021; Jesnes 2019; Mattila 2020). Research on OLPs has concentrated on certain widely scaled companies, such as Uber, whose operations and business models have become archetypes of platform work and the various trends around it (Schor et al. 2020).

OLPs' control over workers has been a major focus of both research and policy discussions. Many studies in HRM, sociology, and industrial relations consider that platform work contributes to the precarization of work, characterized by the replacement of traditional long-term employment with highly controlled, standardized, task-based

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working, leading to power imbalances between OLPs and workers. Although work often takes place outside employment relationships, most workers have been subject to a range of control activities, such as algorithmic management of task distributions and compensation control (e.g., Connelly et al. 2021; Krzywdzinski & Gerber 2021; Peticca-Harris et al. 2018; Schüßler et al. 2021; Wood et al. 2018).

The control exerted by OLPs has challenged their roles as neutral intermediaries of work. Regulatory concerns have been raised regarding the classification of platform workers as self-employed workers/entrepreneurs, even when their working arrangements fulfill the characteristics of employment (Aloisi 2022; European Commission 2021; Jesnes & Rolandsson 2020). At both national and EU levels, a critical question is whether self-employed platform workers should be entitled to the same protection and support as employed workers (e.g., European Commission 2021; Hotvedt 2018; Schoukens 2020). In the Nordic countries, the question of platform workers' employment status has been especially relevant considering that Nordic welfare states and labor market models are characterized by strong social partnership, collective bargaining, and employment security relying on standard full-time employment. Many protective elements inside and outside of the work are closely connected to standard employment (e.g., Jesnes & Rolandsson 2020; Rasmussen et al. 2019; Salonen et al. 2020).

These critical academic discourses and public discussions, driven by media, trade union criticism, and regulatory concerns raised by legislative and regulatory entities, often address the classification of entrepreneurship and the control that OLPs exert over workers. In this study, the entirety of these discussions is referred to as 'critical platform work discussions' or 'critical discussions'. The critical discussions and features of the Nordic labor market model presumably pose a legitimacy risk for OLP companies that exert various levels of control over self-employed platform workers. Legitimacy is crucial for the financial interests and continuity of companies (Suchman 1995), which potentially necessitates managers to justify the OLPs' operations, and contractual models to gain legitimacy for OLPs. This research addresses this issue by analyzing interviews with the CEOs and founders of seven OLP companies operating in Finland, focusing on how managers justify the OLPs' operations in the context of critical discussions and the Finnish labor market model.

The research question is: *How do managers justify their OLP companies' contractual relations and market control in the context of the Finnish labor market model and critical platform work discussions?*

The study uses justification theory (Boltanski & Thevenot 2006) and market control classification (Maffie 2020) as analytical tools. Justification theory provides the conceptual framework for the analysis. The theory encompasses the dimensions of legitimacy and normative principles, which are essential when considering the context in which justifications occur. The market control classification of Michael Maffie (2020) is used to structure the analysis and focus on forms of control that have been crucial in critical discussions and employment classification issues: compensation control and task distribution. Justification theory defines the nature of justifications, while market control and contractual relations represent OLP operations that the analyzed justifications consider. The aim is to observe how justifications are influenced by critical discussions and the features of the Finnish labor market model.

The reality of OLP control is diverse (Immonen 2023; Maffie 2020; Schüßler et al. 2021), a fact often overlooked in research. There is also a limited number of studies from

the perspectives of OLP managers. This study aims to contribute to these less-observed perspectives. The operational diversity of OLPs has been considered in the selection of case OLPs. The findings will shed light on whether critical discussions and legitimacy issues are considered in the same way across different types of OLPs. The study will also demonstrate if managers of differently operating OLPs adopt similar normative principles in their justifications.

The article proceeds as follows: The following section introduces the critical platform work discussions, particularly in the context of the Finnish labor market model. The theory section explains the analytical tools of market control and justification theory. The data and methods section presents the main characteristics of the OLP companies under study, describes the conducted interviews, and provides the methods used for the analysis. The results section introduces how managers justify contractual relations and market control, and how critical discussions and the Finnish labor market model features are reflected in these justifications. The conclusion and discussion summarize the findings and introduce the contribution of this study, as well as potential future research avenues.

2. OLP discussions in the Nordics and Finland

As mentioned, control has been a central element in critical discussions, including legal and public discussions about platform workers' contractual relations and research literature on platform work precariousness (e.g., Krzywdzinski & Gerber 2021; Peticca-Harris et al. 2018; Schor et al. 2020; Wood et al. 2018). This has also been reflected in Finnish public and legislative discussions. Political initiatives, trade union statements, and media representations of platform work in Finland have primarily focused on the question of whether self-employed platform workers should be classified as employees in cases where their operational freedom is restricted by OLP control (e.g., Finnish Government 2019; Mattila 2020; TEM 2020).

Employment security that relies on standard forms of employment is considered as one of the hallmarks of European and Nordic social models (Gumbrell-McCormick 2011; Hotvedt 2018). Nordic welfare states and institutions have a historical basis in the strong role of civil society and collective agreements supporting the expansion of salaried work toward full employment in society (Esping-Andersen 1990; Kettunen 2012). Platform work has been seen to challenge this basis, as well as the societal and labor protection schemes upon which Nordic models of work and welfare are based (Dølvik & Steen 2018; Jesnes & Rolandsson 2020).

