

# ‘I don’t know what awaits me.’ Understanding Uncertainty and Spatiotemporal Flexibility among Platform-based Food Delivery Couriers in Romania<sup>1</sup>

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**‘I don’t know what awaits me.’ Understanding Uncertainty and Spatiotemporal Flexibility among Platform-based Food Delivery Couriers in Romania.** Drawing from a qualitative study of food delivery platform labour and critical labour theory on the platformisation of work, this article explores how workers experience flexible time resources in Romania and how algorithmic management controls the labour process of delivery through autonomy and variation. In the context of an emerging platform economy in everyday life in Romania, our findings from in-depth interviews with couriers illustrate how delivery workers feel pressured to find adaptive methods to manage the time constraints of their workplace. By framing solutions for gaining a weekly cash income, this article explains how spatiotemporal flexibility and fast delivery are mediated by the excellence scores of the apps’ algorithmic management. The business model of delivery platforms generates changes in the workers’ norms of work and increases the uncertainty when they interact with the platforms’ tools. This study explains workers’ strategies in precarious working situations by dividing our findings into a thematic coding analysis that describes experiences in food delivery: flexibility and excellence.

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**Key words:** Food-delivery platform work; Eastern Europe; labour process; digital algorithms; flexibility; excellence score

## Introduction

Lixandru, a food delivery courier with over three years of service at Food Panda, has reached a turning point in his career. Comparing his previous jobs with food delivery, he appreciates the lack of routine and flexible working arrangements that the platform offers him: *‘I don’t have the same routine as others who have to be at the office at 8 AM, work, take a lunch break at 12 PM, and then return the next day to the office. I’ve had different jobs before, and it’s not a routine where you have to be tied down at a specific time.’* Digital labour platforms found a friendly economic environment in everyday life in Romania. Numerous delivery services have moved to apps, providing a user-friendly and accessible infrastructure for selling food at any hour and any day.

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The ecosystem of food delivery platforms in Romania is very dynamic. The COVID-19 crisis has brought food delivery platforms such as Glovo, Food Panda, Bolt Food and Tazz by Emag into positive public attention. These platforms operate as multinational businesses increasingly reliant on information technology and algorithmic management to drive their profitability, but they also function as labour organisations. Many platform companies emerge as start-ups. For example, Tazz by Emag was founded in Romania and has now become one of the prominent employers in the market of food delivery services after acquiring Uber Eats. The Food Panda platform was taken over by the Glovo platform and moved its headquarters to another country.

The elevated levels of job uncertainty and reduced wages during the pandemic represented a tipping point for food delivery companies. They gradually expedited their business models to meet the amplified demand for home deliveries and employed hundreds of thousands of couriers in desperate need of a regular income. In the Romanian labour market, food delivery is the main platform-based activity affected by low wages, intermittence, precarious occupations and limited provision for social protection schemes. The model of platform labour regulation in Romania is similar to other European countries in Eastern and Southern Europe: the platforms are not recognised as employers, and the platform workers from our study are classified as employees with part-time and temporary contracts, while some are independent contractors with or without employees. Being an employee in Romania automatically entitles a worker to some employment rights, including minimum wage, health protections, sick pay and working time legislation concerning part-time and full-time contracts. Other social protection benefits such as maternity pay, holidays and pensions are subject to previous contributions to the social protection systems. Concerning social dialogue, trade unions in Romania have historically inadequately represented service sector workers. This fact has generally led to a lack of protection against unfair dismissal and limited collective representation rights for the food delivery sector. Even though labour regulations in Romania provide employment rights to workers in the service sector, our study revealed that subcontracting practices still exist in the relationship between workers and their employers. Individual social protection rights for self-employed workers working with platforms are optional because labour regulations do not provide formal coverage. Additionally, we argue that delivery platforms have found a loophole in the pandemic related labour legislation to worsen the precarious situation of workers, especially those who experienced abusive dismissals and forced unemployment leave.

Romania as a separate case study in the scholarship on digital labour platforms in Central and Southern Europe is rather scarce. In the region, the focus has been on the prevalence of internet and platform work in Bulgaria, Hungary,

Latvia, Poland and Slovakia (Piasna et al. 2022), Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine (European Training Foundation 2021), along with the fragmentation of the labour market, delivery work opportunities and personal transportation in Poland and Hungary during the COVID-19 crisis (Polkowska 2020; Makó et al. 2020; Simonovits et al. 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on platform workers' working conditions in Romania was documented before in studies on social protection schemes of self-employment and platform work (Pop – Urse 2017; Roşioru 2021; Wallis 2021; Badoi 2020; Sabanova – Badoi 2022).

The findings indicate that the platform sector in the country is expanding. However, the current labour regulations only pertain to traditional work arrangements and do not align with the labour requirements of platform workers. With the EU Directive adopted on 11 March 2024, platform workers now have a chance to secure better working conditions. The EU regulatory framework offers guidelines that have the potential to benefit hundreds of thousands of workers in Romania by affording them employment status and social protection.

This paper aims to uncover the working conditions of platform workers in the platform-based food delivery sector in Romania by examining the experiences of food delivery couriers. We explore how they navigate uncertainty at the intersection of algorithmic decision-making and spatio-temporal flexibility in their daily work. The paper takes an analytical approach that focuses on empirical narratives of the workers from the food delivery platform sector. The study involved conducting a thematic analysis on 17 interviews with food delivery platform workers from eight platforms: Bolt, Glovo, Bringo, Food Panda, Takeaway, Tazz by Emag, BeeFast and Tookan.

