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Challenges in the Sharing Economy: a Provider's Perspective

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Abstract: Digital systems employed in mediating stakeholder relations in the sharing economy entail economic, legal and ethical consequences. As the sharing economy market continues to grow, the challenges created by digital mediation are likely to become more pressing. Given the providers' perspective on those challenges is still under-researched, this paper aimed to explore the factors pertaining to the organisational and digital aspects of relationship management contributing to the providers' perception of the work environment in the sharing economy. The study found that information asymmetry, uncertainty of working conditions and relational opportunism correlate with providers' dissatisfaction with the company, which consequently leads to job insecurity. The findings extend the knowledge on providers' perspectives and their participation in peer-to-peer services and offer suggestions on how to improve the organisational environment in the companies within the sharing economy sector.

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1. Introduction

The sharing economy has been a controversial area of discussion since its emergence (Basukie et al., 2020; Davlembayeva and Papagiannidis, 2021; Acquier et al., 2017). Despite its social and economic benefits (e.g. employment, entrepreneurial opportunities) (Acquier et al., 2017), digital systems employed in mediating stakeholder relations could potentially entail economic, legal and ethical consequences (Murillo et al., 2017; Ahsan, 2018; Wentrup et al., 2019). Even though attention has been brought to the potential implications for those participating in the sharing economy (Murillo et al., 2017; Ahsan, 2018; Wentrup et al., 2019; Basukie et al., 2020), this market continues to grow. As the peer-to-peer market continues to expand, challenges like those raised above are likely to become even more pressing.

Considering the risk of sharing economy companies contributing to the precarity of their providers, the providers' perspective on platform-provider relations requires closer attention. It is crucial to study digital and organisational aspects that may cause challenges for the providers. However, there is a lack of insight into the providers' perceptions of the challenges in platform-provider relations. Researchers have paid attention to providers' motivations to work and exchange resources via the platform system (Fest et al., 2021). There is a plethora of conceptual and opinion papers unpacking the agency problems in sharing economy companies (Ahsan, 2018; Murillo et al., 2017; Davlembayeva and Papagiannidis, 2021). Still, the factors contributing to providers' negative experiences of working in those companies are underexplored.

In order to address the above gap this work aims to explore the challenges in platform-provider relations contributing to the providers' perception of the work environment in the sharing economy. To address this objective, we draw on prior literature on organisational climate (Jones

and James, 1979; Parker et al., 2003) and providers' perspective on the sharing economy (Leoni and Parker, 2019; Constantiou et al., 2017; Guo et al., 2020). This helps conceptualise the factors pertaining to the organisational and digital aspects of relationship management, and their relation to dissatisfaction with platforms and perceived job insecurity.

2. Platform-Provider Relations in the Sharing Economy

The sharing economy is a socio-economic system enabling a peer-to-peer exchange of resources by connecting providers and end-users/customers using digital technology (Munoz and Cohen, 2017). Intermediation by digital systems creates a triadic business model. It makes it possible for providers (e.g. drivers, hosts) to deliver resources and services to customers and capitalise on the efficiency of digitally-mediated transactions (Kumar et al., 2018). However, the relationships between platforms and providers are not clearly defined (Gerwe and Silva, 2020). Labour status and the ubiquity of digital systems in the functioning of platform-based companies create an environment that potentially impacts the dynamics of relationships between stakeholders (Ahsan, 2018).

Discussions about potential challenges and the implications of working in the sharing economy have been numerous (Murillo et al., 2017; Ahsan, 2018; Muller, 2019; Davlembayeva and Papagiannidis, 2021). However, empirical evidence about the providers' perspective when it comes to working in such an environment has been scarce (Table 1).

