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# (De)valuation of household cleaning in the platform economy

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## ***Abstract***

The division of paid and unpaid work fostered by the industrial revolution resulted in the devaluation of domestic work, including cleaning. Taking place behind closed doors renders this kind of work largely invisible. The arrival of platforms in this sector provides a novel possibility to explore the (de)valuation of household cleaning. Building on the literature on platform labor, we identify three “sites of valuation” and explore these in the case of the major platform operating in this field in Germany: Helpling. By means of the walkthrough method, we collect data from i) the Helpling webpage and infrastructure; ii) client reviews; and iii) cleaner profiles, and analyze the material with a grounded theory approach. We outline what these sites allow us to see about “good cleaning” or “good cleaners”, thereby unfolding how the infrastructure and the worker-client relationship are co-constructed. We argue that the digital infrastructure of platforms makes aspects of valuation of household cleaning visible, some of which have otherwise been hidden behind closed doors, such as affective labor, trust, or safety. The emerging picture leaves little prospect for digital platforms to foster actual valuation and appreciation of historically devalued domestic work such as cleaning. This would require, for example, improved working conditions – which would entail a fundamentally different business model underlying platform companies *and* altered regulatory frameworks. We stress here that it would also require active contribution of platforms to redefine the appreciation for and the recognition of cleaning (and other domestic work) in social-cultural terms.

**Keywords:** Platform labor; household cleaning; domestic work; netnography; walkthrough method; algorithmic management

## ***1 Introduction***

Cleaning in private households, as part of the broader sector of domestic and care work, has a centuries-long history of cultural, social, and economic devaluation. Crucially, this history has been largely hidden behind closed doors, and has detrimentally affected the livelihoods of women and migrant populations in particular (ILO 2018). Rooted in the division of paid and unpaid work that emerged during the industrial revolution, the lack of appreciation and recognition of reproductive activities such as housework is strikingly persistent until today

(Jaffe 2021; Komlosy 2018). The repercussions of these issues span from the fact that housework is generally still excluded from national accounts, thus stripped of economic value, to the blatantly low wages in care, health, or education (Jaffe 2021; Mazzucato 2017) – the sectors still associated with narratives of being more “natural” to women. Cleaning in particular is perceived as a dirty job (Schürmann 2013). Despite numerous ongoing attempts of breaking away with the dynamics of undermining the value of housework, for example, through challenging gender stereotypes or increased formalization of the sector, appreciation for workers providing household services, along with valuing the fruit of their work, remains low. This is reflected, for instance, in the persistently low wages and the lack of social security, and the social-cultural perceptions of household work as something one does out of feelings of “feminine” care.

In recent years, platforms mediating labor have spread from their most prominent domains of ride-hailing, app-based delivery, and cloud work to the domestic sector. They offer a digital alternative to the traditional intermediaries such as private recruitment of employment agencies on the one hand, and to word-of-mouth recommendations and informal work arrangements on the other hand (Digital Future Society 2021; Fudge and Hobden 2018). On platforms, domestic work such as cleaning, babysitting, or care activities can be outsourced in only a few clicks, as these companies oftentimes like to promise. This brings certain chances and risks for both households and workers. In household cleaning, for example, Fritsch and von Schwichow (2020) point to the platform narratives of flexible and easily accessible jobs as highly attractive for and valued by women who provide (unpaid) care work at home. However, they show a thin line between flexibility and uncertainty of/in employment, and stress the lack of transparency of platform interfaces, and the persisting worker isolation. Bor (2021) discusses how the platformization of cleaning work is reproducing the precarity that has been associated with “offline” domestic work for a long time. She concludes that the general crisis of social reproduction is thereby shifted to the platform workers. Importantly, household work has long been referred to as invisible by feminist scholars (Kaplan Daniels 1987). The arrival of platforms in household work holds potential to redefine what this invisibility means, as discussed further on. Yet, substantial platform-driven improvement along various lines of invisibility of household work has thus far not occurred, for example in terms of further formalization of the sector and stronger worker protection, or empowering household workers in their voice, or challenging the socio-cultural images of household work as degrading and worse in comparison to other occupations. Consequently, the devaluation of work in private homes seems to remain largely untouched, also in a platform-mediated version thereof.

In this paper, we focus on cleaning in private households and see the arrival of platforms as a possibility to explore and unpack the (de)valuation in this sector through the data that is now exposed and accessible via platform-specific digital infrastructures. We contribute via our netnography expanded by a walkthrough of the platform infrastructure of a selected case, Helpling – a major platform mediating cleaning in private households on the European market. We narrow our geographical focus to Germany’s capital, Berlin – the “birthplace” of Helpling, and the city with the highest number of cleaners on that platform in the country (Schmidt and Kathmann 2017). Ultimately, we identify what we refer to as three “sites of valuation”, i.e., the

content of Helpling’s webpage and the overall infrastructure design, reviews written by clients, and online profiles of cleaners.

As intermediaries between the parties involved in a specific market interaction (Çalışkan & Callon 2010), platforms mediating work generally aim to assure an efficient matching process, to manage the quality of the provided services and to foster trust between the users – all embedded in a digital setting. This digital setting is precisely what differentiates platforms from other market organizers as it enables them to access, extract, store and analyze data in a thus far unmatched way (Fourcade and Healy 2017; Montalban et al. 2019; Srnicek 2016). The sustained functioning of a platform mediating work largely depends on the user data provided from the moment of onboarding or registration, and through the on-going use of the platform. Consequently, “data-rich interaction moments” can be spotted throughout the interface, for example, in the search filters available, review and rating schemes, online profiles of the users, or data required for setting up an account. As platform labor research highlights, these “moments” are the essential fabric of algorithmic management and control practices of platforms. In line with other scholars in this field, we claim that these interactions, beyond serving the functions of remote worker control, of user trust building, and, last but not least, of ongoing optimization of the matching process, also constitute sites where (de)valuation can (and does) occur.