Finnish labor and social security legislation distinguishes workers as either employees or entrepreneurs. Finnish labor markets rely heavily on collective bargaining and strong trade union representation, which have strengthened work and employment-related benefits (Mattila 2020). This Nordic model is characterized as 'voluntaristic', whereby employer organizations together with employee unions negotiate collective agreements within the industry. Employment guarantees the benefits that are largely absent from self-employed work (Jesnes & Rolandsson 2020; Rasmussen et al. 2019).

The Finnish labor and social model is centered around full-time employment, encompassing in-work benefits such as sick pay, occupational pensions, dismissal protection, and collective rights, including bargaining and sectoral collective agreements, as well



as support for non-working periods (Jesnes & Rolandsson 2020; Salonen et al. 2020). Self-employed workers are not without protection, as they are covered by entrepreneur's insurance (YEL). YEL offers earnings-related pensions and social security in the event of sickness and disability, although there has been significant discussion about the costs of YEL and under-insurance of entrepreneurs (Salonen et al. 2020). Additionally, self-employed workers have access to earnings-related unemployment allowances. However, they have often perceived themselves as unequal compared to employees and have felt excluded from higher levels of social security (Sutela & Pärnänen 2020).

The strong labor protection emphasis may be the reason why contractual relations have been the most-addressed platform work issues in Finland. They were brought most prominently into public discussion in 2020, when the Finnish Labor Council, operating under the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, set out that it regards couriers of the food delivery platforms Foodora and Wolt to be misclassified as entrepreneurs (TEM 2020). This decision was influenced by whether the characteristics of employment were met in the direction and supervision of platform workers. The Labor Council statement fueled public discussions about the legal classifications and well-being of food deliverers (e.g., YLE News 2021). The issue of labor legislation interpretation regarding platform workers was also brought up in Prime Minister Sanna Marin's government program (Finnish Government 2019).

Finland represents an interesting case and example of the Nordic labor market model. It could be assumed that it is difficult for OLP companies to find a place in Nordic labor market structures (Jesnes 2019). The development of platform work has proved somewhat opposite. While discussions about the employment characteristics and rights of platform workers represent a more traditional perspective, the legislation concerning taxi service OLPs in 2018 aimed for deregulation and freer entrepreneurial competition (Lanamäki et al. 2020). OLP companies have received both criticism and praise for their success and operational models (e.g., Pullinen 2021; Teittinen 2023). The Finnish labor market model norms have thus affected OLPs, but they do not represent hegemonic norms without existing counter voices.

The research interviews took place in 2021, just before the EU Commission released a proposal to improve platform workers' labor conditions (European Commission 2021). In 2024, the European Council reached an agreement on the platform work directive, aiming to address false self-employment and regulate algorithmic management (Council of the EU 2024). The European Commission has also provided guidelines on the conditions under which self-employed platform workers should be entitled to bargaining and collective agreements (European Commission 2022). Despite progress with directives and legislation, OLPs are still in the process of institutionalizing and seeking societal legitimacy. Many open questions remain about the classification and protection of platform workers. These questions are increasingly important, as in 2022, approximately 3% of the European workforce was engaged in work through digital platforms (Eurostat 2023). In Finland, the share was 3.9% (Statistics Finland 2023).

This section has addressed the features of the Finnish labor market model in connection with critical platform work discussions. The next section will introduce the main analytical concepts used in the analysis, beginning with platform control classification and market control.

3. Analytical concepts and theories

3.1 Market control

Widely scaled forms of platform work, such as food delivery and taxi services, represent the public image of the phenomenon and are often the focus of critical discussions. Criticism often centers on the extensive algorithmic management of these OLPs. In a broad sense, algorithmic management refers to the set of managerial practices conducted through algorithms and technological systems, either autonomously or by complementing human decisions (Lippert et al. 2023; Mateescu & Nguyen 2019; Wood 2021). Algorithmic management is an overarching concept that encompasses multiple forms of digital worker control operations.

The versatile and layered algorithmic management of OLPs has made it challenging to establish clearly defined categorizations for their various forms. However, a related concept and classification of platform control by Michael Maffie (2020) has effectively categorized and conceptualized the fragmented nature of OLP control. Therefore, this study utilizes the concept of control to describe operations often referred to under algorithmic management in platform work literature.

The studies have shown that the manifestation of control in OLPs varies greatly and can result in widely different implementations (Schüßler et al. 2021; Schor et al. 2020). OLPs rarely control all aspects of work processes and intermediation (e.g., Keegan & Meijerink 2021; Krzywdzinski & Gerber 2021; Wood 2021). Instead, they frequently control important functions in their operations while decentralizing control of certain dimensions and granting workers more autonomy in these areas. In doing so, they evade hierarchical authority and rely on the disciplining effect of the markets rather than on centralized managerial control (Vallas & Schor 2020).

