



Precarity on the Platform: Processes of Commodifying Labor and Forms of Unpaid Work in Platformized Domestic Cleaning in Finland¹

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes how platformized domestic cleaning companies optimize labor processes and commodify labor. Drawing on qualitative research with migrant cleaners, we study how they struggle with the processes of labor commodification. They struggle for a living wage, which, for non-EU migrant workers, is entangled with a struggle over legal status. The optimization of the labor process imposes unpaid labor on the workers in the form of unpaid reputation management work and unpaid logistics work, that is, spatiotemporal optimization of movements between gigs, home, the company office, and the cleaning app. We find that migrant platform workers are excluded from the decommodifying protections of the Nordic welfare state, have less bargaining power than citizens, and are disciplined by a migration regime converting fluctuations of the rating system into a threat to legal residence. Platformized domestic cleaning exemplifies the broader recommodification of labor in the Nordics.

KEYWORDS

Commodification / domestic cleaning / migrant platform workers / platform work / platformization of cleaning / unpaid labor

Introduction

‘There are so many things that are kind of shady. Like the rating system. [...] They are obsessed with it.’ (Maria, a platform cleaner from an EU country)

‘[T]he market for home cleaning services is large and growing, although fragmented. With an obsessive attention to service quality and process optimization, together with strong values forming a coherent company culture, [the company] has rapidly taken a lead in the Finnish and Norwegian markets.’ (A venture capitalist company’s description of the platform cleaning company).

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These two diverging perspectives on a domestic cleaning company operating in the Nordics underline key characteristics of contemporary platform companies that provide on-demand services. The network logic of raising venture capital to grow fast and dominate the market is a *modus operandi* for platform companies (Srnicsek 2017). To do so, they rely on familiar tactics from other financialized sectors, such as acquiring smaller firms, cutting costs, and investing in the company's brand, to appear as attractive investment opportunities (Hoppania et al. 2024). To keep costs low, companies optimize their processes, making them as lean as possible (De Stefano 2016), while also minimizing labor costs. However, in the Nordic context, companies need to adjust to labor market regulations and, often, adhere to collective agreements (Jesnes 2019). For workers like Maria, this pursuit of efficiency translates into an obsession with ratings that is hidden from the workers. Algorithmic management (Lee et al. 2015) using such features as client ratings is a way to outsource part of the management of the labor process to the clients and the algorithm (Pulignano et al. 2024).

In this article, our starting point is the acknowledgment that the process of optimization, including algorithmic management, is central to each company's own reputation, brand, and profit-making model, as evident in the above quote from the venture capital company's website. Drawing on research on the commodification of labor in platform work (e.g., Aloisi 2016; De Stefano 2016) and unpaid labor on labor platforms (e.g., Collier et al. 2017; Pulignano et al. 2024), we examine the various ways in which companies seek to optimize labor and, in doing so, commodify it. Our article is based on a study of migrant cleaners in Finland. We analyze the forms of unpaid labor inherent in platformized cleaning and their impact on migrant workers. Most migrant workers, especially non-EU migrants, hold short-term conditional residence permits (Könönen 2018) that often tie them to specific labor sectors with few opportunities to change jobs or employers in labor markets characterized by widespread discrimination (Ahmad 2020). Thus, their position in the labor market is structurally one of limited freedom (Wide 2025). Our research question is as follows: What kinds of processes of labor commodification and forms of unpaid labor are present in platformized cleaning work in Finland?

This article draws on the analysis of two complementary datasets. Primary data are qualitative interviews with cleaners who are working or have worked through cleaning platforms, while secondary data are company websites and documents provided by our research participants, such as work contracts, screenshots of applications, and ratings and comments by customers. Having introduced our approach to the commodification of labor and unpaid labor, our article then introduces the research context and follows it with an overview of our data and methods. Our empirical analysis focuses on experiences of commodification of labor and the labor process, which we term *modularization of the labor process*. We find that the commodification of labor involves struggles over a living wage and legal status, while the optimization of the labor process involves a great deal of unpaid labor from workers, taking the forms of what we call *unpaid logistics work* and *unpaid reputation management work*.

Commodification of labor and unpaid work in platform work

The literature on the commodification of labor goes back to Marx, for whom commodification of labor power was necessary for the capitalist production system. Capitalist

production relies on workers who need to sell their labor power on the market: ‘labour-power can appear upon the market as a commodity, only if, and in so far as, its possessor, the individual whose labour-power it is, offers it for sale or sells it as a commodity’ (Marx [1867] 1990, p. 271) existing ‘only in his [sic] living body’ (Marx [1867] 1990, p. 272). Indeed, the value of this peculiar commodity ‘is the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of its owner’ (Marx [1867] 1990, p. 273). This value has been enshrined in labor and human rights treaties as the ‘living wage’, that is, the wage level necessary to afford the worker and their family a decent standard of living in each country (ILO 2025).