Table 1: Research on providers' challenges in the sharing economy

Author	Methodology	Context	Unit of analysis	Research area	Findings
Giddy (2021)	Survey	Ridesharing	Providers	Providers' work experiences and implications	Providers' challenges are rooted in physical pressure and psychological stress
von Richthofen and von Wangenheim (2021)	Secondary research, interviews	Hospitality	Providers, platforms	Measures for improving providers' work experiences	Platforms can motivate hosts by orienting, enabling, incentivizing and controlling strategies.
Sivarajan et al. (2021)	Case study	Ridesharing	Providers	Measures for improving providers' work experiences	Coping with the problem helps alleviate the psychological contract breach
Bucher et al. (2021)	Web mining	Knowledge/Skill-sharing platform	Providers	Measures for improving providers' work experiences	Providers develop tactics to circumvent unfavourable algorithmic rules of participation in platforms
Davlembayeva and Papagiannidis (2021)	Conceptual paper	General	Providers	Providers' work experiences and implications	Normative, economic and digital regulatory mechanisms governing relations within platforms create paradoxical implications
Tan et al. (2021)	Review	General	Providers	Providers' work experiences and implications	Ethical problems require policy changes

Basukie et al. (2020)	In-depth interviews	Ridesharing	Providers, consumers, external stakeholders	Providers' work experiences and implications	Legal and ethical concerns stemming from big data and algorithmic management
Cheng and Foley (2019)	Thematic analysis	Hospitality	Providers	Measures for improving providers' work experiences	Knowledge of algorithmic decision-making helps providers adopt to the environment
Muller (2019)	Opinion paper	Ridesharing	Providers	Measures for improving providers' work experiences	Legal pitfalls causing challenges are identified and potential remedies are discussed
Wentrup et al. (2019)	In-depth interviews	Ridesharing	Providers	Providers' work experiences and implications	Providers feel distrust and lack of commitment to platforms; platforms exercise excessive control over providers
Ahsan (2018)	Conceptual paper	Ridesharing	Providers	Providers' work experiences and implications	Ethical implications and mechanisms to ensure ethical compliance are discussed
Murillo et al. (2017)	Conceptual paper	General	Providers, consumers, external stakeholders	Providers' work experiences and implications	Conflicting assumptions about social impacts are discussed
Calo and Rosenblat (2017)	Conceptual paper	Ridesharing	Consumer, providers, platforms	Providers' work experiences and implications	Regulatory pitfalls, discrimination and privacy issues are discussed
Rosenblat and Stark (2016)	Nethnography	Ridesharing	Providers	Providers' work experiences and implications	Imbalance of power between providers and platforms are enabled by digital intermediation
Lee et al. (2015)	In-depth interviews	Ridesharing	Providers	Providers' work experiences and implications	The impact of data-driven regulation is discussed. Drivers learn to adapt to interacting with digital systems

The above shows that the providers' perspective on the dynamics of the platform-provider relationships have not received much attention. Specifically, although the literature sheds some light on the negative impact of algorithmic management perceived by providers (Basukie et al., 2020; Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Lee et al., 2015), little is known about the organisational and managerial factors contributing to the negative work environment in sharing economy companies. To further the knowledge on that front, the following section discusses the challenges contributing to the perception of the work environment in the sharing economy, which go beyond the functions of algorithmic management.

3. Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

To examine the challenges in platform-provider relationships in the sharing economy, this study borrows from the literature focusing on the role of the psychological and organisational climate in work environment perception (Jones and James, 1979; James et al., 2008; Parker et al., 2003). The organisational climate refers to the factors forming the perception of the organisational environment. The psychological climate concerns the individual's perceptions of this environment, which can be examined by focusing on people as a unit of analysis (Jones and James, 1979).

The evaluation of the environment at work is shaped by the perception of organisational characteristics, job autonomy, role ambiguity, leader support, and work-group cooperation (Jones and James, 1979; Parker et al., 2003). Given the focus on the digitally-mediated work environment, this study focuses on the first three. Specifically, organisational characteristics refer to the evaluation of organisational innovation and information processes (Parker et al., 2003). Sharing economy companies are characterised by a non-traditional governance of relations, manifested by *algorithmic management* and *asymmetrical information distribution* among stakeholders (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016). Perceived job autonomy is the perception of one's own sovereignty in relation to job goals, procedures and priorities (Strutton et al., 1993). This perception stems from desires for independence and responsibility (Locke, 1976). The perception of autonomy is weakened when a company has strong control and interference in workers' activities (Hartmann and Rutherford, 2015). Similarly, platforms exercise *control* to restrict service customisation and monitor all aspects of relations between stakeholders (Constantiou et al., 2017). Role ambiguity reflects the individual's value and desires for clarity and fairness (Locke, 1976). Conflicts around role ambiguity are common in sharing economy companies, which often rely on informal policies and vaguely delineated role boundaries (Botsman, 2017). Informal regulation creates *uncertain working conditions* (Eckhardt et al., 2019) and enables the possibility of exercising *opportunism* in favour of platforms (Zietlow, 2020).