In Maffie's classification (2020), platform control consists of three phases: (1) Architecture of identity, (2) Platform centralization, and (3) Market control. The architecture of identity includes operations to determine who has access to the platforms and with what exclusion criteria. Platform centralization refers to the centralization of worker–client interactions, such as communications, payment arrangements, and ratings within the platform systems (Maffie 2020). The first two phases are preconditions for market control. Market control refers to how and to what extent platforms regulate the markets they create and affect the autonomy of service providers, including platform workers. Market control includes operations for determining workers' visibility on platforms, control of paid compensation, and control of task distribution, that is, 'matching' (Maffie 2020). This article focuses on the latter two operations.

In theory, task distribution is divided into three subcategories based on intensity of control. Less controlled task distribution is called *open matching*. In this type of matching, clients and workers meet directly via OLPs and make agreements themselves. OLPs do not participate in work distribution but enable workers and clients to find each other through the OLP systems without restricting the freedom of choice of either party. These OLPs could be considered neutral intermediaries, or 'open platforms' (Maffie 2020).

Another form of task distribution control is *forced matching*, in which OLPs set all the rules of task distribution and control it completely with algorithmic procedures.

Essentially, OLPs determine for whom the tasks and working opportunities are directed (Maffie 2020; also see Connelly et al. 2021; Keegan & Meijerink 2021). In this type of matching, workers have limited ability to choose which tasks they undertake and for whom. Often, in forced matching, all the work terms are predetermined and standardized (Maffie 2020). Examples of these include food delivery and ride-hailing OLPs, such as Uber and Lyft.

Between open and forced matching, there is *single-sided matching*, in which OLPs prevent either clients or workers from participating in the selection process. This could mean that OLPs and clients determine the workers who task offers are directed at and who can compete for them. Alternatively, workers are provided with visibility to available tasks, but clients have no visibility to the workers (Maffie 2020).

Another dimension of market control is compensation control, which also consists of various forms. Compensation control refers to the operations through which levels of compensation paid to workers are managed. Some OLPs do not determine levels of compensation for workers but only take a certain commission from the final price. Others participate in compensation determination or set thresholds for it. Some OLPs completely determine the levels of compensation (Maffie 2020).

In both single-sided and forced matching processes, the essential legal criterion defining the employment relationship is the freedom of self-employed workers to choose their working hours and periods of absence without facing consequences or sanctions from OLPs (European Commission 2021). The challenge lies in determining this freedom due to the lack of transparency in the matching process. With algorithmic management, it is often unclear how the actions of workers affect the matching procedures and algorithmic decision-making (Bérestégui 2021; Wood 2021). Compensation control has also been a central element in court evaluations of platform work classifications and competition rights (European Commission 2021).

In this study, it has been decided to focus on the market control operations of compensation and task distribution control. One reason for this is to address the legitimacy issues of OLP control. Some market control activities exist in a legislatively gray area, questioning the positions of OLPs as neutral intermediaries. Additionally, market control offers well-structured concepts and targets that can be analyzed in the context of platform work, where control is often fragmented. This approach helps to structure the analysis and make comparisons between otherwise versatile OLPs feasible. Market control operations are also segments of algorithmic management that are often invisible to outsiders and even workers themselves. Therefore, focusing on them will provide valuable information on how managers justify operations that are often characterized by a lack of transparency.

This section has introduced the theorization of market control and its connection to platform work issues and discussions. In the next section, the justification theory and legitimacy that represent another important analytical concept of this study will be introduced.

3.2 Justification and legitimacy

Often the desire for justifying stems from conflicts with values and norms that have occurred or have the potential to occur. According to the justification theory of Boltanski

and Thevenot (2006), these ‘critical moments’ are when people in ordinary relationships realize that something is not working correctly in that system and start criticizing it. Both sides, the criticized and the critic, must justify their cause, opinions, or actions with their sense of justice. The purpose of this justification process is to gain legitimacy (Boltanski & Thevenot 1999). Legitimacy is a ‘generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some set of a socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions’ (Suchman 1995, 574). Thus, the purpose of the justifications is to defend operations against criticism or potential criticism and gain legitimacy in certain social contexts (Boltanski & Thevenot 2006; Dencik & Stevens 2023).

For business organizations, legitimacy is a key element in integrating within their environments and is crucial for their long-term survival and success (Frenken et al. 2020; Suchman 1995). Justifications are arguments that aim to gain and strengthen legitimacy (Hossfeld 2018). To be accepted, justifications must often be grounded in generally shared normative principles. Thus, justifications not only reflect the values of the speaker, but also what is generally accepted or desirable in the context in which the justification takes place (Boltanski & Thevenot 2006).

Regarding this research, the examination of managers’ justifications can reveal the normative principles and societal aspects that not only influence justifications but also create the need for managers to justify OLP operations. OLP companies are facing legitimacy issues because their control and contractual relations contradict institutionalized structures and norms (e.g., Keegan & Meijerink 2021). In this sense, the Finnish labor market represents an interesting societal context for justifications. Labor market model built around full-time employment may present a challenging environment for entrepreneurship-promoting OLPs to gain legitimacy.

In this study, the justification theory will be used as an analytical concept for interpreting the interview data. The theory includes more dimensions than what was found relevant considering the objectives of this research. The aim is to uncover the arguments through which contractual relations and market control schemes are justified and to determine whether the context of the Finnish labor market model and critical discussions are reflected in these justifications. The justification concept gives value to the recognition of what justifications are and what they tell about legitimacy and normative principles of the context in which justifications are presented. Reflections on the critical discussions and the Finnish labor market model features are called references in this study.