Polanyi (1944) advanced the discussion on the commodification of labor by developing the notion of ‘fictitious commodity’, referring to goods that in their essence are not meant to be sold on the market. He distinguished between three fictitious commodities (land, money, and labor), the last of which he defined as ‘human activity which goes with life itself’ (Polanyi 1944, p. 72) and as inseparable from its bearer. In Esping-Andersen’s (1990, p. 37) words, ‘[w]orkers are not commodities like others because they must survive and reproduce themselves and the society they live in’. Thus, institutions are needed to protect workers from risks, such as illness, and from macro-level economic cycles. The key societal institutions that protect labor from commodification – that is, they decommodify labor – are labor protections and the broader welfare state services. Neither decommodification nor its opposite, commodification – are all-or-nothing phenomena, but a matter of the ‘degree to which individuals, or families, can uphold a socially acceptable standard of living independently of market participation’ (Esping-Andersen 1990, p. 37). Accordingly, we focus on *processes of commodification*. We also acknowledge that even though Nordic welfare states have traditionally been forerunners in protecting labor from processes of commodification, since the 1980s they have moved from universality toward increasing conditionality of benefits and dependence on markets through workfare measures and active labor market policies – a trend that has been termed *recommodification* (e.g., Rubery et al. 2018; Vike et al. 2022). However, labor has never been fully decommodified in Nordic welfare states, and there have always been marginalized groups excluded from welfare state services, notably all non-citizens without access to permanent residence (Bendixsen & Näre 2024).

Processes of (de)commodification refer to labor relations that protect (or fail to protect) labor from a ‘pure market’ relationship. Precarious work can be defined as the lack of protection of labor from commodification and is associated with ‘low pay, insufficient and variable hours, short-term contracts and limited social protection rights [...] frequently found in, but not confined to, what are known as non-standard forms of employment (NSFE), including part-time, temporary and zero hours contracts and dependent self-employment’ (Rubery et al. 2018, p. 510). The processes of de/commodification of labor relate to the degree to which workers can rely on their labor to offer them a living wage and social protection, which, for non-citizens, includes protection from deportation (Maury et al. 2024; Näre & Maury 2024).

Labor platforms facilitate the commodification of labor in various ways. Existing research has demonstrated that platform companies seek to create a just-in-time labor force (Aloisi 2016; De Stefano 2016). Accordingly, workers are paid only for the time they work, excluding the costs of their own reproductive labor. This is especially clear when platform companies externalize non-billable costs onto the worker by engaging independent contractors who pay for their own social insurance and work equipment,

and/or when work is fragmented into discrete, piece-rate gigs or micro-tasks (Aloisi 2016; Wood et al. 2019), but it is also present in the platformized home-cleaning sector we study. The Finnish cleaning sector, like other platform labor sectors in the Nordics, uses a hybrid model in which some workers are engaged under an employment contract and others as solo self-employed workers (Jesnes 2019). The commodification of labor is enhanced by the algorithmic management of the labor process, which partly outsources management to the algorithm through client ratings and performance measures and requires workers to engage in unpaid labor. Existing research has revealed the consequences of algorithmic management for workers, especially in delivery work and online freelance work. It has highlighted the amount of unpaid labor involved in waiting for gigs and tasks, which can also involve paying for work through platform fees (Pulignano et al. 2024), and the unpaid work required to maintain customer ratings (Pulignano et al. 2025). We contribute to this literature by linking unpaid labor to a wider process of commodifying labor for migrants who have fewer alternatives than citizens, and by examining the forms it takes in platformized home cleaning.

Existing research on platformized home cleaning

Empirical research on platform labor has concentrated on ride hailing, food delivery, and various forms of online gig work (Haidar & Keune 2021; Ness 2023). In contrast, studies on platformized home cleaning have emerged only recently (e.g., Floros 2024; Floros & Jørgensen 2023; Gruszka et al. 2022; Tandon & Rath 2021). One reason for this is practical: household cleaners are less visible in the cityscape and more difficult to recruit (Orth & Baum 2026). Indeed, (in)visibility is one key lens through which platformized home cleaning and care work has been studied (e.g., Gruszka & Böhm 2022; Ticona & Mateescu 2018).

Existing research has demonstrated that analytical models from other gig economy sectors are often inadequate for capturing the specific dynamics involved in this work. This stems from two differences: the specific operational strategies of the domestic labor platforms themselves and the intimate, high-trust character of in-home care and cleaning work (Ticona & Mateescu 2018). Platformized home cleaning is a distinct category of labor within the gig economy. As a physical, in situ service, it contrasts sharply with the remote, digital completion of online crowdwork, and it is also distinguished from other location-based gigs, such as delivery work, by the high-stakes relationship of trust required for access to the private domestic sphere (Ticona & Mateescu 2018). Because cleaning work in private homes is not trackable in the way that, for example, a delivery route can be digitally tracked and algorithmically controlled, platforms rely on co-management by clients who use the rating system to exert control and determine the worker's 'market value' on the platform (Altenried & Niebler 2024, p. 361). The centrality of trust reconfigures technological mediation in this sector. Platform algorithms and rating systems are calibrated not just for logistical efficiency but also to vet workers, cultivate client confidence, and regulate the intimate dynamics of in-home service provision (Tandon & Rath 2021; Ticona & Mateescu 2018).