This article is organised as follows. First, it provides a theoretical overview of the interplay between platform workers' experiences of pursuing fragmented working hours and the techniques that measure their work, from previous research. It then looks at the institutional framework of Romania to identify common themes across the experiences of couriers. The discussion is structured under a thematic approach with inductive and deductive coding (Green – Thorogood 2004; Saldana 2011). We divided our analysis into two main dimensions: flexibility and excellence. In our analysis, we applied Hirschman's (1970) typology to pinpoint the working experiences of Romanian couriers: loyalty and exit. We interpreted the typology by referring to the workers who choose to remain on the platform due to the potential advantages of flexibility. Other workers may opt to pursue opportunities elsewhere because they are disheartened by the algorithmic decision-making employed by platforms. We examine how these algorithmic tools influence their labour process through the excellence scores. Finally, we investigate workers' experiences as distinctive

strategies that help couriers cope with a new form of work. The paper extrapolates the findings from our study with the institutional context that regulates platform labour in Romania. The conclusions integrate the main results and recommendations for future work policies.

## **Theoretical framework**

### ***Spatio-temporal flexibility***

Digital labour platforms operate under the premise of spatiotemporal mobility and flexibility marked by a radical neo liberalisation of various forms of work and freelancing opportunities mediated by technology. Digital labour platforms provide an entry point for precarious workers to atypical jobs that offer flexibility and easy employment (Huws et al. 2018). Vulnerable groups at risk of social exclusion from the labour market, such as unemployed people, migrants and low-skilled workers, rely on platform work for additional income. They experience the benefits of flexible working time arrangements and mobile work in a user-friendly app accessible through any smartphone connected to the internet. Romania is one of the countries in Europe where, in recent years, food delivery platform work has attracted vulnerable categories of workers.

By providing the freedom to set working hours, digital labour platforms in Romania offer a viable yet exploitative alternative to the mainstream labour market. Workers are recruited with promises of flexible hours, autonomy, performance-based wages and opportunities for a mobile lifestyle (Wallis 2021). These platforms profoundly impact workers' lives, from frequent shifts in control and performance measurement to the reproduction of algorithms and techniques (Schor et al. 2020). This new reality, marked by algorithmic tracking, affects workers' well-being, with the pressure of expedited delivery, tight schedules and continuous work during evenings and holidays. The pursuit of extra income and bonuses often leads to psychosocial stress, income unpredictability and discriminatory practices – all exacerbated by algorithms (Badoi 2024).

Findings from Central and Southern European countries describe the vulnerable status of platform workers, who must manage flexible working time arrangements and related income insecurities. Platform workers operate in highly individualised arrangements without bargaining possibilities, where platforms often require workers to take responsibility for compliance with local regulations (Muszynski et al. 2022). Due to constant availability, flexible working time intensifies work and stress. Labour platforms contribute to work intensification through several factors: they introduce new types of semi-automated control that can have an even greater impact on workers' daily lives (Heiland 2021). This is done through algorithm-driven systems that rate and rank employees, penalising them for absences, inactivity, or delayed responses

by reducing their visibility to customers. For workers, the line between work and personal life is becoming increasingly unclear due to global competition on these platforms.

The continuous presence of being ‘logged in’ in the app for real-time tasks shifts different interpretations of flexibility in our research. On the one hand, flexibility arises from the courier’s positive perceptions of the freedom to work without physical surveillance and being monitored by a person (a boss). On the other hand, the requirement of a constant online presence comes with the pressure to meet deadlines and deliver quickly to acquire bonuses from clients. The freedom to work without surveillance empowers them to be their own bosses and to feel like entrepreneurs in a platform capitalism environment that motivates them to pursue platform work (Barratt et al. 2020). The entrepreneurial agency of gig workers follows the self-determination theory when workers feel motivated by autonomy and competence. Building on Foucault’s theory of the governance of the self as enterprise, we incorporate the freedom in a dilemma of increasingly detailed control systems within labour platforms (Foucault 2004; Cooper 2015).

In many European countries, media discourses already present the entrepreneurial vision of the growing business models in the platform economy and opportunities for innovative start-ups (Sabanova – Badoi 2022). In Romania, platform work has allowed people to generate additional income and acquire specific skills to develop similar business models (Barcevičius et al. 2021). Labour platforms have reshaped understandings of traditional employment settings by replacing them with entrepreneurial opportunities to build solo careers and develop business models: ‘*Workers were able to spend time in their cars, alone, without supervision from a boss or much interaction with customers.*’ (Griesbach et al. 2019: 12)

As a consequence, food delivery workers face the paradox of navigating the potential benefits of temporal flexibility in their work. Relying on Hirschman’s theory of organisation (1970), our findings suggest it appears as a potential loyalty factor leading to the desire to stay on platforms. We explain this paradox by the conflicting aspects of job quality and the precarious nature of their work. Flexibility is often seen as the primary advantage of platform work, but in association with algorithmic control, it also contributes to the overall uncertainty of the job, a central dimension ‘in unpacking precarity’ (Kahancová et al. 2020).

Following discussions in sociology, there is a growing agreement about the dimensions of job quality and the impact of technology on labour, as noted by Sennett (2007) and Brenner et al. (2010). Platform capitalism describes how technology has led to a more flexible labour market, resulting in a divide

between good and bad jobs (Kalleberg 2011). Working under precarious conditions increases the risk of poverty due to low wages and long-term job insecurity (Kalleberg 2009). These new work arrangements have contributed to a form of poverty that has disrupted the lives of workers.

Post-Fordist labour theory examines how the increasingly flexible labour market primarily offers low-quality and precarious job opportunities to vulnerable workers. Confronting Castel's work, he discusses how the growing precariousness of work is a direct result of the new technological demands of modern capitalism. This phenomenon not only impacts individuals across different social classes but also has far-reaching consequences for working conditions, work-life balance and overall life strategies (Castel 1996).