It is important to note that the norms of the Finnish labor market model are not necessarily hegemonic. Other societal norms and legitimacies may also influence OLPs’ operations and managers’ justifications. The traditionality of the Finnish labor market model does not necessarily mean that managers try to adopt its norms in their justifications. OLPs’ operations may also be justified by criticizing the model. The form that justifications take provides insight into the relationships of OLPs with the Finnish labor market model and critical discussions, shedding light on the normative conflicts that may arise between traditional labor markets and new forms of working.

These sections have introduced the theoretical concepts of this research and the context of the Finnish labor market model and critical discussions. The following section describes the data and methods of this study.

4. Methods

4.1 Data

The research data consists of semi-structured interviews with eight managers (CEOs or founders) from seven OLP companies. In one of the interviews, two OLP founders were present. The companies being researched were selected based on a classification formed in previous research (Immonen 2023). The idea of the classification was the recognition of versatility in OLP management and institutional complexities. This classification provided prior knowledge of the operational differences among OLP companies. Based on this knowledge, seven OLP companies were selected as research cases.

Based on a list of Finnish OLP companies, potential case OLPs were systematically selected with an emphasis on diversity of industries, types of work, and control. While diversity in control was a well-known aspect of OLPs, it had been less researched in platform work literature. Addressing this research gap was considered in the company selection process. The aim was to gather as diverse a group of case OLPs as possible from the limited number of OLPs in general. After this phase, I contacted the managers of selected companies. Managers actively wanted to participate in platform work discussions and express company views.

Descriptions of the studied OLPs based on characteristics and market control (Maffie 2020) are detailed in Table 1. Maffie's classification offered descriptive concepts for indicating the practical differences in market control between OLPs. Thus, while the earlier classification guided the company selection, Maffie's control classification was utilized more in the actual research and analysis. The given pseudonyms are combinations of the earlier classification, market control, and characteristics of the OLP companies.

Interviews were arranged between June and September 2021 remotely via Teams because of the COVID-19 pandemic. All managers were interviewed using the same semi-structured interview form, which was complemented before each interview with additional company-specific questions. Managers were first asked for basic details about their companies' business models, workers, clients, types of tasks, and fields of operation. After establishing the basic information, the interviews went through the themes of managerial activities, contractual relations, compensation, communication, ratings, surveillance, societal roles, and public discussions. Under each theme were questions on fairness and how it appeared in each theme according to the managers. The interviews lasted between 50 and 140 minutes, with an average length of 86 minutes.

In the interviews, managers were not directly challenged on how they justified certain control schemes or contractual relations. Instead, they were asked how they arranged different dimensions of their operations (i.e., task distribution, compensation, contractual forms) and fostered their companies' perceptions of fairness through them. The interview structure emphasized the description of OLP operations and what fairness means in these operations. While the questionnaire did not emphasize controversies around platform work, the critical discussions were talked about at the end of most interviews. The semi-structured form provided the possibility to delve further into questions that arose during the interviews, making each interview unique and emphasizing company-specific operations.

The formulation of the questionnaire was supported by literature and public discussions, with a pre-assumption about the operations and topics that could be essential in

Table 1 Descriptions of case OLPs expressed with pseudonyms and described using main characteristics and market control.

	Market control activities (Maffie 2020)	Form of service provision	Type of tasks	Expertise requirement	Industry	Brief description of operations
OLP 1: <i>Free marketplace</i>	Worker-determined compensation	Online/On location	Projects	High	Consulting	OLP centralizes interaction and payments but does not control levels of compensation or matching.
OLP 2: <i>Managed marketplace</i>	Open matching					
	Worker-determined compensation	On location	Tasks	High/moderate	Creative arts	OLP centralizes interaction, ratings, and payments but does not control levels of compensation or matching.
OLP 3: <i>Marketplace + Managed network</i>	Open matching					
	Negotiated compensation	Online	Projects	High	Specialist work in different industries	OLP not only allows open matching, but also participates in selecting workers for clients from OLP network. Does not determine compensation but participates in negotiations of project terms.
OLP 4: <i>Managed network</i>	Open + single-sided matching					
	Negotiated compensation	Online/On location	Projects/temporary jobs	High	Management	OLP participates in selecting competent workers from OLP network for clients. Does not determine compensation but participates in negotiations of project terms.
OLP 5: <i>Worker-supporting marketplace</i>	Single-sided matching					
	Controlled compensation	On location	Tasks	Low/moderate	Simple tasks in multiple industries	OLP participates in distributing tasks to workers with limited experience. Allows clients and workers to make decisions. Otherwise, open matching. Controls the levels of compensation.
OLP 6: <i>Employer + managed task distribution</i>	Open matching + guidance from OLP					
	Controlled compensation	Online/on location	Tasks	High	Translation	Algorithmically controls the task distribution and defines paid compensation. Some workers operate as employees and some as self-employed. Status affects task distribution.
OLP 7: <i>Managed task distribution</i>	Forced matching					
	Controlled compensation	On location	Tasks	Low/moderate	Transportation	Algorithmically controls the work distribution and defines paid compensation. All workers operate as self-employed and are treated equally in task distribution.
	Forced matching					

terms of legitimacy. For example, platform workers' contractual forms are highly presented in public discussions about employment classifications. Thus, when asked about them, the managers gave justifications quite organically without further questions, indicating a need to justify selected contractual forms. Managers whose OLPs' operations were closer to the legal gray area gave comprehensive and versatile justifications for control and contract-related questions, indicating the centrality of these topics. As the interviewer, I aimed for a neutral position in guiding the discussion and asking follow-up questions but avoided guiding the discussions too much on known discourses of platform work.