In what follows, we first discuss the background behind devaluation of cleaning and other housework in greater detail, tracking its historical and social-cultural roots. Next, we move on to platforms mediating labor and investigate the various digital tools of algorithmic management and quality control that shape user interaction. We scrutinize the literature on platform-mediated labor in search for valuation-relevant insights, building particularly on the vocabulary of, for instance, appreciating and respecting workers and their work, recognizing their work as work, rendering workers more or less visible, or the criteria based on which the quality of the services is assessed. Further, we briefly present the selected case of Helpling, and the three sites of valuation investigated. i.e., the content of Helpling’s webpage and the overall infrastructure design, reviews written by clients, and online profiles of cleaners. The collected data was analyzed in line with a grounded theory approach, with the findings presented in detail further on. This allows readers a glimpse into the content and the structure of these sites. Finally, we problematize our findings in the context of broader issues of (de)valuation in household cleaning, and the tensions arising between the private sphere of the home and the public sphere of wage labor. We end with a reflection on what the insights provided through the digitalization of valuation could mean for the sector of domestic cleaning and the valuation thereof. In short, we show how, as the platform infrastructure and the worker-client relationship are co-constructed, existing practices of devaluation are reproduced.

## ***2 The (de)valuation of housework***

The division of paid and unpaid work fostered by the industrial revolution resulted in a devaluation and a lack of recognition of reproductive activities, such as housework. In household economies, the predominant economic unit since the sedentarisation of humans, various kinds of work were conducted under one roof. These activities were assigned to household members according to age, gender, and status, and were considered work independently on whether they brought money into the household or not (Komlosy 2018, 2019).

With the increased emergence of factories and wage labor in the nineteenth century, a sharp distinction was made between the domestic and the economic sphere. Activities oriented towards self-sufficiency and reproduction were no longer designated as work. Unpaid work in the household was not only devalued, it was henceforth solely assigned to women (Komlosy 2018). While the market was seen as cold, competitive, and male, the family was associated with altruism, affection, and care, according to a bourgeois family ideology. Moreover, the gendered distinction between the workplace and the home disguises the fact that many women, especially those with working-class background, had no other choice but to engage in wage labor (Komlosy 2018; Silbaugh 1996). The fact that housework was intermingled with expectations to create a pleasant atmosphere in the home is also reflected in the concept of affective labor. The latter has been defined as “labor that produces or manipulates affects such as feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 108). Women were supposed to engage in these reproductive activities out of love, which is why these tasks were not considered work – except when performed by servants in the household.

Considering only gainful employment as value-creating work is also reflected in the first attempts to measure national wealth. The classical economists regarded household production as non-productive and thus as not contributing to any kind of value creation. Until today, national accounts – the way economic value is measured nowadays – generally exclude housework. The preclusion of unpaid work in households from national accounts is justified by the self-contained nature of these activities with hardly any implications for markets, the difficulty of assigning a meaningful value to these activities, and the problems it would create for policy making and market analyses (SNA 2008: 98f). Interestingly, national accountants do not seem to have a problem to include the services provided by private houses, “the property in which the supposedly unproductive household work is done”, into GDP by imputing rents (Mazzucato 2017: 93). In the meantime, feminist scholars have developed several attempts to measure the economic value of unpaid work (for an overview, see Jokubauskaitė and Schneebaum 2021). Based on country minimum wages, Oxfam, for example, has recently estimated that women’s unpaid work accounts for at least \$US10.8 trillion per year (Espinoza-Revollo 2020). In fact, data accessible on digital platforms can be used to calculate the monetary value of unpaid domestic work - as shown by Jokubauskaitė and Schneebaum (2021) in their analysis of the local hourly rates for childcare and other services provided via platforms active in Austria.

Not considering reproductive activities as work or value-creating has two major flaws, according to feminist scholarship. First, it neglects the fact that household production reduces the number of commodities to be bought on the market. Food preparation, cleaning, childcare and the production of other goods such as clothing all provide an important source of “family wealth” (Silbaugh 1996: 23), just like the wage earned in factories. Second, all the unpaid work that is provided at home (predominantly by women) is the precondition for other household members (mostly men) to engage in gainful employment – and to create exchange value on markets (Dalla Costa and James 1975; Mies et al. 1988).

Feminist attempts to challenge the gendered division of labor have mainly relied on two strategies (Weeks 2011). One approach is to strive for revaluing and acknowledging unpaid

work in the family. The “Wages for Housework” movement in the early 1970s is paradigmatic for this strategy. This demand did not only combat the forced identity of women being “naturally” predisposed for reproductive labor; by claiming wages for housework, they pointed out that what they were doing was indeed work (Federici and Austin 2017; James 2012). Western European Welfare States partially realized this claim in the form of paid maternity leaves, early childhood care or counting childcare as retirement time (Komlosy 2018). Another popular feminist strategy is to bring more women into paid jobs. Although the ongoing struggle for increased labor market participation is important and understandable, this strategy also means to “more or less accept the lesser value accorded to unwaged domestic labor” (Weeks 2011: 12). Furthermore, though women increasingly entered the labor market during the last decades, gendered assumptions about who is responsible for care and housework continue to shape gendered working patterns: In Germany, women spend on average 1.7 times more time on housework and care than men (Hobler et al. 2017). Globally, more than 75 % of unpaid work is performed by women (ILO 2018). In fact, getting a paid job did not necessarily improve women’s lives. Too often, the jobs women could get were often “low-paid versions of what they were doing at home” (Jaffe 2021: 31). All in all, the lacking recognition of unpaid domestic work, together with the assumption that housework and caring work was something women do out of love, culminated into a devaluation of these tasks performed on the market, reflected in low wage levels in the care, health or education sector (Jaffe 2021).