The leader support dimension is not examined in the study. This concerns support in goal achievement through leaders' interaction with subordinates and hierarchical and psychological influence (Jones and James, 1979; James et al., 2008). The importance of leaders in supporting employees is inherent to organisations with a hierarchical power structure (Vecchio et al., 2010) and is not common for decentralised systems, such as online sharing markets (Ahsan, 2018). Similarly, the work-group cooperation dimension refers to the resources enabling the development of team collaborations (Jones and James, 1979), which are not typical for peer-to-peer interactions (Acquier et al., 2017).

Given the above, this study hypothesises that the evaluation of the work environment in the sharing economy is explained by two aspects of the platform-provider relationship. First, the perception of an unfavourable working environment can be rooted in the characteristics of the companies, making them distinctive from other traditional organisations. Those perceptions refer to algorithmic management unfairness and the information asymmetry attributed to the digital mediation of relations. Second, the challenges faced by providers could be a result of factors attributed to the managerial decisions of platforms, namely uncertain working conditions, control and relational opportunism. As the above factors can undermine job flexibility, role clarity and fair work procedures and outcomes (Leoni and Parker, 2019; Constantiou et al., 2017; Guo et al., 2020; Acquier et al., 2019) they may be related to dissatisfaction with the company. In turn, such dissatisfaction could be positively related to the feeling of job insecurity.

Algorithmic management and information asymmetry can affect the perception of the work environment and the satisfaction with the company accordingly. Algorithmic management is

implemented with the aim of automating platform policies and procedures (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Basukie et al., 2020). Algorithmic management can trigger providers' concerns in relation to several work experiences. With service ranking systems based on numerical metrics, the evaluation of performance lacks qualitative indicators. Although reviews might be biased, providers do not have an opportunity to negotiate or object to the feedback once it is submitted online (Lee et al., 2015; Basukie et al., 2020). The automation of processes stipulates information asymmetry, resulting in a disproportionate amount of data accessible for providers and platforms. While data empowers platforms to make strategic decisions in terms of predicting demand and setting prices, providers often have little awareness of these changes (Ahsan, 2018). Feedback channels are highly automated. The digital system enabling communication from providers to the management of platforms can be perceived as unfair, which, in turn, negatively affects job satisfaction and organisational behaviour (Villanueva-Flores et al., 2017). Given the potential unfairness of algorithmic management and information asymmetry, such beliefs are more likely to result in a negative perception of platforms. Therefore, the first hypothesis postulates:

Hypothesis 1: A provider's perception of a) algorithmic management unfairness and b) information asymmetry in a sharing economy platform positively correlates with dissatisfaction with the platforms.

Platforms use organisational coordination mechanisms to control their providers (Constantiou et al., 2017; Guo et al., 2020). A high degree of control entails the standardisation of services and monitoring of all aspects of relations between stakeholders, which limits providers' independence in transactions. Control enables platforms to quantify performance indicators and minimise costs (Constantiou et al., 2017). For example, commercial ridesharing platforms use apps as a single point of control for every work process in which drivers are involved (Constantiou et al., 2017; Guo et al., 2020). Such control makes providers abide by platforms' rules, loosens their independence, and creates uncertain work conditions (Leoni and Parker, 2019; Guo et al., 2020). Perceived uncertainty and ambiguity in the workplace undermine the positive perception of the work environment (James et al., 2008). They lead to psychological strains, dissatisfaction with the job and company, and turnover intention (Hartmann and Rutherford, 2015). Therefore, this research proposes that:

Hypothesis 2: A provider's perception of a) control and b) uncertain working conditions in a sharing economy platform positively correlates with dissatisfaction with the platform.