4.2 Data analysis

The analysis combined both inductive and theory-guided methods (Schreier 2012). Throughout the process, multiple methods of coding and theoretical frameworks were considered, tested, and abandoned, including different fairness and control theorizations and qualitative analysis methods. The selected content analysis methods and theories of market control and justifications effectively addressed the research question and objectives of the study. However, future research could benefit from considering different methodological solutions and framings to comprehend the findings of this study. Here, I will present only the steps of the analysis that led to the results of this study.

In the first phase, the data was analyzed inductively by recognizing managers' justifications considering OLPs' control activities without guiding theories. This was done by first recognizing control schemes from the transcripts and then finding arguments that justified their use. At this point, justifications meant direct answers to the question of why OLPs operate with certain control schemes.

Then, the analysis was broadened to find more abstract justifications for the OLPs' existence and contractual relations. There was a need for a more comprehensive picture of the normative basis of OLPs, before focusing on selected operations. The second round of coding focused on the episodes in which managers (1) justified their OLPs' operations, (2) justified the OLPs' existence, (3) expressed views about the societal systems considering their companies, and (4) directly expressed what fairness means to their OLPs. All of these were not direct justifications as to why OLPs are operating and controlling workers like they do, but they expressed what the normative basis of OLP operations was.

This coding round revealed the versatile nature of justifications. They were not only direct explanations of why something was done but also indirect grounds that indicated the normative basis for why OLPs are operating as they do. Practical examples could be found in justifications for self-employment. The direct justifications explained why OLPs were using a self-employed workforce, while indirect justifications grounded it by, for example, criticizing the Finnish labor market model for the lack of flexibility and the neglect of self-employed workers. The indirect justifications did not directly explain why OLPs had some operations or control, but rather justified the existence and societal role of OLPs, thus expressing the normative basis around which OLPs' operations and control were built. Both direct and indirect justifications are important when interpreting the findings.

The last phase of the analysis was done using a theory-guided method. In this phase, the justification episodes concerning contractual relations and market control were identified from all justification episodes using the conceptual framework of Michael Maffie (2020). Justifications for market control and contractual relations were selected

as evidence because they offered a well-structured framework for analysis and included a lot of references to the features of the Finnish labor market model and critical platform work discussions.

In the next section, the findings will be presented by first introducing justifications for contractual relations and then the market control dimensions of task distribution (matching) and compensation control.

5. The findings

As previously mentioned, justification episodes either directly justified control or contractual relations, or indirectly substantiated these operations. Many indirect justifications were criticisms of features of the Finnish labor market model, which are best represented in the first part of the findings addressing the justifications for contractual relations (self-employment/employment). The following sections will focus on justifications for market control activities, which, due to different OLP operations, varied in content based on the extent to which OLPs were involved in critical platform work discussions through their operations. The results will provide descriptive examples from interviews that demonstrate the ways of justifying and how references to critical discussions and Finnish labor market model features appeared.

5.1 Justifications for contractual relations

All studied OLPs used a self-employed workforce (Table 2). In both indirect and direct justifications, managers expressed that self-employment itself is valuable and worth promoting. Using self-employment as a contractual form was justified as a response to the demand for flexibility in changing working life and to create new working opportunities in labor markets. Managers also justified self-employment to offer freedom for workers to determine their ways of living and working, which was largely considered a core value of the OLPs' operations. Self-employment was viewed as a contractual model to promote individual autonomy.

Many indirect justifications that supported the use of a self-employed workforce included criticism of the Finnish labor market model's emphasis on standard full-time employment. Most managers considered that labor market model and societal systems were built around full-time employment, for which reason safety nets, insurances, and pension securities of self-employed workers were outdated, too difficult to utilize, and placed the self-employed workers in a weak position in the labor markets.

Our goal is to enable self-employed to channel and scale their competence to the activities that have the most impact. OLPs like us enable this, instead of confining people to be employed within a single organization where their potential is underutilized...And when it comes to contracts and all aspects related to freelancers' work and safety nets, we strive to do our part in supporting the development of the freelance economy and making it a normal way of working.

OLP 3: Marketplace + managed network



Table 2 The workers' forms of contract and OLPs' forms of market control.