Finally, the concept of invisible work (Hatton 2017; Kaplan Daniels 1987) - rooted in feminist studies of household work - helps to grasp the dynamics and mechanisms behind the question of persisting devaluation of the sector, despite of the increasing formalization thereof, and despite of the continuing dilution of gender stereotypes. These dynamics and mechanisms are multidimensional and intersectional. For example, Hatton (2017) identified cultural, legal and spatial mechanisms that render work invisible. As already mentioned, domestic work was often seen as an activity that women are naturally inclined towards, thus denying it the character of skilled work. Naturalizing certain skills, instead of regarding them a result of learning and hard work, operates as a sociocultural mechanism of invisibility. Further, work is invisible, or devalued, in a sociolegal sense when it falls beyond the legal definitions of employment. The resultant lack of regulation and, in turn, protection of workers is interpreted as devaluation of their work. The overwhelming extent of informal work arrangements in domestic cleaning provide a case in point. Last but not least, domestic work usually takes place in private homes, and thus outside of what is perceived as workspace. The devaluation of work due to its physical segregation from “official” workplaces such as factories and offices has been described as sociospatial mechanism of invisibility. As shown further on, the invisibility lens has found a fertile ground in platform labor studies.

### ***3 Platforms mediating work as sites of valuation***

Questions of valuation have thus far mainly been explored in platform labor studies of algorithmic management and control, and studies focusing on the experiences of vulnerable and marginalized groups of platform workers (Ticona and Mateescu 2018; van Doorn 2017). These studies jointly stress the centrality of platform infrastructure design and its role in co-shaping and transforming the organization of work, seeing platforms as creators of (digital) “spaces for

individual valuation and comparison” (Gruszka and Böhm, 2020: 9). They also emphasize the ways in which workers navigate their way through this digital landscape, oscillating between surveillance, self-regulation, and self-optimization (Gruszka et al. 2020; Shapiro 2018; Wood et al. 2019). Through referring to invisible labor in problematizing the functioning and the opacity of platform infrastructure design, a bridge is built between platform-mediated work and multifaceted aspects of valuation. This point is captured by van Doorn (2017), who provocatively asks: “how does one value something one cannot and often does not want to see” (2017: 899)?

In what follows, we look into these contributions to provide a solid ground for understanding how, why, and where platforms create what we refer to as sites of valuation. First, we shortly revisit the research on algorithmic management tools and worker-control practices in two most thoroughly analyzed areas of platform-mediated labor: ride hailing and cloud work. Next, we draw on insights from the literature focusing specifically on platform-mediated household work and care work to trace how workers, and their work, are assessed, evaluated, ranked, and compared via a digital infrastructure.

### ***Valuation in ride hailing and cloud work***

Platform labor scholars have begun to explore the multifaceted ways in which platform-specific tools of user behavior control and management affect platform workers as tools of valuation. The most intuitive and prevalent examples of platform-specific tools of user behavior control and management are (consumer-sourced) review and rating schemes as well as online profiles that workers need to maintain and manage. These tools connect to platform quality management as they foster trust between platform users and provide means for workers to build their platform reputation.

Reviews and ratings, online profiles, or practices of measuring the responsiveness rate of a worker, all connect to “the issues of appearance, (in)visibility, and user power” (Gruszka et al. 2020: 284), and thus serve as potential sites of (worker) valuation. In this landscape, platform workers and their work are subject to constant tracking, monitoring, and, crucially, to evaluation and comparison (Fourcade and Healy 2017; Healy et al. 2020; Langley and Leyshon 2017). Low scores can thereby lead to less visibility in the search results, a decrease in earnings, or even deactivation of the platform workers (Cherry 2016; Rosenblat et al. 2017; Schor et al. 2020; Ticona et al. 2018). Cherry (2016) and Irani (2015) further stress how cloud workers are devalued through being hidden from view by technology. Platforms, thus, contribute to the sociospatial invisibility of cloud workers (Hatton 2017). This technological distance created by platform infrastructures dehumanizes cloud workers especially and is seen as a threat to the appreciation of their work. In this context, van Doorn (2017) observes that the digital means of quality assurance, worker evaluation, and trust and reputation building mechanisms for platform workers are embedded in “socio-technical obfuscation” (van Doorn 2017: 904). Platform infrastructure functions as a quasi-smokescreen, with tools that are often not fully transparent for the workers; that leave platform workers to a large degree invisible to each other and to the customers, and the fruit of their work at risk of being degraded and devalued.

While the growing body of platform labor research provides insights for considering how valuation processes possibly outplay in a platform-setting, and shows that “virtually every



platform worker puts considerable effort into a careful orchestration of their online selves” (Gruszka et al. 2020: 285), one must stress the variety of platform-mediated work yet again. Much of the literature zooms in on selected sectors, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of location-based gig-work in ride hailing and (food) delivery services, as well as web-based cloud work. Studies of platform work in the highly informal domestic sector have grown in recent years, including household cleaning (Bor 2021; Digital Future Society 2021; Hunt and Machingura 2016). However, they are accompanied by difficulties in accessing the field, the reasons for that coming back to the broad invisibility of these types of work. It is precisely the domestic sector that has been historically devalued by societies and their economic accounts, with work taking place behind closed doors of private households. Be it offline or online, workers providing home-bound and care services function in low levels of formality, with a simultaneous demand for proving their trustworthiness and suitability to work in private households.