### ***Work uncertainty and algorithmic control***

Digital labour platforms broker work, introducing a structure and organisation that emphasises technical control through algorithms. Economically, algorithms keep both marginal and labour costs relatively low. In this way, food delivery platforms rely on cheap labour to allow a high fluctuation and often an oversupply of workers (Altenried 2021). Digital platforms serve as intermediaries in a multifaceted market, involving clients, service providers and advertisers, facilitating a range of social and economic interactions. In Romania, platforms like Glovo or Bolt Food function not only as digital platforms but also as business entities and labour organisations simultaneously.

In this country, food delivery platforms' media discourses sell workers a false narrative of entrepreneurship, freedom and flexibility. By advertising flexible working arrangements and the lack of spatial boundaries, platform workers face new risks associated with their labour control, calculated by digital algorithmic management (Gerber 2022). Our findings revealed that workers experienced fragmented payment performance and competitive allocation of work calculated through excellence scores and bonus systems. Low-skilled workers become vulnerable when confronting arbitrary practices of algorithmic management (Shapiro 2018). Due to their limited technological proficiency, workers struggle to navigate the algorithmic decision-making systems employed by labour platforms. In such cases, algorithmic design exacerbates their exploitation, requiring them to work unsocial hours and contributing to feelings of insecurity.

In terms of research that defines algorithms' influences on work performance and income fluidity, some studies can be mentioned. We refer to Wood et al. (2019), which analyses algorithmic management in connection with high levels of control and power authority relations that exclude people from decision-making. Algorithms create gaps in the subordinative relationship between

platforms and workers. We define the algorithmic management used by digital labour platforms from Muldoon – Raekstad (2022). They look at algorithmic management as continuously tracking and evaluating worker behaviour and performance, as well as the automatic implementation of algorithmic decisions to decrease human-to-human supervision. We argue that in the algorithmic decision-making process used by labour platforms, the new digital business management controls profile ratings and reviews to match clients and demands (Griesbach et al. 2019). Algorithms enable the assignment and evaluation of work performance by penalising workers in case of interruptions and delays. They automate decisions related to order assignments and penalties. They can influence workers' behaviours by making the labour process seem arbitrary (Shapiro 2018). Arbitrariness is a deliberate effort by platforms to obscure the algorithmic processes, ensuring timely delivery and flawless service (Griesbach et al. 2019).

The findings show how the algorithmic system of labour platforms is perceived as a controlling system on workers' bonus rates during high-demand hours. The best delivery solution is presented directly to the workers' app. Many interviewed workers associate algorithmic control with lower job quality. The platforms control their pay by allocating an excellence score, based on a complex calculation of their orders and reviews received on their app.

## **Methodology**

We employed a qualitative approach to examine platform-based food delivery workers on active platforms in Romania during the pandemic. We collected data from 17 in-depth interviews with food delivery platform workers across eight labour platforms. A purposive sampling method was designed for this research. To ensure information richness (Patton 2002; Staller 2021), we considered a homogenous sample, with participants having the same occupation, regardless of the particular delivery company they work for. The literature analysed previously showed the sample design presents no differences regarding the working conditions of couriers, regardless of which company they work for. This allowed us to select participants who fit the particularity of the current occupation in food delivery. Moreover, at the time of the study, the sample closely mirrored national platform workers in terms of nationality, race and gender. According to previous research, food delivery is predominantly performed by males and our sample reflects this well.

Between October 2020 and July 2021, we conducted interviews with food couriers from the Bolt, Glovo, Bringo, Food Panda, Takeaway, Tazz by Emag, BeeFast and Tookan platforms. The interview guide covered the following main topics: employment history, motivations for working in food delivery,

specific delivery work history, risks, working conditions (type of work contract, working hours, earnings/income, insurance, collective bargaining, work content, resources and healthy work-life balance). We conducted the interviews by phone, lasting between 20 and 90 minutes. Initially, we planned to conduct online video interviews using the Zoom platform. However, we reconsidered our research strategy because most couriers had very busy schedules and were often on the move in their cars or on bikes. Since the data collection occurred during the pandemic, the telephone interviewing technique was acceptable as it provided a safe environment for both the interviewer and the participant. We relied on previous studies comparing the results of face-to-face and telephone interviews, showing no significant differences between the techniques. The use of telephone interviews in special situations can be productive (Sturges – Hanrahan 2004; Vogl 2013). Two participants requested the interview guide and responded in writing, citing a lack of time. We excluded these two interviews from the analysis because they contained poor information.

We recorded, anonymised and transcribed all phone interviews afterwards. To ensure anonymity, all participants' names were given pseudonyms, and we changed or removed all personal information that could make them recognisable. We employed a thematic analysis approach using inductive and deductive coding (Green – Thorogood 2004; Saldana 2011) on MAXQDA software.

## **Recruitment**

To recruit participants, we first employed an online screening survey using the platforms' groups across the Facebook network. We joined about 50 online groups on social media and posted links and invitations to our screening survey. We gathered 113 questionnaires from people working through delivery platforms. The screening survey collected only socio-demographic information (age, gender, education) and close-ended questions regarding participants' delivery work history: their starting dates, the platforms they worked for, their employment status and their main/secondary jobs. The respondents included men (83%) and women (17%) with the following employment situations: temporary employees (55%), self-employed (13%) and legal persons with or without employees or intermediate companies with employees (19%). Although our interview sample was not representative, only 49 of the 113 people who filled out the questionnaire agreed to participate in our study and 17 accepted the final invitation to an interview. Out of the 49 participants who agreed to take part in our study, 32 declined our invitations to the interview, citing time constraints, lack of interest or a general reluctance to respond to our questions.