	Contract with OLP			Task distribution (matching)		Compensation control	
	Self-employment	Employment	No control (open matching)	Participates in distribution (single-sided matching)	Algorithmically controlled distribution (forced matching)	No compensation control	Participates in compensation determination
OLP 1: Free marketplace	×		×			×	
OLP 2: Managed marketplace	×		×			×	
OLP 3: Marketplace + managed network	×		×	×			×
OLP 4: Managed network	×			×			×
OLP 5: Worker-supporting marketplace	×	×	×	×			×
OLP 6: Employer + managed task distribution	×	×			×		×
OLP 7: Managed task distribution	×				×		×

The direct justification in the citation states that the OLP uses a self-employed workforce because it gives workers the flexibility to better scale their competence compared to working as an employee in a single organization. The latter part of the citation is an indirect justification that explains how, through their operations, the OLP aims to be a part of the promotion of self-employment in society. References to safety nets and ‘normal ways of doing’ indicate that the manager considers self-employment to be somewhat less normal and less protected in Finland. Thus, the normative basis is that self-employment should be promoted in the labor market in which it is not currently in a strong position.

Justifications for self-employment widely included references to critical discussions on platform worker employment classifications. For most managers, the legal debates were something that took place in the field of platform work but were more relevant to other OLPs rather than to theirs. Basically, managers connected their OLPs to the phenomenon of platform work but did not want to be associated with legal issues. The way of justifying was to exclude OLPs from those under direct criticism.

The critical discussions were more relevant to OLPs that have more restrictive market control in their operations. Managers whose OLPs had faced regulatory complexities with self-employment or had to strike a balance between using self-employed or employed workforces (OLPs 5, 6, and 7) relied on justifications for the workers’ desire for flexibility and freedom, which would be compromised by employment. As indicated earlier, self-employment was widely associated with freedom and flexibility in justifications, while employment was linked to inflexibility and working under the command of an employer.

The issue with employment is that it requires arranging shifts, assigning supervisors, and determining working places and times. It requires protocols for work and efficiency standards...I genuinely believe that in employment relationships, everyday working becomes more miserable, stressful, and annoying. There is a huge difference between whether you do three gigs per hour because you decide to do them...or if an employer says that if you do not do three gigs you will get a warning.

OLP 7: Managed task distribution

The Manager of OLP 7 expressed that they avoid employment relationships due to risks for worker freedom. According to him, employment would necessitate the OLP taking more control of work, shifts, and surveillance, compromising worker autonomy and well-being. The manager directly justified the current contractual model by expressing its benefits for workers and by expressing threats associated with employment, such as increased supervision and efficiency requirements. One of the threats is that employment requirements would reduce the motivation originating from the workers themselves. The OLP’s own benefit is built into that justification, as the goal is to keep workers efficient through self-employment.

Two OLPs offered employment as an option for platform workers (Table 2). They emphasized that both contractual forms have their benefits but are bound by different rules. The manager of OLP 6 justified the employment with elements to protect workers, such as paid sick leaves, but also saw it as allowing them to manage workers. The manager of OLP 5 considered that employment was more beneficial and safer when

work was continuous and regular but did not meet the needs of those working more casually. Again, self-employment was equated with worker freedom, while employment was associated with commitment and better protection in exchange for less freedom and flexibility.

We have wanted to offer the kind of model where workers can choose the contractual form in which they work. That has been the basis of it all...What I think should be obvious, but currently is not obvious in Finland, and apparently is not clear enough in legislation either, is how to draw a line between entrepreneurship and employment. Our solution is that we do not have any intermediate forms. You are either an employee or an entrepreneur, but we have understood that in the current situation this also involves risks.

OLP 6: Employer + managed task distribution

The direct justification for this contractual arrangement is workers' freedom of choice. The offered employment relationship is a more secure but less flexible form of working, while self-employed workers are provided with more flexibility but less protection and income stability. Workers can choose which one they value more. However, the indirect continuation, including the reference to legislative discussions, indicates insecurity about this arrangement. The manager desires a clear distinction between self-employed and employed work in legislation to help them arrange OLP operations and contracts with less risk. This kind of demarcation of employment and self-employment terms has been widely needed in the field of platform work and has been an essential dimension in the EU directive on platform work (European Commission 2021). While the manager considers their model fair, he does not have confidence that it would necessarily be interpreted as legitimate.

5.2 Justifications for task distribution

The justifications for task distribution control were closely connected to the types of control exercised by OLPs. *Open matching* (Table 2) generally did not put at risk the legitimacy of OLPs and was not justified with references to critical discussions. Managers of these OLPs emphasized workers' freedom to compete and market their own services, reflecting a similar normative basis as justifications for self-employment. The same principle applied to *single-sided matching*, which in the case OLPs (Table 2), meant that the OLPs selected workers for whom the clients' task offers were directed. The justifications highlighted this type of matching to provide workers with competence and interest-matching work. Essentially, single-sided matching was intended to ensure the quality of workers, and many justifications also appealed to the client benefits.

The justifications for forced matching were closely linked to critical discussions, indicating that this form of control comes closer to the gray area of legitimacy. Both OLPs that had forced matching in operations (Table 2) had slightly different principles behind the logics of matching. In OLP 6, the matching favored employed workers, and many direct justifications relied on industry-specific elements. One of the main justifications for forced matching was to improve the positions of qualified full-time workers in the industry.

Indirect justifications of both managers emphasized the workers' right to decline offered tasks. These justifications did not directly justify the use of forced matching but rather emphasized how it is not coercive toward workers. The manager of OLP 7, in particular, underlined the importance of allowing self-employed workers to select tasks without sanctions or effects on algorithms. He considered that this feature made workers in their OLP genuinely self-employed. This can be considered a reference to the legislative discussion of platform work and the classification criteria of the European Union (e.g., European Commission 2021).