There is no uniform way in which platformized home cleaning is organized. It can be organized through *marketplace platforms* that display large pools of (ranked) workers from which clients can choose to perform the task. Many of these resemble crowdwork

platforms in that workers can price their tasks themselves. Another form of platformized cleaning is through *on-demand platforms* that have elements from food delivery platforms, in that workers cannot be chosen by the client but are assigned by an algorithm or a human manager. This model centralizes control with the platform dictating pricing, managing workers, and setting standards for the service (De Stefano 2016). The pricing structure in platformized home cleaning resembles temporary staffing agencies in that the company receives a cut from the clients who buy cleaning services.

On-demand platforms have become reliant on flexible and disposable migrant labor globally, including in the Nordics (e.g., Lam & Triandafyllidou 2021; Maury et al. 2024; Staalhane & Vassenden 2022; Van Doorn 2017; Van Doorn & Vijay 2024). Researchers have argued that for migrants who encounter discriminatory labor markets, platform work is attractive because it offers relatively quick and easy access to income: entry requirements are limited to a smartphone, an internet connection, and a valid residence permit (Andersen et al. 2024; Maury et al. 2024), the last of which can to some extent be circumvented by borrowing or renting someone else's account (Casas-Cortés 2026). The perceived attractiveness of platform work also lies in the sense of autonomy regarding when and where to work, but this can prove illusory once workers are confronted with long work hours, intensified work pace, precarious employment conditions, and the platforms' algorithmic management processes (Woodcock 2020). Moreover, as migrants are confronted with discriminatory labor markets while being partially excluded from welfare protection, often the alternative to precarious work is not unemployment, but another precarious job or deportation.

Platformized home cleaning in the Nordics and Finland

In the Nordic context, platformized home cleaning has received less attention than other forms of platform work. However, Floros (2024) and Floros and Jørgensen (2023) have analyzed the experiences of migrant workers active on housecleaning platforms in Denmark operating as marketplace platforms. Floros (2024) argued that while platformized cleaning offers flexibility to workers, it is also precarious, including job and income insecurity, insecurity caused by migrants' exclusion from welfare benefits, and insecurity related to their intersectional identities, such as gender, age, ethnicity, and migration status. Finnish research on on-demand platform work has so far studied platform workers' everyday experiences of control as well as their health and well-being. Their struggles have been examined in the context of restrictive and temporally limited migration regimes, primarily among food couriers (Alasoini et al. 2023; Maury et al. 2025; Mbare et al. 2024) but also in combined analyses of food delivery and platformized cleaning (Maury 2024; Maury et al. 2024). While the exploitation of migrants in the Finnish cleaning sector has been studied (Ollus 2016), this is, to our knowledge, the first study focusing exclusively on migrant workers' experiences of platformized home cleaning in Finland.

Researchers on platformized home cleaning and care work have argued that platforms selectively formalize what traditionally has been an informal labor sector (Ticona & Mateescu 2018), indicating how workers have to bear administrative, fiscal, and legal responsibilities that, in standard employment relationships, would be borne by the employer while keeping workers excluded from welfare protection (Floros &

Jørgensen 2022). However, domestic cleaning in Finland has not been predominantly informal work, at least not since the introduction of tax credits for domestic and household repair work in 2001 (Näre 2016). The credit system has become very popular, and its use increased exponentially from 32 million euros in 2001, when the system came into force nationwide, to over 517 million euros in 2022 (Taxpayers' Association in Finland 2025). In 2022, over 519,000 taxpayers benefitted from the state subsidy for purchasing household services; the majority used the tax credit for repair and maintenance work, while 21%, or over 108 million euros, went to household cleaning and care services (Taxpayers' Association in Finland 2025). The introduction of the tax credit has normalized the outsourcing of home cleaning in Finland (Näre 2016).

In platformized home cleaning, reputation and rating systems have been examined as forms of individualized visibility designed to build trust between workers and customers (Ticona & Mateescu 2018). At the same time, they operate as mechanisms of algorithmic control (Pulignano et al. 2023; Tandon & Rath 2022), effectively automating aspects of performance evaluation and labor process management and often inducing insecurity among workers. Rating systems have been found to reinforce power asymmetries by giving clients and platforms the authority to evaluate workers while offering workers little chance to evaluate clients (Teixeira 2025), and, on some platforms, by granting clients access to detailed worker profiles and ratings, whereas workers receive only limited gig information, such as location and duration (Gruszka et al. 2022). In the context of the platform cleaning company examined in our analysis, however, customers cannot browse visible worker profiles to select cleaners in advance, but they need to rate the service after the cleaning has taken place and can leave feedback for the worker.

The cleaning sector has conventionally been female-dominated and infused with intersecting forms of oppression based on class, migration status, and race (Näre 2013a). In Finland, cleaning is the most common job for migrants and household cleaning is conducted predominantly by migrant workers (Wide & Näre 2024). Cleaning companies have also actively recruited workers directly from non-EU countries, especially from the Philippines, since the early 2000s (Näre 2013b).