### ***Valuation in platform-mediated care and domestic work***

Studies on worker experiences and platforms in the domestic work and care sector stress the centrality of trust assurance (Bor 2021; Digital Future Society 2021). The assurance of the trustworthiness of the workers begins with the onboarding process. The worker-provided information in that step ranges from proof of identity, proof of specialized education (if required), to external references for work experience, among others (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). Though differences occur in the specific information required by various platforms, the common denominator is the asymmetry of the information that each platform requests from its users, tipping the balance towards the benefit of the clients (Bor 2021; Digital Future Society 2021; Rathi and Tandon 2021; Ticona and Mateescu 2018). On some care work platforms, workers can also add links to their profiles on social media platforms (Mateescu and Ticona 2020; Ticona and Mateescu 2018). This step is framed as an incentive to boost the trustworthiness of the workers, highlight their credibility in comparison to other workers, and ultimately be considered a more reasonable and valuable choice in the eyes of the clients.

Many scholars stress the importance of platform management and control of workers and work processes in the domestic sphere, such as caring and cleaning, and observe intriguing dynamics further related to trust building and quality assurance (Hunt and Machingura 2016; Ticona and Mateescu 2018). Ticona and Mateescu (2018) employ the term individual visibility to capture how review and rating systems, as well as online profiles of platform care workers provide indication about experience, reliability, reputation, or trustworthiness of each worker – all feeding into how “valuable” one is as a worker. As on other platforms, online profiles of workers on platforms mediating household work maximize the visibility of workers “as individuals to potential clients, displaying specific qualities of workers in standardized and comparable ways” (Ticona and Mateescu 2018: 4394). In comparison to the thus-far common alternatives of word-of-mouth recommendation or deploying smaller agencies, a digital interface thus redefines the ways available to the workers to map themselves out to the clients and against other workers. For (self-employed) domestic workers, this then entails the need to “self-brand and manage one’s image online” (Mateescu and Ticona 2020: 67), or, more broadly, to “negotiate the engineering of their visibility, agency, and income opportunities” (van Doorn

2020: 49). This can even reach the dimension of presenting a “mission statement” on the domestic workers profiles (Bor 2021: 152).

As for review and rating systems, similar to other types of digitally-mediated labor, platform care and domestic workers have been shown to be highly aware of the possible detrimental impact of even one negative rating on their platform reputation (Mateescu and Ticona 2020; van Doorn 2017, 2020). Moreover, many platforms facilitating on-demand domestic work implement a one-way review and rating scheme. This offers workers scarce options for voicing their views about the clients, consequently bolstering unequal power relations between the two parties (Bor 2021; Digital Future Society 2021; Hunt and Machingura 2016; Rathi and Tandon 2021). It also reinforces an impression of one group of target users being favored over the other in their evaluation and assessment of the successful platform-mediated match between the two parties. Scholars also point to how the design of a given platform can further aggravate this hierarchy by reproducing and amplifying existing gender, race, or class norms – what Rathi and Tandon refer to as “platform paternalism” (2021: 42) – through the tools of algorithmic management and control. Researchers in this sector also expose a lack of a full understanding among the workers of how the rating process actually functions (Bor 2021; Digital Future Society 2021; Rathi and Tandon 2021), which can be seen as yet another expression of the opacity of platform infrastructures.

Last but not least, platforms in this sector openly narrate their activities as contributing to the increase in the levels of formality and professionalism yet have been repeatedly exposed to fail to live up to this ambition. They are often criticized for practicing selective formalization, meaning that they “formalize some aspects of the gig while perpetuating and sometimes aggravating certain conditions of informality” (van Doorn 2020: 51). This sets the sociolegal mechanisms of invisibility in motion (Hatton 2017), or prevents workers from being more institutionally visible (Gruszka and Böhm 2020; Ticona and Mateescu 2018), and, thus, more valued and recognized for the work they provide by the relevant regulatory institutions. A variety of studies of domestic work platforms, for example, operating in Spain (Digital Future Society 2021), in India (Rathi and Tandon 2021), in South Africa (Hunt and Machingura 2016), or in van Doorn’s (2020) research of household cleaning on Handy in New York and Helping in Berlin have shown, that this formalization is frequently unmonitored and thereby negligible. According to Bor’s (2021) research on Helping in Berlin, only one out of ten cleaners upload the proof of their registration as self-employed (Bor 2021: 155). Additionally, most of the platforms operating in the domestic sector do not provide a space for worker interaction in their infrastructures, which reduces the possibility of developing a collective voice counters the formalization narrative and maintains worker isolation (Athreya 2021; Bor 2021; Digital Future Society, 2021; Rathi and Tandon 2021). This quasi-formalization is seen as one of the key challenges for bringing domestic work closer to decent work (Fudge and Hobden 2018; Hunt and Machingura 2016).

Concluding, the literature clearly points out that platform review and rating schemes as well as online profiles of the workers facilitate a streamlined, flawless matching process for the clients. They also provide spaces where workers can build their reputation and manage their image of trustworthiness, reliability, and experience. They require careful unpacking and are further analyzed as two core sites of valuation in our investigation of Helping. Going beyond these

usual suspects, we also approach the platform website as yet another site of valuation and look into how various aspects of what makes a good cleaning and what makes a good cleaner are embedded there, for instance, via search filters, or specific vocabulary used.

#### ***4 Field, Materials & Methods***

The case scrutinized in this article is Helpling, a major German platform mediating cleaning work. Founded in Germany in 2014, the platform provides a digital infrastructure for matching households in need of a cleaner with self-employed cleaners. Especially in its early days, it had a number of competitors in Germany such as Homejoy, Clean Agents and Book a Tiger. While Homejoy stopped operating in 2015, Clean Agents and Book a Tiger were subsequently acquired by Helpling. All these platforms started off with a similar business model, namely matching clients and self-employed cleaners and taking commission. However, Book A Tiger radically changed its business model in 2016 and started employing the cleaners. Other digital solutions for finding a cleaner available in Germany include ExtraSauber, Betreut.de (the German branch of Care.com) or the Haushaltsjob-Börse. The latter seeks to connect clients and cleaners to further foster an employment relation between those parties. Contrary to the other ones, it is a non-profit platform, tightly linked to the German pension scheme.