We do not do what many other [OLPs] do, such as if you do gigs quickly, you will get more or better tasks. Or we do not punish you for declining tasks so that you won't get them anymore. We do not do this, because we regard that as employment-like surveillance and management...I believe fairness in our business means that you cannot operate with an independent contractor model and then just add elements of employment. If you want to tell the worker what tasks they do, when, and what they have to accept, then you have to offer employment.

OLP 7: Managed task distribution

This citation is an indirect justification indicating that the OLP's forced matching is not as coercive as that of their counterpart OLPs. The manager defends their task distribution control with references to legal discussions and employment issues. The way of justifying is to exclude their OLP from legally questionable alternatives and emphasize the parts of matching that provide workers with freedom and are not in conflict with employment criteria. This indicates the close linkage between forced matching and critical discussions. The manager agreed with occurred criticism but directed it toward other OLPs that have clearer conflicts with employment criteria and market control operations.

5.3 Justifications for compensation control

Compensation control justifications divided manager perspectives from one another. Managers of OLPs who did not control compensation (Table 2) considered the freedom to determine one's own compensation from the legal perspective as a basic right of the self-employed. Managers of OLP 1 considered compensation control as a legally questionable activity from which they ruled themselves out completely: 'First of all, it is illegal, they are called cartels and we do not stand with them at all' (OLP 1: Free marketplace).

Managers whose OLPs participated in compensation negotiations (Table 2) were more closely attached to critical discussions on underpayment in platform work in their justifications. They justified the compensation negotiations to protect workers from underpayment and unfair price competition, which has been a major issue, especially in international cloud work OLPs (e.g., Heeks 2017). The direct justification was that workers were highly skilled professionals who were entitled to receive decent compensation for the competence they bring to clients. In their justifications, workers' insecure positions as self-employed workers were raised as reasons for OLPs to participate in compensation determination.



Simultaneously, managers whose OLPs participate in compensation determination considered that the work they mediate is too complex and expertise demanding to be standardized and sold as cheap work. These expressions followed the previously introduced pattern that OLPs belong to the phenomenon of platform work, but critical discussions about compensation do not consider them. Basically, direct justifications for compensation control underlined the importance of improving the positions of self-employed workers and preventing underpayment. The indirect justifications defended OLPs against critical discussions by indicating that these issues are not relevant for them.

When discussing gig work and all the negative things related to it, then we talk about Uber drivers and whether this is the person’s own choice and whether it is safe...Do people earn enough and have insurance, etc...Workers in our OLP are also gig workers but they can earn hundreds of euros per day...But this kind of discussion creates risk for my business, if we start to create legislation in accordance with this image, by seeing this as only one kind of way of doing.

OLP 4: Managed network

The manager of OLP 4 was concerned about the public representation of platform work. She believed that critical discussions label the phenomenon and have already affected the representation of OLPs, which, from her perspective, could lead to unfavorable legislation. She criticized how the versatility of OLPs is overlooked. This cannot be considered as a direct justification for why the OLP participates in compensation determinations. Rather, it is an indirect justification that their OLP’s compensation control model is not problematic because it allows workers to earn quite significantly. The references to the legislative questions imply that the critical discussions are more problematic in terms of legitimacy.

Managers of OLPs that control compensation completely (Table 2) based their justifications on the sufficiency of the compensation for workers. Interestingly, the reference points for sufficient compensation were in sectoral collective agreements and the wages of employed workers in similar work. The managers of OLPs 5 and 7 justified compensation control with workers’ freedom and equality. They emphasized that all workers were paid the same for similar tasks, and everyone had the freedom to decide ‘whether they want to work under these conditions’. Both OLPs had benchmarked compensation to collective agreements of similar jobs and justified their compensation sufficiency with them.

The median for this type of work is about 9.1 or 9.2 euros per hour. With us, it is 60% higher. The idea is that when it is 60% higher, then you can afford to pay 20% for insurance for the self-employed, which will provide you with pension insurance, sickness insurance, parental leave security, and so on. Then you can afford to pay [work expenses], and you’re left with the amount of money you’d get from cash work or work at McDonald’s.

OLP 7: Managed task distribution

This justification for compensation control involves an interesting balance between the promotion of self-employment and adhering to the norms of the Finnish labor market

model. The compensation control operations themselves were not directly justified, but rather the levels of compensation. Particularly interesting are the references to industry collective agreements, which are the core of the Finnish labor market model (Kettunen 2012). The citation above indicates that the compensation in OLP 7 is determined in a way that after entrepreneurial expenses, the received income would be in line with industry collective agreements. Basically, the fair compensation levels of self-employed workers are justified by collective agreements of employment. This suggests that both features of the Finnish labor market model and the promotion of self-employment appear to influence OLP operations and justify operational arrangements.

6. Conclusion and discussion

In this study, I have analyzed managers' justifications for the contractual relations and market control operations of OLPs with different control schemes. The findings imply that critical platform work discussions affect OLPs and are reflected in the direct and indirect justifications of managers. However, there were different levels of attachment to the critical discussions. Managers of OLPs with more-controlled task distribution and compensation had a greater need to justify and legitimize OLP control and contractual models. They also made more references to legal and public discussions than managers of less-controlled OLPs.