The Finnish migration regime includes various bureaucratic hurdles for non-EU labor migrants, including temporary residence permits and requirements for income and a work contract that do not correspond to the characteristics of low-wage labor markets. For non-EU labor migrants, first residence permits based on work are always temporary and usually issued for one year, or a maximum of two, after which the person needs to apply for an extended permit (new fixed-term residence permit). A non-EU labor migrant must be able to prove a steady income of at least 1,600 euros per month, including in the future, which is why it is not, in principle, possible to receive a residence permit for work based on a zero-hour contract or as a solo entrepreneur. Finland applies labor market testing to non-EU labor permits, which is in practice done by publishing lists of job titles that are exempted from an availability assessment. For many years until June 2024, domestic cleaning was exempted from availability assessment in many regions of Finland, but at the time of writing this article, it is not. Domestic cleaning is also performed by workers holding other types of residence permits, such as student residence permits, partly because labor-based permits are difficult to attain and keep.

While most cleaning companies in Finland do not operate through digital platforms, the biggest home cleaning company today is platformized and financialized, meaning that it has received funding from foreign capital investors. The company employs more

than 1,000 workers. Recruiting migrant workers has been a key strategy that has enabled the company to grow (company website). The platformized cleaning company has cleaners who work as solo entrepreneurs and as employees. The solo entrepreneurs' earnings depend on customer ratings. We did not explicitly choose to focus on migrant cleaners; we encountered only non-citizen cleaners as we recruited using qualitative methods.

Data and methods

The analysis draws on qualitative data on platform work produced as part of two research projects, Tackling Precarious and Informal Work in the Nordics and Caring Labour: A multi-modal study of migrant workers' care practices and mobilities. We conducted 35 qualitative interviews and participant observations with migrant workers engaged in platform labor in Finland. Our article zooms in on the part of the data that examines gig cleaning. Thus, the primary data consist of 11 semi-structured interviews with gig cleaners, all of whom had migrated to Finland and had experience of working via on-demand cleaning platforms in Finland, and participant observation during workdays. We connected with the research participants by distributing information about the study in Facebook groups related to employment, education, and diasporic communities. Nine of the interviewed cleaners were women, two were men, and their ages ranged from 20 to 55 years. Six of the interviewed gig cleaners had migrated from non-EU countries, which meant encountering strict residence permit requirements. Their first labor-based residence permits were temporary, valid for only one year, and conditional on income limits and full-time working hours, while student and entrepreneur permits carried income requirements of their own. Five interviewees were from other EU countries, and some had already engaged in gig cleaning in their country of origin before moving to Finland. Six interviewees had experience of working as dependent solo entrepreneurs, one had moved from freelancing to a full-time cleaner position, and four interviewees had been employed full-time. The interviews were thematically structured, focusing on the interviewee's migration background, general work experiences in Finland, experiences of platformized cleaning, and perceptions of social life in Finland and beyond. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and pseudonymized to ensure confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained either orally or in writing before each interview.

The data also incorporate Näre's fieldwork diary accompanying the interviews and secondary data collection and Maury's fieldwork diary based on participant observation. Maury's participant observation included shadowing workers during their workdays in the Helsinki metropolitan area, holding informal discussions between gigs, and online participant observation. Accompanying workers from one gig to another provided the opportunity to discuss the organizational structure of their daily work as mediated through the platforms, as well as immediate reactions and reflections on the work done. The secondary data used in the article consist of company websites and documents provided by our research participants, such as work contracts, screenshots of applications, ratings, and comments by customers.

The primary data (interviews and fieldwork diary) were thematically coded using similar codes across the data sets covering the main topics of work (including freedom, insecurity, unpaid work, and deregulation), social life, migration, algorithms, and apps.

In this study, we analyze the data using qualitative content analysis, prioritizing the common themes of unpaid work and the impact of the app and the algorithms in shaping platformized cleaning work. The primary analysis was done by the authors individually, after which the individual analyses were discussed in joint meetings with the objective of identifying, analyzing, and discerning patterns within the data, whereby data excerpts were dynamically compared against existing research and theoretical frameworks. Consequently, the analysis combines inductive and deductive analysis, integrating theoretical research perspectives with the research subjects' own analyses, understandings, and theorizations of social and political phenomena and classifications. This is similar to the 'iterative dialogue (both metaphorical and literal) between data and an amalgam of existing and new conceptualizations,' as discussed by Timmermans and Tavory (2012, p. 180) in relation to abductive analysis. The secondary data are used to clarify or back up claims occurring in the primary data. The research project was assessed by the University of Helsinki Ethical Review Board in Humanities and Social and Behavioral Sciences.

Processes of labor commodification in platformized home cleaning

Struggles for a living wage and legal status

While the Nordic model has traditionally protected workers from the obligation to accept low wages and precarious working conditions, platform companies have reinforced working conditions that commodify labor in the Nordics (Oppegaard et al. 2025). Our interviewees, especially those who were working as 'independent contractors', struggled to earn a sufficient income through cleaning. Sara had spent several months working as a cleaner with a service contractor agreement. She explained that some weeks she could have a full working week, followed by a week with just one two-hour gig, despite her living costs remaining high:

I will pay the insurance, the taxes, the accountant, the rent, and I would be left with a couple of hundred for the month. I've never borrowed so much money [as during] these eight months. (Sara's interview with Hakala)