As the “leading online-marketplace in Europe” (Helpling 2020), Helpling promises to connect clients with a “fitting” cleaner within only a few clicks. Besides cleaning, they mediate other household services such as dog sitting or gardening. In 2022, they operate in Australia, Germany, Switzerland, France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and the UK. Our case study focuses on Berlin, where the highest share of cleaners in the home country of the platform is located. The founder presents Helpling as a technology company with a rather passive role, such as a newspaper ad space or a notice board in a supermarket. For him both types of users, namely the cleaners as well as the clients, are customers of Helpling. The cleaners are classified as independent contractors (Panel: Plattformarbeit Kontrovers 2020). As already mentioned, this is not unusual in the sector of platform-mediated labor, and it is enabled by legal frameworks. However, this classification of workers is oftentimes highly contested, taking into consideration the extent to which digital platforms control the work process<sup>1</sup>.

The business model of Helpling relies mainly on these independent contractors, just recently the company added a premium version where cleaners are employed. Most profits are generated through the commissions on each cleaning booked. The commission ranges from 25% in the case of regular arrangements (i.e., weekly, or bi-weekly, after the third appointment) to 39% (for one time cleanings or the first three appointments) (Bor 2021). In case of spontaneous cancellations, fees have to be paid by cleaners and clients. However, there is power asymmetry, which favors clients over cleaners when it comes to whose voice counts more, for example, in case of bad reviews and ratings. This can result in an unfair review or even a suspension of the payment.

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<sup>1</sup> In the EU context, see the discussions on the five criteria for determining the existence of an employment relationship between workers and digital platforms (EC 2021; Henning 2022; Fairwork 2021)

By providing the infrastructure i.e., the website (and the app) – which is also the initial point of our inquiry into the sites of valuation – the company shapes the relations between the different users of Helpling. In particular, it shapes and enables the different ways cleaners and their work become evaluated and valorized (Vatin 2013) by the clients but also by the platform company itself. In this paper, we focus on the following sites of valuation of platform-mediated household cleaning: i) the Helpling webpage and infrastructure; ii) the reviews done by the clients for their respective cleaner; iii) the profile descriptions written by the cleaners. These three areas correspond to the literature exploring the experiences of workers with platform intermediaries and are oftentimes intertwined.

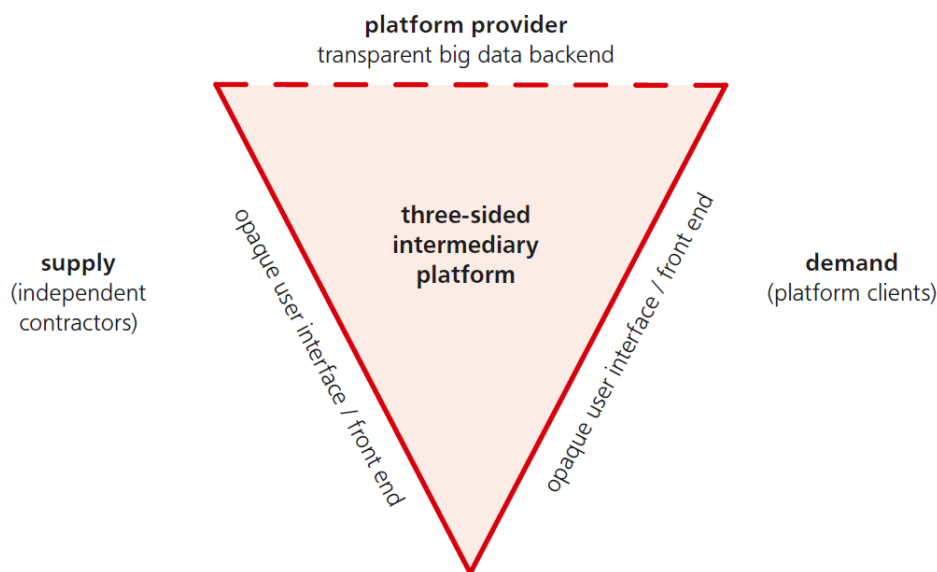


Figure 1 Three-sided intermediary platform (Schmidt 2016)

Schmidt (2016) comprehensively illustrates this intertwined relationship. While both kinds of users, the contractors as well as the clients, are interacting with and feeding their user data into an opaque and differing user interface, the platform provider has access to all data and many aspects remain invisible to the users, as depicted in Figure 1. This also helps in understanding how different users of the platform see it, and what they are able or unable to do.

Looking for data in this digital space requires methods acknowledging the digital and nested infrastructure of the platform. It also requires a reflection on the fact that a given infrastructure is moldable and not set in stone, as platform companies continuously develop, change different aspects of their business models and modes of operation, which affects their digital architecture. As such, infrastructure-centered research can only capture a particular moment in the “life” of a platform and demands a certain degree of flexibility. Moreover, platform infrastructures are both shaped by the social and economic contexts they operate in, and they further shape the relations and actions of the cleaners and clients who use them. A method highly fitting to this endeavor is *netnography*, as coined by Kozinets (2010; 2019), which “adapts the methods of ethnography and other qualitative research practices to the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, networks, and systems of social media” (Kozinets 2019: 19). The information classified as data in this research context are “usually a set of social media postings, a comment, some messages, a conversation or a thread” (Kozinets 2019: 191).