When considering the justifications of OLP control, there were not necessarily shared normative principles between managers of differently controlled OLPs. Compensation control, in particular, divided managers from one another, as some considered it to protect workers' income, while others saw it as an illegal activity. The different normative principles were also indicated by indirect justifications in which managers aimed to distinguish their operations from those of other OLPs. Many considered it a risk to legitimacy that differently operating OLPs are unified by the same concepts and critical discussions. Despite different implementations of market control, the critical discussions seem to challenge the legitimacy of all OLPs to some extent.

However, in their justifications, OLP managers almost always returned to the same normative basis of individual freedom and the promotion of self-employment in society. The common experience for managers was that OLPs are somewhat on illegitimate ground in the Finnish labor market, and in contradiction with the labor market model ethos of standard full-time employment. This can be seen in references to the Finnish labor market model features and its normative basis. While not being a hegemonic norm, it is certainly an influential one. Almost all the managers expressed that self-employed workers are in a weaker position in the labor market compared to employees.

The increase of gig-based platform work, which has been seen in work sociology studies as a weakening of working life (e.g., Peticca-Harris et al. 2018; Schor et al. 2020), is the desired development from the managers' perspectives. Many of them share the concern about self-employed precariousness with critical platform work research but consider that this precarity stems from weaknesses in societal systems and general attitudes toward self-employment. This touches on the widely discussed question of the sustainability of European social policy; should standard employment be the domain of welfare states, or should the needs of changing labor markets and economics be met with more varieties of work and forms of support (e.g., Gumbrell-McCormick 2011)?

The findings brought out an interesting balance between the norms of the Finnish labor market model and OLP operations largely relying on self-employment. Many talked against the labor market model's emphasis on standard employment, while at the same time, the OLPs' operations included protective and supporting elements of employment implemented into self-employed work, like worker insurances and wages determined by collective agreements. This can be considered a legitimation strategy or process of isomorphism (e.g., Frenken et al. 2020; Hossfeld 2018). While seeing themselves in opposition to traditional labor, OLPs still seek societal legitimacy by adopting the normative elements of the Finnish labor market model into their operations (e.g., Ilssøe & Larsen 2023).

This raises the question of whether these are just really Nordic ways of justifying platform work. If this research was applied to other countries and legal contexts, would we find differences in what is emphasized in the justifications and what institutional features are adapted in OLP operations? OLPs are often described as institutional chameleons that are flexible in implementing different operational choices in diverse institutional and legal frameworks (Vallas & Schor 2020). Thus, control in other countries may already be formed to meet the national demands. Further research should be carried out on how different institutional settings and stages of legitimation modify OLP operations and manager justifications.

The weakness of this study is the relatively small amount of data. This does not diminish the relevance or interest of the findings, but it obviously limits their generalizability. This issue has been addressed with a diverse sample of companies, but nonetheless, many interesting cases from the broad field of OLPs are not represented. Despite the limited sample, this study provides a much-needed comparison between different types of OLPs. The voice of platform managers has been underrepresented in work sociology and HRM research. This study is one contribution to a perspective that requires much more complementation. This is particularly relevant, as CEOs are directly responsible for OLPs and can provide valuable insights into the black box of OLP operations.

This kind of research could also benefit from different methodologies and perspectives. Discourse analysis methods could offer value in recognizing institutionalized discourses and counter discourses that occur in different institutional contexts. Future research could benefit from both quantitatively larger and qualitatively deeper analysis of manager perspectives. Still, this research has managed to bring out important findings about norms and values behind OLP operations. Managers are guided by similar perceptions of labor markets and feasible working life development. This is seminal in outlining how fair platform work is constituted in different OLP contexts.

While positions of entrepreneurial gig work promoters unite the studied OLPs, they are essentially companies operating in their own industries, types of work, and worker groups. The findings hint that some justifications could be further explained with industry and work-related aspects. It is recognized that highly controlled forms of platform work are more common in types of work that can be standardized. These OLPs also often operate with a less organized and more precarious workforce (Schor et al. 2020). Considering the laws and labor market structures, it can make these OLPs obvious targets of criticism and underline the need for managers to justify within the frame of critical discussions. This study has viewed OLPs as a part of platform work and gig-based labor. Future research would benefit from looking at OLPs more from the perspectives of industries and their institutional arrangements.

The focus on market control and contracts is well-reasoned, as these operations have been a major focus in platform work literature and legitimacy issues. Focusing on control has structured the analysis, but leaving other diversifying elements out has not weakened the results – rather the opposite. The fact that there are shared normative principles behind OLP operations, despite different industries and worker groups, provides valuable information considering the basis of OLPs.

The study provides a snapshot of a time when OLPs are institutionalizing and seeking societal legitimacy. Justifications reflect ongoing discussions and may alter over time as OLPs institutionalize and modify their operations to meet regulatory demands. During the time of writing, there have been proceedings with both the EU directive and national regulations. The institutional frame is constantly changing, and OLPs lack societal legitimacy in many ways. It remains uncertain what the place of OLPs will be in the Nordic labor markets.

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