It was not uncommon for our interviewees to rely on loans or their partners' financial support to compensate for fluctuating income. Maria showed her weekly schedule with a few gigs here and there, explaining that:

You never know how much you're gonna get every month. Even if you get like regular customers, it happens so often that customers cancel their order. It happens so many times that I'm not working, not a single hour in a week. (Maria's interview with Näre)

The instability of income is characteristic of platform labor across sectors in the Nordics, as Floros (2024) has discussed in relation to home cleaning in Denmark, Karlsson (2025) in relation to creative freelancers in Sweden, and ourselves (Maury et al. 2024) in relation to delivery workers in Finland. We conceptualize this instability of income as part of the process of the commodification of labor in platformized cleaning. The interviewees'

wages were insufficient for them to survive as living labor (Marx [1867] 1990), and they had to rely on friends and partners to make ends meet. Having to borrow money to make ends meet while working speaks volumes of the labor precarity induced by treating labor as a commodity. As full-time solo entrepreneurs, Maria and Sara are not fully covered by Finnish unemployment insurance to protect them from unstable income. Indeed, none of the cleaners we interviewed had relied on welfare state services, such as unemployment benefits, but had turned either to friends or to the market to borrow money.

Non-EU migrants with short-term residence permits are another group excluded from the decommodification offered by the welfare state to permanent residents (Wide & Näre 2024). In addition to being excluded from welfare state protections, their chances of maintaining a labor-based residence permit depend on several requirements inherent in the Finnish migration regime, such as a full-time work contract and a wage that exceeds the monthly income limit. For non-EU migrants with temporary labor-based residence permits, the instability of income leads to an additional struggle over legal residence, as exemplified by Arturo's case. Arturo was directly recruited from the Philippines by the cleaning company. The recruitment in itself included various costs for Arturo, including visa and permit costs, as well as two airplane tickets, and once in Finland, he found out that, instead of working under the full-time contract he had signed in the Philippines in order to be granted a labor-based residence permit, he would initially work part-time during a three-month trial period. When it was time to renew his one-year residence permit, his application was rejected because he did not meet the requirements of full-time work and income during the previous year. Arturo explained the economic and health consequences that losing his status meant for him:

I had to let go of my apartment. I gave away all my stuff because I don't have anything to pay with. I cannot apply for anything, [receive] benefits at all, because I don't have a valid visa. I was devastated at that time. [...] The answer [from the platform company] kept on changing. I even cry there because I had too much of sleeplessness. I went to the doctor because I cannot sleep. [...] All my savings and everything was washed away because I didn't have anything. (Arturo's interview with Näre)

As a non-EU migrant worker who had lost his right to legal residence in the country, Arturo was excluded from welfare protections and had to cover his living costs himself. He became indebted and, five years later, was still paying off his debts. For Arturo, the loss of status and income led to further precariousness, as evidenced in his health problems. He ended up quitting the cleaning sector, and after a period of living undocumented in Finland, he eventually managed to regularize his legal status through a job in another low-wage sector that he found through personal contacts. Treating labor as a commodity bought and sold on global markets without considering the specific legal status requirements for migrant workers or their exclusion from the welfare state is characteristic of any non-EU migrant worker's structural position in the Nordic countries (Näre & Maury 2024; Wide & Näre 2024).

Next, we analyze how processes of labor commodification are visible in the algorithmic management and optimization of the labor process and the forms of unpaid labor that emerge in these management practices.



Unpaid logistics work

Platform companies seek to optimize their labor processes by deploying workers who are ‘compensated on a “pay-as-you-go” basis [and] only paid during the moments they actually work for a client’ (De Stefano 2016, p. 476), and by transferring all non-billable costs to the workers. Accordingly, the platformized cleaning company provided cleaning cloths, detergents, and t-shirts, but no means of transport from one customer to the next, as is customary in other home cleaning companies. They did not pay for travel to the first gig or from the last one. In addition, while it would have been possible to get the cleaning cloths washed at the company’s premises, workers commonly calculated that it was easier to wash them at home at their own expense than to travel regularly to the office.

This not only imposes a just-in-time workforce, but also serves as a means of extracting unpaid work from cleaners by imposing *unpaid logistics work* on them. Samir described in detail how unpaid logistics work shapes his work routine: the gigs themselves are the only paid instances amid long days of traveling across the vast metropolitan area of Helsinki – including the neighboring cities of Espoo and Vantaa – without actual breaks.

It is all day, from 8 in the morning to 6 p.m. So all this time it’s stress and run between the metro and train, there’s no time to eat, I eat in the metro always, or train. There is no time enough to drink a coffee, only we clean and we get feedback from the customer. (Samir’s interview with Maury)

Although whole days are spent checking the cleaning app for updates on the schedule, searching for the most optimal routes, and following reviews and comments received, the workday is only partially paid for. The ongoing movement also involves traveling to the company office in the city center to pick up customers’ keys and cleaning equipment: ‘I have many keys, I can just open the door, clean, switch the light and close the door. Then I return the key to the office. They don’t pay to me salary for the traveling’, Samir said.