However, while part of our data overlaps with Kozinets' approach – namely collecting written information such as profile descriptions and reviews, our research extends this approach by explicitly reflecting on the infrastructure of the platform and what it suggests, enables, or renders (in)visible. Therefore, we expand our method of data collection with the *walkthrough-method* (Light et al. 2018), which we see as being part of netnography in the broader sense, but shedding more light on the socio-technical mechanisms. Conceptually it draws from science and technology studies and allows to “engag[e] directly with an app’s interface to examine its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences” (Light et al. 2018: 882).

The first step of this method involves exploring “the environment of expected use” (Light et al. 2018: 889–891), which means doing background research on the vision of the app, the company’s business strategy and the governance. Following this, we started with conducting exploratory research on the company “behind” this infrastructure. This includes researching their business model, which is manifested in the design of the platform infrastructure. In the second step we conducted “the technical walkthrough” (Light et al. 2018: 891–895), which consists of moving through the different stages of the app and documenting various aspects such as user interface arrangement, functions and features, the textual content and symbolic representation. Our technical walkthrough started at the homepage of Helpling. Screenshots and research diary entries accompanied each step of the “journey” through the platform infrastructure. To obtain different perspectives, we conducted multiple walkthroughs such as acting as an unregistered user or registering and booking a cleaner ourselves. Besides the textual content on the website, such as instructions, FAQs and the benefits of the platform for the clients, we strongly focus on the mechanisms of algorithmic management along the process. As discussed in our insights on platform-mediated work, these platform-proper elements often serve the goals of quality management, or user trust and reputation building, and embed the premises underlying work organization of a given platform. Although the starting page is theoretically the same for both kinds of users of the platform, it is clearly tailored towards the clients.

Step by step we documented how the website operates and which actions of the users were implied or enabled. This includes tracking how the booking functions, seeing which filters and sorting operations are available when looking for a cleaner, and reflecting on what the filters prioritize as valued, appreciated, and important about the cleaners. Another noteworthy aspect was looking into the reviews and ratings predefined by the platform, but also the possibilities cleaners have to present themselves in their online profile. The iterative data collection took place in December 2020 and in March 2021. In the first round of data collection, profile descriptions of 34 cleaners and reviews of 127 clients from Berlin were collected. After an initial analysis, the data was complemented with 100 additional profile descriptions in the second round of data collection and analysis to approximate a theoretical saturation with our data. Cleaner profiles and client reviews were selected by setting postal codes to the central areas of the city, which yielded a large number of potential cleaners. Further, the list of cleaners was sorted “by relevance”, the default sorting mechanism provided by the platform. The data collected from the three sites was analyzed in line with a grounded theory approach of finding (recurring) themes in the data (Charmaz 2017). First, the data was coded line-by-line with

mostly in-vivo codes, which were later categorized by two of the authors. The primary focus of this analysis was strongly linked to our interest in investigating what and how is valued when it comes to cleaning work.

The attempt of analyzing this highly ubiquitous infrastructure comes along with a number of limitations. While the starting page is a “general” one, for all kinds of users, it is strongly directed towards the clients. Information for service contractors is rather hidden in the nested website. Additionally, it has not been possible for us to analyze the infrastructure from the perspective of the cleaners. For our empirical research, this means that we are mainly “walking through” – or rather on – the client’s side of the triangle, as illustrated above (see Fig.1). This client-centeredness is therefore also present in our results. Nevertheless, the profile descriptions allow us to include user-generated content from cleaners as well. Still, we need to acknowledge that the profile descriptions are targeted towards the potential future clients. Furthermore, for a more detailed glimpse behind the platform, and to learn how the filters and mechanisms came into being, a cooperation with a platform company would be desirable.

### ***5 Exploring sites of valuation***

In this section, we present the findings of our netnography. This includes a thorough description of the empirical sites of valuation: the platform’s website, the clients’ reviews, and the cleaners’ profiles. Further, by singling out the different tools of algorithmic management and control, we attempt to unfold how the platform infrastructure and the worker-client relations are co-constructed (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999).

#### ***Entering the platform: Helping’s nested website***

On the starting page, Helping embeds reviews and ratings of cleaners working via the platform. This shows the centrality of the cleaners in promoting Helping’s services. However, besides a button for registering as a cleaner, cleaners themselves are not targeted at all on the starting page in stark contrast to the clients, who seem to be seen as the main audience by Helping. Helping further markets itself to future clients by presenting reviews and ratings about themselves acquired from a third-party platform.

The starting page already hints at characteristics of cleaners deemed valuable. Themes emerging here are:

- Trust – “Find the cleaner you trust.”<sup>2</sup> (Helping 1 2020)
- Safety/Security – “For your security, every cleaner on the Helping-platform is liability insured.” (Helping 2 2020)
- Personalization – “Compare hourly rates and reviews of thousands of cleaners and book (...) the cleaner who suits you best.” (Helping 3 2020)
- Easiness – “You can book a cleaner in only a few clicks.” (Helping 4 2020)

Trust is built along two lines, first through security, which is granted by the means of liability insurance, and strongly emphasized on the website also beyond the starting page. Second, through the promise of personalization, namely finding a cleaner who “suits you best”. The infrastructure of the platform enables this personalization, through the mechanisms provided

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<sup>2</sup> This quote, as well as all other quotes from the website providers were German in original and translated by the authors. Quotes from cleaners and clients were often written in English.

such as the hourly rates and the reviews and ratings. Further, easiness and functionality were promoted, as the following quote points out:

*In only a few clicks, you will find the fitting cleaner for you.*  
(Helpling 5 2020)

To find a cleaner, the clients start their search by entering their postal code. After entering details such as cleaning date and time, a list of cleaner profiles is presented to the client, along with slots for saving a number of preferred cleaners. As platform labor literature shows (see e.g., Bor 2021; Ticona and Mateescu 2018), being presented higher on top sections of this list increases the visibility of the workers and thus might influence their chances of receiving a cleaning gig. Different sorting mechanisms are available for the client, such as “by relevance”, “highest rate”, “lowest rate”, “new”, “highest number of cleanings”. It is not clear to the user, however, what the default option “by relevance” is based upon.