One of the ethical implications of the sharing economy is that it can foster relational opportunism (Acquier et al., 2019). An act of opportunism is self-interest seeking (e.g. lying, cheating, distorting information), when one's own interests prevail over the interests of another party (Hodgson, 2004). In the context of the relationship between platforms and providers, opportunism reflects an overall perception of the inequitable distribution of rewards, unfair treatment in terms of the lack of communication and accountability (Etter et al., 2019; Murillo et al., 2017). In contrast to algorithmic management, whose technological properties can enable

unfairness (Basukie et al., 2020; Rosenblat and Stark, 2016), relational opportunism results from the managerial decision to adjust working terms and conditions to maximise gains irrespective of the potential disadvantages for providers (Acquier et al., 2019). Perceived opportunism in the work environment has an adverse effect on organisational behaviour, the perception of the organisational justice climate and job satisfaction (Bizzi, 2018). Therefore:

Hypothesis 3: A provider's perception of relational opportunism in a sharing economy platform positively correlates with dissatisfaction with the platform.

The feeling of dissatisfaction is a negative affect associated with the perception that one's own values have not been met following job performance (Locke, 1976; Henne and Locke, 1985). Unrealised values may refer to a lack of job autonomy, support and promotion (Henne and Locke, 1985). Dissatisfaction significantly correlates with job insecurity (Näswall et al., 2005). Job insecurity refers to the perception that the job is threatened and an employee has limited resources and opportunities to eliminate the threat (Ashford et al., 1989). Feeling insecure about a job means that employees are uncertain whether they will be able to work in such conditions in the future. When providers in the sharing economy face challenges rooted in opportunism, control and uncertain working conditions, dissatisfaction with the company is a likely psychological state correlating with perceived job insecurity. Given the above, we state:

Hypothesis 4: A provider's dissatisfaction with a sharing economy platform positively correlates with a feeling of job insecurity.

4. Methodology

4.1. Data Collection and Sampling

This study adopted a cross-sectional research design for collecting data about providers' perceptions of negative work experiences and firm strategies in the sharing economy. For recruiting respondents for the study, we used a purposive sampling technique. An independent research company provided access to a sample of individuals offering ridesharing services in companies such as Uber, Didi, BlaBlaCar. Ridesharing services represent one of the largest and fastest-growing segments (Salas, 2021), with arguably least favourable working conditions (Muller, 2019; Ahsan, 2018). The data was collected anonymously, following the respondents' consent to participate in the survey. To be eligible to participate in the survey, the respondents should have had a negative work experience while working at those companies. The final sample consisted of 510 valid responses. The sample was representative of the population of ridesharing drivers (Statista, 2021). In terms of gender, 52.2% of the respondents were male, 47.5% were female and 0.4% were non-binary. In terms of age, the majority were at the age between 20 and 29 (66.1%) and between 30 and 39 (23.1%). When it came to income, the majority of the respondents (55.9%) received up to 25000 British pounds a year. Also, for most of the respondents (46.1%), ridesharing comprised up to 20% of their total annual income.

4.2. Measurements

The items for measuring challenges in platform-provider relations, satisfaction with the company and job insecurity are provided in Table 2. All items, except dissatisfaction with the company, were measured using a Likert scale, with anchors between “1 – *strongly disagree*” to “7 – *strongly agree*”. Dissatisfaction with the company was assessed by a 7-point scale, where “1” characterised a negative state and “7” characterised a positive state. For the data analysis, the dissatisfaction scale was reverse-coded.