The recruitment process may lead to self-selection bias, wherein certain individuals are more likely to participate in the study due to specific interests or attributes. To mitigate this potential bias, the authors adopted a triangulation approach, combining multiple research methods and data sources to provide a comprehensive analysis of the institutional framework of platform work in both Romania and Europe. This approach aimed to ensure a more robust and impartial assessment of the subject matter, allowing for a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances inherent in platform work within specific contexts.

In our study, we interviewed 15 men and two women. Considering our sampling strategy and the fact that we did not aim for representativeness, the gender proportion reflects the current situation in Romania, where men represent a larger group than women. Moreover, our recruitment method is limited to the higher number of men who were active in the Facebook groups. The respondents' age range was 30 to 60 years. Table 1 includes the sample's information and socio-demographic details about the interviewed couriers.

**Table 1: Sample information**

<b>Platform</b>	<b>Vehicle</b>	<b>Employment status</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Respondent</b>
Glovo	Bicycle	Employee	64	F	Tertiary	Carolina
Glovo	Car	Employee	40	M	Tertiary	Dan
Glovo	Car	Own company	41	M	Tertiary	Randi
Food Panda	Car	Employee	49	M	Secondary	Ioanin
Glovo	Car	Employee	44	M	Secondary	Nemo
Food Panda	Car	Own company	36	M	Secondary	Valeriu
Takeaway	Bicycle	employee	36	M	Tertiary	Alin
Bee fast	Car	Employee	34	M	Tertiary	Romi
Glovo	Car	Employee	60	M	Tertiary	Andrei
Glovo	Bicycle	Own company	30	M	Tertiary	Florin
Food Panda	Car	Employee	37	F	Tertiary	Roxana
Food Panda	Car	Employee	42	M	Secondary	Marius
Food Panda	Car	Own company	44	M	Secondary	Marian
Food Panda	Car	Employee	30	M	Tertiary	Lixandru
Glovo	Bicycle	Employee	45	M	Tertiary	Stefan
Glovo/ Tazz by Emag	Car	Own company	45	M	Tertiary	Manuel
Bringo	Car	Own company	36	F	Secondary	Severin

### **The institutional framework of platform work in Romania**

In the Romanian labour market, working in food delivery has become an alternative and new temporary source of revenue in an economic context strongly hit by unemployment during the pandemic. Romania is marked by a strong legal framework under the labour code and social dialogue regulation. However, platform workers operate under an unclear employment status that affects their legal representation and social protection.

The regulatory tools of remote and telework in Romania do not include platform work as ‘work’ but strengthen workers’ rights in the overall platform economy, for instance, for non-standard contracts and home-based activities. For platform workers employed with contracts, the labour law automatically entitles a worker to employment rights, including a minimum wage scheme and basic social protection (health, sick pay). The spread of self-employment arrangements and legal sub-contracting practices are, however, present through platform employment. Labour platforms present their job offers with promises of flexibility and few legal requirements, providing an easy opportunity to earn an income for those who face barriers to standard employment.

The COVID-19 outbreak accelerated insecurity when many people lost their jobs. Job instability has become particularly severe in Romania, affecting vulnerable groups working in hard-hit industries (e.g., restaurants, accommodation, construction). The accommodation and hospitality industries were affected by lockdown conditions and changes in consumer behaviour (avoidance of restaurants and hotels). Traditional companies that used to have face-to-face activities moved to digital working conditions – especially in the delivery sector and online micro-work activities – once the COVID-19 pandemic expanded the demand for platform-based work (Badoi 2020).

Since 2020, the food delivery sector has become one of the largest sectors of the platform economy in Romania. The European Commission survey (2021) estimated that in Romania, over 263,692 people work through platforms as their main activity and 1,369,827 people in total worked through online platforms. The prevalence of platform work in Romania is estimated at 2.2% of the total employment rate, the lowest among all European countries (Piasna et al. 2022). The earnings of an on-location platform worker in Romania were around €3.55 per hour in 2021. The average monthly income is between less than 150 RON (about €30) and 3,500 RON (about €700) or more (Piasna et al. 2022). Survey studies by Piasna et al. (2022) indicate that among European countries, Romania has the least common experiences with internet work (19.3%), which makes up 10% of Romania’s total employment. The European Trade Union Institute (2022) estimated that in Romania, almost all transport and delivery platform workers do this work at least every month.

Food delivery platforms have expanded their activity in more than 75 cities in Romania. For example, the services of Glovo are provided by couriers paid hourly, according to Glovo's algorithmic score that calculates the number of orders and the total time spent on the platform. With an estimated revenue of €97 million in 2022 and registered in 2018 in Romania through an intermediate company, GlovoappRO SRL that only organises its activities locally, Glovo Romania is the largest platform company.

Aside from the Glovo platform, since the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, other platforms have announced the transformation of their main fields of activity into on-demand services. In 2018, around nine platforms were registered in Romania through intermediate companies, including Glovo (which assimilated Food Panda – Foodora in 2021), Uber Eats (which ceased operations in June 2020 because of high competition, was bought by the Romanian food delivery company Tazz by Emag), Bolt Food, Takeaway (Lieferando ceased its activities in 2022) and Bringo (Carrefour's delivery platform):

It should be noted that Glovo and Bolt are not registered in Romania and are not recognised as 'employers,' as they operate under the existing legislation in Spain and Estonia. In Romania, digital labour platforms do not officially employ workers due to operating through intermediaries. These platforms function through local private companies (usually small to medium-sized enterprises with fewer than ten employees) known as company fleets. In this chain of intermediation with small local companies, platform workers do not work directly for the platforms but for intermediary companies that provide contractual services to the platforms (Sabanova – Badoi 2022).