By extracting unpaid logistics work from cleaners, platform companies seek to optimize the labor process by transferring the risk of cancellation to the worker. Even though customers are charged the full price for gigs canceled with less than seven days’ notice (according to the company website), cleaners do not receive full compensation. Maria explained how the system works for solo entrepreneur workers:

I have to ask for a day off 30 days in advance, which sucks [but] the customer is entitled to cancel the gig even on the very same day. [...] I must wait at least 30 minutes [...] and if I go there and nobody opens the door [the company] pays for one hour of work. But sometimes I travel one hour [for work]. (Maria’s interview with Näre)

The extraction of unpaid logistics work applies not only to solo self-employed workers, but also to workers who have an employment relationship. According to the collective bargaining agreement, employed workers must be notified of their shifts two weeks ahead; however, a shift only specifies that their ‘main responsibility is to do the

cleanings' (cleaner handbook), while the actual location of these cleanings can change with very little notice. Also, if no bookings are scheduled, the cleaner must continuously keep track of the app, because gigs can be assigned on the same day and cannot be declined:

When we contact you to assign a suitable cleaning during your work shift, you are obligated to go to that cleaning. [...] It is not acceptable to leave far away from your home/work area, take other jobs, go shopping, babysit or do anything that would prevent you from leaving within a short period of time. We expect you to answer your phone and be able to leave to a booking shortly after contacting you. This means that your cleaning supplies are already packed and all you need to do is to put the necessary outdoor clothing on, take the supplies and start your travel towards the cleaning booking address. (cleaner handbook)

For full-time cleaners, this means that they need to check their app constantly, even while working, as the gigs can be changed during the same day. Rowena explained what this means in practice:

One time I tried to complain [to the company] because I check my schedule in the evening and then in the morning and it was the same [...] and then I check my schedule [after the first gig] I was about to go because the second work is near my home and then when I check it and go to the map, it was rescheduled. [...] They [had] put in another client. [...] I was late [for the second gig]. [...] I thought that I have this time [between the gigs] for myself. I already have plans also. [...] My manager told me that you should have checked it earlier. Like when you are throwing the garbage or something. (Rowena's interview with Näre)

As Rowena explained, workers are expected to check the app and organize the next day's logistics right before going to bed at night and again the first thing in the morning before starting work. Yet, as her experience demonstrates, even this level of preparation is not always sufficient because the company can reassign gigs while a worker is still completing the previous one, leaving it to workers to constantly monitor the app.

The unpaid logistics work not only extends workers' hours beyond their normal shifts but also requires cleaners to perform additional tasks during their off-hours, such as checking the app, planning routes, and optimizing their own daily logistics. In Rowena's account, the fact that she was late for her gig could have direct consequences for her customer rating, thereby affecting her position in the company.

The unpaid logistics work, combined with the flexibility offered to customers to choose their preferred times for cleaning, can mean that workers spend several hours travelling at asocial hours. Arturo told of a customer who wanted the cleaner to start at seven in the morning, which meant that Arturo had to leave his home at five in the morning.

Interviewees spoke of long walks from bus stops to reach customers, which are especially straining and time-consuming during the harsh winter months. With gigs spread around the metropolitan region, which spans four neighboring cities, Rowena relied on her husband to drive her to work:



Today I worked in Itis [part of Eastern-Helsinki] and Espoo [a city west of Helsinki], but if I travel by bus, it's going to take one hour and 36 minutes. I asked my husband to bring me there. Anyway, because it's too far and I have to get up early and travel very long time [...] it's about 30 minutes travel with a car. And tomorrow I have in Vantaa, one hour 42 minutes I'm checking already. It's very far. I have to start [work] at 7.55 [am]. (Rowena's interview with Näre)

Rowena and her husband tried to manage the difficult logistics by covering the cost of travel themselves. By not providing workers with means of travel on the pretext of being ecological, as one interviewee put it, the platform company directly benefits from workers' unpaid logistics work.

Unpaid reputation management work

Platform companies commodify labor by fragmenting the labor process into standardized, time-bound tasks. By fragmenting the labor process, it is possible to partially outsource its management to the algorithm and client. This, which we term the *modularization of the labor process*, has been discussed as *micro-tasking* in relation to online crowdworking platforms (Aloisi 2016). In the case of platformized household cleaning, the companies do not sell the time of the worker to the clients but 'cleaning packages' that entail certain services. Such packaging lowers the threshold for consumers to rely on the market for their social reproductive work (Huws 2019). However, as with other on-demand platform work, such as food delivery (Maury et al. 2024), the everyday realities of the work rarely correspond to the neat packaging on the app. Workers need to arrive at the place of work in all weather conditions, as we discussed above in relation to unpaid logistics work, and the customers are expected to prepare the spaces so that they can be cleaned. Teresa highlighted a crucial difference between organizing and cleaning:

When a customer buys three hours, they have to know that if I have to spend 20 minutes or 30 minutes organizing the house to be cleaned – that's 20, 30 minutes less that they are going to have on cleaning. (Teresa's interview with Näre)

When the customer's estimate does not match the platform's standardized service selection, an inevitable gap between customer expectations and service reality is created. Under the guise of customization and choice, the packaging of services places the responsibility for assessing the scope and duration of the work required for the cleaning entirely on the customer. Maria describes a situation in which this shift in responsibility led directly to her being penalized for not performing a task that was not included in the original order:

[The customer] was complaining that I didn't clean the trash cabinet but it wasn't in the order because it's an extra service, so it's not included in the regular cleaning [...] so I got like a bad feedback and my salary got lowered because of that and from the customer service, they were like, the customer has the right to say whatever they want. (Maria's interview with Näre)

When the customer's expectation (a clean trash cabinet) did not match the modularized service process, the customer dissatisfaction was not resolved by the platform or by the company's human resources, but instead translated directly into a penalty for the worker in the form of a negative rating and a pay cut. Thus, a conflict is generated at the intersection of the platform's modular labor process and its rating system. One way that platform companies optimize their processes is by partly externalizing managerial responsibility to the customers. In non-platformized household cleaning, a manager and a cleaner usually estimate the time required during a test cleaning. Platformized cleaning companies task the customer with scoping the work, leading to possible mismatches between the purchased service package and the reality of the task – for instance, when the time allocated is insufficient or when customer expectations exceed the bounds of a 'basic' service.

The pressure to navigate such situations can be so intense that workers may rely on unpaid labor to cope. Angelica, who was no longer working through the platform at the time of the interview, described how she would help her sister whenever a customer had underestimated the time required for a gig – 'I was there with my sister, so I always help her' – to maintain her sister's high rating. Gig cleaners are often caught in a no-win situation, forced to bear the full material and reputational cost of a situation that is structurally embedded in the platform's own 'optimized' operating model. A great deal of unpaid labor, which we term *unpaid reputation management work*, is required from workers to circumvent possible reputational costs.

The Finnish platform company utilizes a rating system with four criteria: starting with a nebulous 'overall feeling in the apartment', followed by 'cleaning quality', 'punctuality', and 'behavior of the cleaner' (independent contractor agreement). The ratings and feedback often do not match, which makes the whole system absurd, in Angelica's words, because it depends completely on the customer's subjective preferences:

As a cleaner you feel like you already did so much. [...] I had this client. When I always have like 5 on my other client. But this client. [...] She never gives me 5. She's always saying oh, very good cleaning and she always gives me like three or four. The only time she gave me five is when I pick up her dog poo in the house. (Angelica's interview with Näre)

The demand for engagement on the platform is one of the various forms of unpaid work involved in platform work. Ticona and Mateescu (2018) emphasized that addressing negative ratings, sudden suspensions, and other platform-imposed penalties requires considerable tenacity from workers, along with a significant amount of free time to navigate platform rules or appeal to customer service in hopes of recovering lost earnings. Ticona (2022) has termed the unpaid work required from precarious workers in domestic and care work the 'digital hustle'.

The ratings given by clients push platform workers into internalizing forms of self-management (Kampouri 2022). Elena highlighted this dual demand in an interview with Maury. While she described cleaning as a 'mechanical job' requiring little thought, she stressed the importance of being good at what she termed 'customer care,' explaining: 'If you made even the slightest mistake, they [customers] would take that as a big problem – and if you have a good possibility to connect with customers, that's how you know that will make you have good ratings'. Elena's experience illustrates how the worker–client relationship is reframed in terms of customer care, where a cleaner's ability to create a

positive emotional connection directly influences their ratings. This pressure is a constant presence. As Maria noted, ‘I always have to walk the extra mile in order to avoid bad feedback’.

This tension is compounded by the deeply subjective nature of ratings. As Sara, a worker from Eastern Europe, explained, the rating system is not an objective measure of performance, but a reflection of a client’s personal standards. She highlights the injustice this creates for workers:

The rating thing is very ... I mean it’s not like university grades. It’s very, *very* personal. Someone may say ok, I’ll put a four since I spotted some dust on the floor or something – it’s like a minor issue. Someone might be like, oh I spotted like a stain on the mirror – that’s a two. (Sara’s interview with Hakala)

Here, the platform’s rating system functions to translate subjective, affective responses from clients into disciplinary data points. A client’s bad day or a personal standard of cleanliness becomes a quantifiable input that the platform uses to manage its workforce. The worker is not managed by a human boss but by the aggregated, and often arbitrary, data extracted from the very encounters the platform facilitates.

The workers develop strategies around the platform company’s criterion of ‘overall feeling in the household’ that can be understood as referring to a more intangible affective labor involved in cleaning work (Maury et al. 2025). Angelica’s strategy was to enhance the ‘overall feeling’ after cleaning by sometimes adding a bit of her own scented detergent to the unscented ones provided by the company. She explained that she wanted the customer, upon coming home, not only to ‘see that the house is so clean’ but also to find it ‘smelling fresh, it smells clean’ (Angelica’s interview with Näre). Here, Angelica is not only doing unpaid reputation management work, but also investing her own money to make it in the rating game. The financial incentive for the workers is a quarterly bonus of 300 euros for full-time workers who maintain high ratings.