Table 2: Measurement items

Measurement Items	Loading	C.R.	AVE	Cronbach's Alpha
Information Asymmetry (Pavlou et al., 2007)		0.83	0.56	0.83
IA1	0.82			
IA2	0.83			
IA3	0.81			
IA4	0.81			
Algorithmic Management Unfairness (Choi, 2008)		0.89	0.73	0.89
AMU1	0.89			
AMU2	0.92			
AMU3	0.89			
Uncertainty of Working Conditions (Pavlou et al., 2007)		0.91	0.68	0.91
UWC1	0.86			
UWC2	0.89			
UWC3	0.88			
UWC4	0.87			
UWC5	0.80			
Control (Provan and Skinner, 1989)		0.83	0.55	0.812
C1	0.81			
C2	0.86			
C3	0.87			
C4	0.67			
Relational Opportunism (Parkhe, 1993)		0.86	0.56	0.86
RO1	0.77			
RO2	0.85			
RO3	0.83			
RO4	0.77			
RO5	0.78			
Dissatisfaction with the company (Westbrook, 1980)		0.89	0.73	0.89
DIS1	0.89			
DIS2	0.90			
DIS3	0.87			
DIS4	0.81			
Job Insecurity (Vander Elst et al., 2014)		0.87	0.62	0.87

JI1	0.83			
JI2	0.86			
JI3	0.83			
JI4	0.87			

4.3.Data Analysis

For the first analysis two-step structural equation modelling was conducted. First, we performed confirmatory factor analysis using SPSS v.25 and Amos v.25 to ensure the validity and reliability of the measurements. The CFA model fit indices were satisfactory: $\chi^2(329) = 795.74$, $P = .000$, $CMIN/DF = 2.419$, $CFI = 0.946$, $RMSEA = 0.053$. Factor loadings (>0.6) Cronbach's α (>0.7) and construct reliability coefficients (>0.7) were above the acceptable threshold, indicating the reliability of the constructs, while average variance extracted ($AVE > 0.5$) demonstrated no convergent validity issues (Hair, 2014) (Table 2). The results in Table 3 suggested that there were no discriminant validity concerns. The second step was testing the path analysis using Amos v.25 (Table 4).

Table 3: Convergent and discriminant validity test

	RO	CC	AMU	IA	UWC	JI	DISC
Relational Opportunism	0.746						
Centralised Control	0.523	0.745					
Algorithmic Management Unfairness	0.660	0.655	0.852				
Information Asymmetry	0.517	0.263	0.366	0.747			
Uncertain Working Conditions	0.693	0.428	0.532	0.535	0.826		
Job Insecurity	0.533	0.474	0.439	0.339	0.578	0.791	
Dissatisfaction with the Company	0.483	0.300	0.310	0.414	0.492	0.300	0.854

5. Results and Findings

5.1. Structural Model

The results of the analysis of the structural model demonstrated satisfactory model fit indices: $\chi^2(334) = 955.34$, $P = .00$, $CMIN/DF = 2.860$, $CFI = 0.928$, $RMSEA = 0.06$. The model explained 33% of the variance for Dissatisfaction with the Company and 12% of the variance for Job Insecurity (Table 4).

Table 4: Path analysis results

Hypothesis	Path	Coef.	t-test
H1a	Information asymmetry -> Dissatisfaction with the company	0.16	2.90 **

H1b	Algorithmic management -> Dissatisfaction with the company	-0.10	-1.43
H2a	Control -> Dissatisfaction with the company	0.10	1.53
H2b	Uncertain working conditions -> Dissatisfaction with the company	0.26	3.86 ***
H3	Relational opportunism-> Dissatisfaction with the company	0.25	3.08 **
H4	Dissatisfaction with the company -> Job Insecurity	0.34	6.75 ***

*Significant at p: * <0.05; ** <0.01; ***<0.001*

6. Discussion

The analysis of the role of the factors attributed to organisational and digital aspects of relationship management helped explore the providers' perception of a digitally-mediated work environment. Such an approach was in line with the conceptualisation of the antecedents of the organisational climate (James et al., 2008). When it came to the digital/technological side of management, information asymmetry was found to have a positive relationship with dissatisfaction with the company (H1a), although the effect of perceived algorithmic management was not confirmed (H1b). Providers feel that they have access to a limited amount of data, which puts them in a disadvantaged position and undermines a positive evaluation of the company. In contrast, the automation of work-related processes, such as price setting, work assignment and feedback rating, does not impact satisfaction with platforms. To some degree, this finding contradicts the discourse in prior literature (Basukie et al., 2020; Ahsan, 2018; Rosenblat and Stark, 2016). Although algorithmic management and information asymmetry are interdependent processes in a technical sense, the two aspects of digital platform management are experienced differently by those who interact with platform systems. Such a finding could possibly indicate that providers have a rational view of algorithmic management as an enabler of ridesharing services and perceive information asymmetry as the underlying problem.