In the Romanian delivery sector, intermediaries can range from traditional companies registered at the national level to temporary work agencies and freelancer cooperatives, also known as fleets. Platforms establish independent contracting relationships with freelance workers and intermediary companies through deliberate organisational strategies. The involvement of companies in the mediation of work dilutes the direct responsibilities of platforms as employers, thereby making it more challenging for workers to assert their rights.

**Table 2: Transparency of the algorithmic management used by food delivery platforms in Romania**

<b>Food delivery platform</b>	<b>Algorithm/application</b>	<b>Terms and conditions of the algorithmic management</b>	<b>Registered company in Romania</b>	<b>Revenues in Romania</b>
Glovo and Food Panda	Jarvis	Jarvis assigns the best courier based on the distance between the pickup point, the delivery point and their location; It also takes into account other factors such as Order preparation time / Traffic/ Courier vehicle/ Seasonality/ Exceptional situations like weather conditions, protests, closed roads, etc. (Glovo website, 2022).	GlovoappRO SRL and Glovo Infrastructure Services SRL	97 mil. € (2022)
Bolt	Bolt Food Platform	Blot allows Couriers to choose the route, provided that the order is delivered to the address indicated on the Bolt Food Platform. The calculation is due: to principles of dynamic pricing/ the distance and time of delivery/ the traffic situation/ weather conditions/ the pool of couriers available on the Marketplace and other factors (Bolt Food website, 2022)	Bolt Services RO S.R.L	9,65 mil € (2021)
Tazz ByEmag and Uber Eats	Xdelivery Platform	The terms and conditions of Tazz's algorithm are not available for the people who are not enrolled in the platform; - the information is available online only for a registered courier on the Xdelivery Platform (main algorithm).	HCL Online Advertising S.R.L	36 mil. € (2022)
Bringo	Bringo Platform	The terms and conditions of Bringo do not provide any information concerning the measurement of payment and the functioning of the platform;	Bringo Magazin SRL	12 mil. € (2022)

## Thematic Analysis

Our research findings complement existing scholarship on the impact of technological changes in labour, including critical sociology (Castel 1996; Burawoy 2013), neo-liberalisation and digital labour studies (Brenner et al. 2010; Cooper 2015; Huws et al. 2018). We also explore labour market regulatory restructuring and precarious alternatives within the post-1970s capitalist context (Sennett 2007; Kalleberg 2009, 2011; Standing 2011). Our thematic analysis is built on Hirschman's exit-loyalty framework (1970) to identify factors related to job quality and their influence on workers' responses. Reviewing previous research on algorithmic control in on-demand platform work by Wood et al. (2019), Griesbach et al. (2019) and Muldoon - Raekstad (2022), we delve

into the varied experiences of food delivery workers, examining how control and autonomy derived from algorithms manage their engagement with on-demand work. We connect previous research on work flexibility and job quality from Kahancová et al. (2020), Cano et al. (2021) and Dunn (2020) to explain contradictions between the benefits and disadvantages of platform work. Using a theoretically informed approach, we conduct thematic analysis to systematically identify common themes in workers' experiences, capturing data on the significance they attach to their work and life experiences.

The first dimension, 'flexibility,' encompasses a multidimensional outlook on workers' daily experiences in managing time resources and spatial freedom. We focus on workers' freedom and flexibility, considering their income sources, working hours, access to social protection schemes and other benefits of their working conditions. Some interviewed workers framed delivery work as a temporary solution to remain flexible for daily activities outside work and family commitments, providing additional income. This was particularly relevant during the pandemic when many service workers faced unemployment or job loss. In such situations, food delivery platforms offered a temporary employment option (see Badoi 2020). Other workers viewed delivery work as a medium-term strategy to learn new skills or as a more permanent career pursuit. Although platform companies provide similar working conditions across their job offers, workers find advantages and cope with entrepreneurial justifications for working in delivery.

The fragmented nature of their working hours and uncertain outcomes force them to develop adaptive strategies that rely on platform ratings. The second dimension that emerges around the working conditions of workers is 'excellence'. The excellence score stimulates bonus reward systems and evaluates the reputation of couriers. To increase their earnings and improve their rating on the app, they are required to work more than eight hours a day and seven days a week. The score appears as a controlling or regulatory aspect in the couriers' working life, depending on working hours, the delivery time and customer ratings. Some workers find these methods ambiguous and problematic. Platforms tend to enforce higher levels of algorithmic control, which can influence pay based on performance.

### ***Flexibility***

Flexible working time appears as a central interest across couriers' discourses. Food delivery work represents a medium-term strategy for earning income as part of a main or secondary job available during the pandemic years. The interviewed workers had relatively peripheral professional positions. Their appreciation of flexibility reflects their social and economic constraints in a marginal position in the labour market. Working in delivery provided an

opportunity for them to pursue a transitional job with flexibility, no complexity, or formal commitments.

Andrei's working experience illustrates a case where food delivery platform labour is appreciated for its flexibility. He is from Bucharest and has worked for Glovo since 2019 as his main job. When we interviewed Andrei, he worked more than 40 hours per week for a medium salary (around 750 euros). Even though he reported having an employment contract, his income fluctuated according to the total number of hours he worked per week. Andrei is legally entitled to receive the minimum wage; however, he reports that this is not always the case: *'I schedule my workdays based on my needs. If I have urgent issues to solve, need to do some cooking for the week, or have other commitments, I take the day off. I don't schedule specific hours on my calendar for those days. If I feel fatigued after working seven days a week for several weeks, I take time off on the weekends once a month.'* Andrei approached us with a positive reaction to intermittent working days. However, the platform's algorithmic management influenced him to work intensively with unorthodox hours as long as he received a satisfactory income. Flexible working hours mean the freedom to choose time slots, working days and breaks. The easily accessible infrastructure allows couriers to switch among weekly calendars by choosing the days and hours to deliver.