A high rating is not only a bonus; it is also a minimum requirement for continued platform access and income stability. The hourly pay of cleaners who work as self-employed workers depends on their previous 3 months’ average customer rating. Maria showed Näre her contract with the cleaning company. The contract included a table with a fine-tuned fee structure that changes according to customer rating average and hours worked for the company. The table reveals that the minimum average rating should be 4.00, which grants a new cleaner an hourly pay of 16.50 euros, while the maximum attainable pay, after 700 completed hours and an average rating between 4.80 and 5.00, is 19.50 euros per hour.

Sara explained that below a rating of 4.00, the worker risks deactivation and will be required to undergo additional ‘training’. She described the persistent anxiety that this creates, as even a single unfair rating can have lasting financial repercussions:

Some customers don’t put the rating unless they have something to complain about. [...] Of course, the support people would somehow contact the customer and ask how bad it was and if they can do anything better. But nothing changes. Even if you manage to prove to them that it wasn’t actually your fault or something; the rating will still stay and influence your income and everything. (Sara’s interview with Hakala)

As Sara suggested, the rating is based on the client's subjective calculation of the worth of the provided service. Thus, a customer's understanding of good cleaning and good service, and their satisfaction with how the final cleaning results match the modularized service they had originally purchased, becomes the definitive, seemingly objective record of the worker's performance. This evaluation is often produced in relation to racialized and gendered perceptions of the worker (Maury 2024), underscoring the customers' privilege of entering a rating without concern, while for the gig workers, 'the rating will stay and influence your income' (Maury et al. 2024). The finality of the rating, regardless of its fairness, directly impacts a worker's income, their need to potentially invest more energy in reputation management work, and their very ability to secure future work through the platform.

Conclusion

While the emerging research on platformized home cleaning has highlighted how algorithms and rating systems are calibrated for logistical efficiency, the outsourcing of management, and the creation of trust within the private sphere of the household (Ticona & Mateescu 2018), our analysis reveals the everyday consequences of these practices for migrant workers, for whom the struggle for a living wage is often closely connected to the struggle for legal status.

We reveal what platform companies' optimization of processes – and their obsession with performance ratings as part of their business model and brand-building – means for daily work practices. Analyzed from the perspective of the workers, these strategies increase labor commodification. Platform companies package household cleaning online in a way that fragments a complex labor process into standardized tasks – what we term the *modularization of the labor process* – shifting the responsibility for assessing the scope and duration of the required work onto the customer.

We find that platformized home cleaning companies extract various forms of unpaid work from workers. The flexibility offered to customers to cancel gigs at the last minute, the company's practice of leaving workers to manage their own daily logistics and travel, and the lack of compensation for travel to the first and from the last gig of the day all result in workers performing a great deal of *unpaid logistics work* for the company. They are compelled to do so because punctuality is one of the criteria by which they are rated, and performance ratings cannot be ignored by workers if they want to stay active on the platform. Punctuality is only one aspect of the *reputation management* in which workers must engage; they must also manage interpersonal relationships with customers (online and offline) and seek creative ways to fulfill the various vague and subjective criteria by which their performance is measured. This contradiction between platform companies' attempts to standardize complex labor processes and the reputation management required from workers is particularly accentuated in home cleaning, which takes place in the privacy of the domestic sphere.

Our findings contribute to the existing research on platform work, which has predominantly focused on on-demand platform work taking place in public spaces, such as food delivery or ride-hailing. Beyond this, our analysis advances the understanding of labor commodification in two ways. First, we show that commodification operates not only through the wage relation – paying workers solely for billable task time – but



also through the unpaid labor that workers must perform to remain employable on the platform at all. Unpaid logistics work and unpaid reputation management work are not incidental costs of platform work; rather, they make up an essential part of the labor through which workers maintain themselves as sellable labor power. Since labor power is inseparable from its bearer, the fictitious commodity of labor must be sustained, transported, and made trustworthy off the clock and at the workers' own expense, while the platform captures the value that this unpaid labor produces. The modularization of the labor process is central to this arrangement because by packaging cleaning into standardized, separately priced tasks, the platform renders billable only a fraction of the labor that the service in fact requires, externalizing the remainder onto workers and the evaluative judgment of customers.

For non-EU migrant workers, the Finnish migration regime does not merely run parallel to these processes of commodification, but intensifies them. Because labor-based residence permits are conditional on continuous full-time income, workers cannot afford the income fluctuations, lost gigs, or lowered ratings that the platform model systematically produces. The result is a self-reinforcing loop: By tying legal residence to continuous income while foreclosing both unemployment and easy movement between jobs, the permit regime compels migrant workers to remain in commodifying labor relations, while platformized work produces exactly the instability that threatens their legal status. Migrant platform workers are thus exposed to a situation in which they are excluded from the decommodifying protections of the welfare state, have less bargaining power than citizens, and are disciplined by a migration regime that converts every fluctuation of the rating system into a potential threat to legal residence. In this sense, platformized home cleaning exemplifies the broader recommodification of labor in Nordic welfare states – a recommodification that is most acute at its margins, among those who were never fully included in these protections to begin with.

Finally, to understand and tackle precarious labor in the Nordics, an understanding of everyday work practices is needed. Only by investigating the daily management of labor processes and working practices, as well as the various meanings that work has for workers with different legal statuses and backgrounds, can we grasp how platform labor is changing Nordic labor markets and how precarity on platforms is experienced.

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