In addition to the sorting operations, filters set by the platform also indicate what the platform values or expects clients to value in a cleaner. These factors are: hourly rate, a good rating and experience (which is quantified by a minimum number of cleanings already performed via the platform).

On Helpling, the cleaners can technically decide on their hourly rate within a lower and upper limit set by the platform (Bor 2021; Henning 2022). The clients can define how much they are willing to pay by adjusting the search filters. The average hourly rate of our sample is €15.30 for cleaners with previous experience on the platform. Further, clients can determine a minimum rating and a minimum level of experience. Experience here corresponds to the cleaners’ experience in a quantitative way, in essence, the number of cleanings booked via the platform. Clicking on a selected cleaner leads to their online profile, where cleaners can provide further information in the “About me” section. Figure 2 illustrates a typical profile:

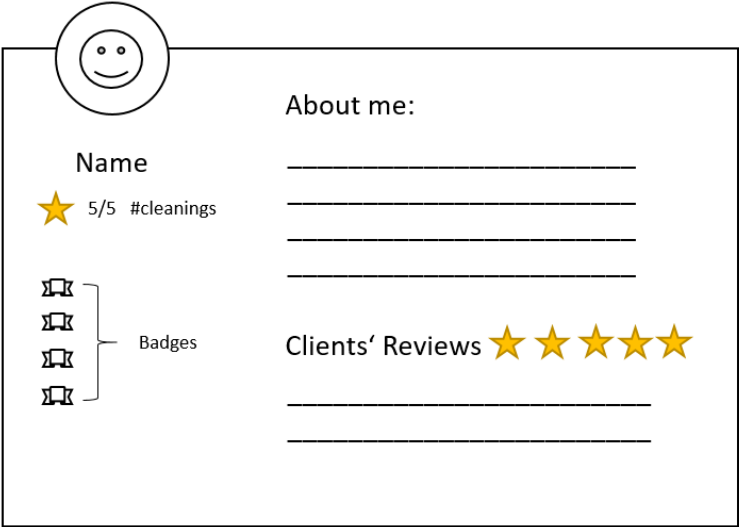
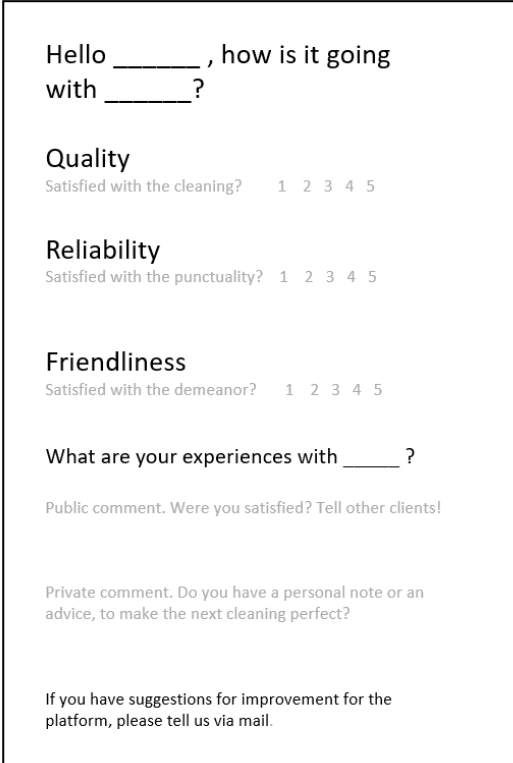


Figure 2: Illustration of a cleaner's profile (source: own illustration)

Helpling also provides badges, checkmarks, and thumbs up for different aspects such as education and training, safety measures against Covid-19, and safety/security (for instance, via

a verified ID). It also enables cleaners to mark extra tasks offered by them, such as window cleaning. These can be therefore seen as signifiers of additional value the cleaner could have for the client.

Finally, this site of valuation enables us to unpack the star rating process from the perspective of a client. The ratings are generated based on the input of clients after a cleaning is completed. After the cleaning job, Helping prompts the clients to rate and review their respective cleaners, as illustrated in Figure 3. The stars are divided into three subcategories: “friendliness”, “quality”, and “reliability” (see also Bor 2021). While “quality” and “reliability” refer to the actual cleaning done, or the overall work situation, “friendliness” reflects personal characteristics, which might be relevant for interpersonal relationship between cleaner and client and does not have anything to do with the work per se. Structuring the evaluation of the cleaning job along these three categories might shape the way clients assess the cleaner’s job as well as their expectations. Not only is the work itself evaluated but also the person doing the work. The cleaner’s friendliness further resurfaces in the comments of the clients, as outlined in the next section. All in all, this perpetuates the expectation of a friendly cleaner (Bor 2021), who does not only produce a clean home but a “friendly environment”. Thereby the rating co-constructs what “a good cleaning” entails.



The illustration shows a form for client reviews. It starts with a greeting: "Hello \_\_\_\_\_, how is it going with \_\_\_\_\_?". Below this are three rating sections, each with a 5-point scale: "Quality" (Satisfied with the cleaning?), "Reliability" (Satisfied with the punctuality?), and "Friendliness" (Satisfied with the demeanor?). After the ratings, there is a question: "What are your experiences with \_\_\_\_\_?". This is followed by two text input areas: "Public comment. Were you satisfied? Tell other clients!" and "Private comment. Do you have a personal note or an advice, to make the next cleaning perfect?". At the bottom, there is a note: "If you have suggestions for improvement for the platform, please tell us via mail."