In other cases, the desire to work flexibly represented an opportunity to achieve additional earnings as part of a secondary activity. A counter-example is provided by Randi, another courier from Glovo who has owned a small company that collaborates with the platform since 2018. Randi preferred to work intensely, fewer days per week but more than 10 hours per day, at his own company. He appreciated the freedom of his working time: *'I deliver in the morning from 8 a.m. to 11 a.m., and more in the evening, from 6 p.m. to 11 p.m. I can work as much as I want—8, 9, or 10 hours per day. The application allows you to choose your shifts as you wish. The day before, you select your shifts. The schedule is published in advance, and you can choose. This flexibility is an advantage.'*

Engaging in delivery work indicated the couriers' dependence on weekly cash and fluid income. Some of the interviewed workers perceived they had control over their incomes as long as they decided on their working hours. In a flexible setting compensated by weekly cash flow, delivery work becomes intense, with many shifts and fewer breaks. Workers received their gross earnings weekly, often in cash, which proved an asset for people who needed to cover urgent expenses. The more the couriers work, the higher their income rates are on a monthly or weekly basis. Randi needed his gross income because he felt in control of his own earnings: *'The satisfaction of the earnings comes from being able to collect the gross income and then choosing whether to cover*

*expenses like health insurance and social security, as opposed to having it deducted with a classic employment contract. Personally, I prefer to have all my income available as gross income and then handle the taxes separately.'*

From one perspective, experimenting with freedom requires them to work many hours to make ends meet. Couriers developed coping strategies to configure their working time through the techniques of the platforms by having good rankings and higher scores. From another perspective, the spatio-temporal flexibility allowed them to choose their schedules according to urgent needs and family duties, such as (child)care or medical issues. In this regard, flexibility and freedom become meaningful motivators for couriers with caring responsibilities. Marius, a courier employed at the Food Panda platform, chose to work in food delivery to manage a flexible schedule and sustain his family: *'I just synchronize the schedule with my wife and fulfil personal duties or solve other personal issues.'* He would welcome a conventional job, but having an autonomous job was important for him. For Randi, owning a firm gave him some degree of freedom in organising his work and balancing family commitments: *'After my second child was born, my wife, who was a student at the time, had classes to attend. This meant that I had to care for the baby while she was in class. I found myself waiting for my wife's breaks so she could breast-feed, during which time I was able to continue working. Before I had this job, I didn't have much time to spend with the child, but now I was able to take care of the baby during the day.'*

For some interviewed couriers, the limited job opportunities in the local labour market pushed them to find an easy way to earn money. They perceived that the labour market did not offer them many 'alternatives' and, consequently, this enabled them to consider what job prospects they could access in their town. In this regard, food delivery was the supplement they needed to remain active. Romi is a sales representative who worked in Spain. In 2019, he returned to Romania with the enthusiasm to search for a job in Bucharest: *'In 2011, I arrived from Spain with the eagerness to work in Romania. Initially, I struggled to find a job and worked as a waiter in various restaurants. Eventually, I made home deliveries for a pizzeria. After significant changes in that pizzeria, I reoriented myself towards Food Panda when the platform just entered the Romanian market.'*

Those workers faced a precarious situation and were in desperate need of an income. For instance, Nemo, a courier who started working for Glovo during the quarantine, found himself in the same situation as Romi: *'I found myself in a situation where I desperately needed employment because I had exhausted all other options. As a result, I started working as a delivery driver. The truth is, the income I earned from this job is significant.'*

In the couriers' discourses, we observed that they felt motivated to pursue flexible work instead of a regular full-time job. For Florin, a self-employed courier at Food Panda, platform labour was an opportunity to work in a newly growing sector in the local market: *'I noticed an opportunity in the market. We had been following the Glovo company since its early days in Barcelona, and I saw that it was growing rapidly in Romania. I started to research what being an independent courier actually entails, and I realised it was a brilliant idea, similar to Uber. I believe that this is the future.'* The delivery platform business models push workers towards a lifelong career. When interacting with the infrastructure of delivery platforms, some of the interviewed couriers saw it as an opportunity to learn new skills about how the platforms' business model functions. Embracing a freelance and autonomous working life represents, for some workers, a creative opportunity to be more 'dynamic' and 'on the move' with spatial flexibility without boundaries. A few workers mentioned earlier had the intention to open their own companies and develop a business model similar to food delivery platforms. For them, food delivery is not a job they pursue solely for money. They intend to build a base of clients and establish a satisfactory trajectory in their own interest. Florin believes that delivery work represents a creative way of working. While he is learning to expand his entrepreneurial activity, he can acquire new sales skills and marketing strategies for developing a similar business. Florin is a highly skilled worker with professional experience in management and business. *'I started working in delivery because I wanted to make my own company, and now, I made my own company to see how it is to be in the shoes of a future delivery [platform company].'*

From an entrepreneurial perspective, couriers conceptualised their work as an individual opportunity to remain independent while learning new digital skills from the platforms' business models. We build on Barratt et al. (2020) entrepreneurial agency, where platform workers act as micro-entrepreneurs attempting to maximise their income and rewards. The freedom of working without a boss is reinforced by some workers. For the couriers that claim the freelancing opportunities, the entrepreneurial identity creation was particularly associated with a sense of empowerment. Having autonomous jobs allowed them to act independently to develop similar businesses. These findings contribute to a focus on the neo-liberalisation of labour regimes. Barratt et al. (2020) analyse entrepreneurial agency as a demonstration of *'how expressions of resilience need to be carefully identified and understood as facilitators but equally inhibitors of higher levels of agency within the context of market regimes.'* (Barratt et al. 2020: 1651)