The analysis of the perceived factors rooted in the organisational aspect of relationship management demonstrated that uncertain working conditions correlate with dissatisfaction with the company (H2a). The significant role of uncertain working conditions agrees with the literature discussing the ethical implications of the sharing economy in terms of the ambiguity of workers' employment status, platform liabilities and policies (Guo et al., 2020; Etter et al., 2019). However, the path between perceived control and dissatisfaction was found to be non-significant (H2b). The non-confirmed role of control is surprising. This is in contrast with evidence that limiting providers' independence by imposing control threatens the financial stability of independent contractors (Leoni and Parker, 2019; Guo et al., 2020). A potential explanation is that control is perceived as a regulatory mechanism, standardising and streamlining work-related processes. It simplifies work procedures rather than weakening job autonomy. Lastly, the significant role of relational opportunism is consistent with prior literature suggesting that platforms seek self-interest (H3) (Etter et al., 2019; Murillo et al., 2017). This finding means that providers may feel that

platforms encourage disproportional rewards distribution and unfair treatment, which increases dissatisfaction with the company.

Finally, the significant path between dissatisfaction with the company and job insecurity is consistent with prior research (H4) (Näswall et al., 2005). An increasing feeling of dissatisfaction with the company increases the feeling of job insecurity. This suggests that unrealised expectations about job outcomes trigger a feeling that the situation cannot be improved. Hence, existing problems are more likely to persist in the future.

7. Conclusion, Implications and Future Research

The findings of this study make several contributions to the literature on stakeholder relations in the sharing economy and the organisational/psychological climate. Firstly, the study extends the knowledge on providers' perspectives and their participation in peer-to-peer services (Ahsan, 2018; Murillo et al., 2017; Davlembayeva and Papagiannidis, 2021; Rosenblat and Stark, 2016), especially when it comes the challenges related to managing platform-provider relations. This study sheds light on the digital and organisational aspects of relationship management that undermine the perception of the work environment. The evidence about the significant effects of information asymmetry, relational opportunism and uncertain working conditions broadens the understanding of negative work experiences. The second contribution of this study is to the literature on organisational behaviour. On the one hand, the evidence of the role of the perceived digital mediation and organisational management factors adds to the literature on the organisational and psychological climate (Jones and James, 1979; James et al., 2008; Parker et al., 2003). The findings show that the perception of information asymmetry, uncertain working conditions and relational opportunism define the dissatisfaction with digitally-mediated work environments.

The findings of the study offer a number of managerial implications. First, the results test a number of factors that better explain providers' dissatisfaction with platforms. The significant effect of information asymmetry shows that the work of sharing economy providers is still challenged by the lack of transparency when it comes to pricing policies, rules of conduct and working terms. To overcome the inequality of power between parties due to information asymmetry, platforms can invite providers and establish working groups, giving them an opportunity to discuss concerns and protect their rights to fair working conditions. The confirmed role of uncertain working conditions in undermining providers' satisfaction with the company suggests that the clarity of employment contract terms or/and the efficiency of communicating those terms to their providers needs to be improved. To avoid ambiguity in the interpretation of contractual conditions, companies may introduce inductions. Also, managers should consider a number of measures to improve belief in platform fairness, openness and honesty in relations with providers.

The paper also has some limitations that could be addressed by future research. First, the statistically non-significant result of the path analysis between algorithmic management unfairness and satisfaction with the company suggests that future studies need to look at the aspects of algorithmic management in platform-provider relations, which may be perceived differently. Second, although the study interprets the disconfirmed effect of control on dissatisfaction, it may be worth testing the role of this factor in different sharing economy areas.

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