### ***Excellence***

Digital algorithms are involved in online platforms' labour processes. Worker flexibility, working time freedom and autonomy are key benefits of the business models used by labour platforms (Muldoon – Raekstad 2022). One of the platforms' tools we analysed is the excellence score that influences workers' performance and decides on their work flexibility. The score acts as a controlling algorithm and working time regulatory aspect. The worker's score depends on the working hours, delivery time and the ratings of customers. The excellence scores stimulate uninterrupted work and penalise unscheduled breaks by changing workers' scores on the app. Moreover, the scores control financial rewards for those who work long hours or receive positive rankings from customers.

Glovo's excellence score evaluates the reputation of couriers based on customer ratings and the orders delivered during peak hours. The algorithms determine the best order for couriers so they can access schedules for booking slots on the platform. For example, Glovo's algorithm improves their reputation and gives them early access to calendars and schedules.

**Table 3: Glovo's excellence score measurement**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Description</b>
Customer reviews	The number of negative and positive reviews of the couriers is divided by the number of orders delivered by the courier.
Contribution	The total number of orders delivered by the courier in the last 28 days in which they have slotted at least 1 time.
Default status	How often a courier does not register for a reserved slot.
Slots in high demand	How many high-demands slots the courier has connected compared to the total number of high-demand slots available in the city.
Reliability	The reliability rate evaluates how often a courier connects during the hours they have booked.

However, platforms have differences among algorithmic calculations of work performance and measurement, but all the platforms we analysed used similar algorithms to match clients with the platform's offers. For the interviewed workers, the algorithms are an unknown and impersonal tool. The workers do not know how the score is related to their work performance and what is the algorithmic functioning behind this score. We noticed that workers often did not understand the rules behind the calculation of excellence scores, which contributed to their reputation on the apps. They relate their (dis)satisfaction and negative emotions while interacting with the machines and robots. How the score is calculated changes over time. Couriers report not being informed about

these changes, which provokes distress. At the same time, the excellence score determines the bonus plan by which couriers are paid. They create considerable frustration for couriers when the score drops instantly. The system of awarding excellence scores stimulates efficiency at Glovo, Bolt and Food Panda. At the same time, they induce side effects in decreasing incomes by influencing the incentive scheme and limiting the freedom to choose from calendar-specific working hours. Andrei, a courier from Glovo, reached a weak point when we asked him about how the score was functioning for him: *'The excellence score was problematic due to numerous instances of abuse and manipulation to lower scores for unjustified reasons. A high score allowed couriers to choose their schedules earlier, while a lower score meant fewer options and later access to remaining hours. The old scoring system, rated out of 100, has been replaced with a 4.3 out of 5 points. While this change may benefit Glovo, it seems couriers stand to gain less and the company to lose less.'* The platforms claim that the excellence scores offer more freedom for the workers. A higher score offers a higher incentive. The software is trained to induce responses from workers to perform in a certain way to sustain a controlling labour regime.

The platforms manage to hide some key information about the score. At the same time, platform companies increase the asymmetric spread of information among the workers and the business model they use. Some interviewed couriers accept excellence scores as a necessary tool of their labour process. However, they report obstacles in understanding how the score is calculated. In their discourses, they made various assumptions. Sometimes, the score increased when they delivered on time, and at other times, the score depended on customer evaluations. Ioanin was recently employed as a food courier for Food Panda. He reported that Food Panda uses a score that largely depends on delivering during peak hours, where the app has a higher number of orders from clients: *'The scores have several components, a maximum score of 100 and 15 out of 100% are customer reviews, 15% is the opinion of customers, 35% counted the presence during peak hours because there is quite a large fluctuation in orders and if you have a presence during the peak hours, you scored more or less.'*

The use of the excellence score manipulates changes in workers' behaviours. Our findings reveal that workers have no physical interactions with their colleagues. Platforms rely on impersonal connections among them. Couriers often interact with colleagues only when waiting at restaurants to pick up orders, on Facebook or in spontaneous interactions. In this regard, algorithms have become the main interaction tool between employees and employers, allowing them to exercise control over their schedules and shifts. Above all, employees never meet their employers and are essentially in touch

with robots. Some couriers have access to platform services only through automatic chats that can answer their queries in real-time. In the absence of a person with whom they could physically interact and report app functioning issues, couriers encountered difficulties that added to their grievances. Carolina, a retired woman who chose to work for Glovo in 2019, explains that she never met any of her colleagues from Glovo. Whenever she had issues related to clients or app functions, she had access to a chatbot for assistance: *'The Glovo platform is updated frequently. However, with each update, a new error seems to emerge. They seem to discourage reaching out for help via phone or email. Whenever I visit the help section of the application, I expect to find an answer to my query or a solution to my problem. Instead, what I get is a long list, and I have to thoroughly search and identify the problem I'm facing so that the application can provide me with generic solutions. Only if I am unable to find the answer there, am I given the option to speak to a support representative.'* When the human response is absent, couriers refer to the platform as if it were a person – either an HR manager or a general manager responsible for allocating resources, rewarding or penalising.

The couriers highlighted their lack of knowledge of the algorithmic labour process. The platforms indicate which mistakes are made by those breaking the basic rules of the app and determine maximum delivery times and demands, working times and order destinations. Dan, an interviewed courier from Food Panda, told us the rankings he received are highly unpredictable: *'You have to work continuously without interruptions, otherwise your score will drop. If you don't work for seven days, you are considered to be on leave, and any monitored parameter will not change at all. The score essentially requires you to work every day to maintain an excellent score because you need to work at least four high-demand hours and have at least one order per high-demand hour.'* Carolina confirms the same statement concerning the scoring system: *'This situation can be the fault of some clients as well. They might be upset about different things such as the courier arriving late or the food not being good. In their frustration, they end up giving a low rating to both the courier and the restaurant. I don't blame the client because they may not realise that penalising me affects the hard work I've put into many previous orders. My overall score has decreased so much that it's affecting my results for months, and it's frustrating that people don't know about it.'*

The food delivery platform's regime of algorithmic control is experienced by many workers as an intangible tool. They find it difficult to observe a direct relationship between the quality of the services they provide and the customer rankings they receive. Yet, couriers are responsible for delivering food at specific times and places. A good delivery was perceived as a burden when the excellence score of their work was controlled by the app. Randi was very

disappointed about how the scores functioned and balanced the appreciated flexibility of his work with the algorithmic measurement of the work that felt demanding to him: *'When you couldn't cancel an order, you were penalised by the platform by lowering that excellence score that affected your income, the number of orders and many other things, and then you needed that flexibility; it is important to not be penalised.'*

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Findings show that workers' experiences vary in completing food delivery. In this article, we conceptualised our findings into two theoretically informed dimensions that describe the experiences of couriers: flexibility and excellence. We apply Hirschman's exit-loyalty framework to interact with these two thematic dimensions. First, flexible working conditions provide workers with the freedom of choice. In this manner, platforms attract a new labour force and the workers can remain loyal to them. The freedom to work without surveillance influences their perception of the benefits of food delivery. Extrapolating Hirschman's model (1970), we see the freedom of choice as supporting the neoliberal demand from platforms to create individual self-realisation by creating flexible arrangements (Bowring 2015). From a sociological perspective, technological changes mark the individualisation of work, where workers are empowered to be 'more entrepreneurial' (Cooper 2015). Lixandru from Food Panda appreciated the lack of spatial boundaries and routine and the unpredictability. At the same time, Florin from Glovo and Randi from Food Panda felt attracted to an independent career and developed a similar business. Second, excellence scores and complicated algorithms used by labour platforms are more likely to provoke distress and promote the exit from platforms.

Our data revealed an overlap between the benefits of flexibility and the disadvantages of being a courier. The combination of algorithmic management perceived as an unknown tool with flexible employment relations shows a paradox of job quality. Being employed provides good access to rights and protections, including health conditions, contracts and due process. At the same time, having a contract does not necessarily entitle the worker to a secure working environment. The labour regime marked by algorithmic management classifies workers depending on a score calculated through positive or negative rankings they receive from customers. Our study reveals that workers have a poor understanding of the bargaining rights and legality between their platform - the intermediate company - and their status, especially when algorithms and scores measure their performance, working time and earnings. However, due to the lack of job alternatives, couriers reported constraints by framing solutions to remain flexible for gaining more money. Nemo from Glovo and Romi from Bolt chose to become couriers specifically because no other viable

job opportunities were available at that time for them. The experiences of workers indicate various individual strategies capable of making them resistant to algorithmic arbitrariness and a work environment impersonally managed by software with continuously changing algorithms and self-regulatory techniques. They claim algorithmic management produces frequent changes and errors in the app content and tasks. Marius from Food Panda felt angry about the app's functioning and reported that *'The platform does not work very well, it has many errors. The platform frequently makes tests on us. For example, it happened 5 times out of 6 invoicing periods to be sanctioned by the app because, for example, I did not accept an order.'*

This paper expands on food delivery platform labour defined by the workers' experiences with algorithms that manipulate their working time and income. For Romania, food delivery platform labour is an emerging employment phenomenon with a significant impact on the quality of life of people. In the context of the pandemic, temporary gig jobs expanded the food delivery sector by offering precarious employment opportunities with low wages for those employed with contracts and poor access to social protection schemes for those enrolled in self-employment. Romania is among the top countries in the European Union in terms of providing mainly non-professional services for which average or minimum digital skills are required, such as in transport and delivery (Sabanova – Badoi 2022).

The study does not attempt to produce a representative response to food delivery platform labour. Yet, it shows two important contributions to the current state of the art in labour studies in the regional context of Central and Southern Europe and it could provide a basis for future research on this topic. First, the article responds to a gap in the literature of this region by presenting a case study on platform workers' employment situation in eight food delivery platforms that were active during the pandemic crisis: Bolt, Glovo, Bringo, Food Panda, Takeaway, Tazz by Emag, BeeFast and Tookan. Second, it identifies a theoretically informed narrative and a qualitative endeavour of how delivery platform workers experience the spectrum of spatiotemporal flexibility and algorithmic control in a competitive measurement of work excellence in their daily work lives.

Our findings underscore the necessity for policy measures in the labour sector to address the regulation of digital labour platforms and the employment status of platform workers in Romania. Additionally, it is essential to conduct quantitative studies on the development of platform work to provide insights into the scale of the phenomenon, the types of contracts and working conditions. We assert that legally defining the status of platform workers could mitigate the risks and costs associated with insecure and intermittent earnings, particularly given the continuous algorithmic monitoring of work performed

through platforms. The EU Directive regulations can serve as a foundational step for legal guidance in Romanian platform labour. However, further actions are required to ensure that workers have access to decent living standards and equitable working conditions.

This framework can be adapted for further research, applying similar data collection methods to compare the impact of platform labour on workers' lives in Central and Eastern Europe.

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