Figure 3: Illustration of the review & rating process (source: own illustration)

### **Clients’ reviews: (de)valuing the cleaners and their work**

The reviews as a feature of algorithmic management and control make visible *how* and *what* clients value about cleaners and their work. The following example gives a prospect on themes emerging from the analysis of the reviews:



*I would like to recommend [Cleaner] a 100%, she greeted me with a smile and was very kind and responsive towards my instructions. My house looks and smells amazing and fresh. I wouldn't hesitate to book her again. (Review 1 2020)*

Broadly speaking, the following themes are identified in client reviews: the cleaner's attitude towards work, the cleaning work itself, communication aspects between cleaner and client, interpersonal relations (for example, "friendliness"), and yet another way of showing appreciation or valuation (in a non-monetary sense) through gratitude and recommendation.

Besides finding their place "spotless", "fresh", "sparkly", "organized", clients appear to value other aspects than the actual cleanliness. We refer to these further aspects as "attitude towards work" and "cleaner's interpersonal skills". Whereas the former is strongly work-centered (such as being responsive towards instructions), the latter relates to personal aspects (for instance, greeting someone with a smile). One of the attitudes towards work coming up frequently is "punctuality", but also "reliability" more generally, the latter also included as a criterion in Helpling's review and rating process. In addition, "efficiency" came up in the reviews, both in positive terms (i.e., that the cleaner was efficient) and in negative terms (lack of efficiency, pointing out that the cleaner was too slow). "Efficiency" relates to how the booking and the payment works. Cleaners are booked for a certain number of hours. Deviations in their working time need to be altered manually in the app and could result in a higher fee for the clients or no payment for the cleaner, depending on how the situation is approached by both users. If the client expresses dissatisfaction, for example via the rating system, it also poses the risk of not being paid. As clearly stated in the Terms and Conditions for cleaners who used Helpling during our data collection (Helpling 2019, § 8 section 4), dispute resolution in cases of unpaid remuneration lies in the hands of the self-employed cleaners.

Another aspect valued by clients and potentially necessary for the job is "communication". Based on analyzing the reviews, clients expect easy and clear communication. This is relevant when it comes to expectation setting and organizing the work. As household work is often outsourced to and taken up by migrant workers, language issues can occur, leading to point deduction in one's rating:

*Communication was not so easy, because she barely speaks German and also her English is not very good. However, there is little to complain about in terms of the quality of her work. (Review 2 2020)*

However, "communication" also makes the trajectory from strictly professional to personal, as one client referred to the communication as "easy" (as functional and efficient) and "pleasant" (as a nice personal encounter). Not only is a pleasant way of communicating with the clients valued here but yet again the general "friendliness" of the cleaners. Corresponding to the rating mechanism, it is also a theme in the review section. In the following review, "friendliness" was crucial enough to be mentioned first:

*[Cleaner] is really friendly and did a great job! He is a very efficient cleaner. I can highly recommend him to anyone who cares about their home being taken care of. (Review 3 2020)*

Further, this review points to a potential reason for the highly valued interpersonal factors such as being friendly, namely the sphere of where the work takes place: the private home. This also relates to the phrasing of “taking care” of the home.

The review section provides space where the clients can stress additional dimensions that they value about the cleaners and their work:

*I definitely recommend her and I am keen on counting on her services again. (...) ¡Muchas gracias!* (Review 4 2020)

They thank the cleaners for their work – sometimes referred to as “help”. When referring to the cleaner’s work as help, instead of work or service, a further devaluation takes place. While help is often associated as a positive notion, highly valued morally, in the context of work it somehow strips off the professional and waged character of the cleaners’ services. This can also be linked back to the name of the platform, potentially shaping these services as some kind of “help”. This point is also taken up by Bor (2021) and related to the reproduction of domestic work as deskilled work. In the review section also the theme of recommendations frequently occurred and can be seen as a signifier for “good cleaning” and trust building. This appears to be adopted from the analogue world of household cleaning, where word-of-mouth is oftentimes the easiest way to find a trusted cleaner.

#### ***Profile descriptions: the cover letters of the platform?***

The profile descriptions are yet another way for cleaners to attract clients to their services. In this rather limited space (up to 100 words), cleaners introduce themselves to the clients and present why they might be the right cleaner for them. As in most other CVs or cover letters, a strong emphasis is put on work experience. Here the professional/private divide is oftentimes present. While experience that is more professional is highlighted by pointing to previous cleaning jobs in a hotel or a restaurant, private cleaning experience is for example mentioned as follows:

*I have experience in hotels and hostels but my first experience was in my own house. I am a professional; I want things to be done in the right way and above all with a smile on my face.*  
(Profile 1 2020)

This resonates with “caring” such as in quotes like “I take care of your house as if it were mine” (Profile 2 2020), where this special role of the private home is becoming visible. In these profiles, the cleaners frequently stress their personal characteristics such as being “friendly” or “outgoing”. Further, they often introduce themselves as being detailed, perfectionist, meticulous, proactive and motivated. Again, this two-sidedness of what is seen as valuable traits for cleaners become visible here. Additionally, we found that the self-advertising often includes descriptions rather detached from the cleaning work but hinting at their “life outside of cleaning”.

Many cleaners describe themselves as “hard-working” sometimes in a creative way, as shown in the following:

*I'll work so hard, they'll think a bunch of aliens cleaned your house.* (Profile 3 2020)

This quote illustrates the creativity brought into the profiles by some of the cleaners. Thereby, in some cases they seem to not only promote themselves but to also redefine the whole (dirty) image of cleaning. Bor calls these aspects of the profiles “mission statements” (2021: 152). Emergent themes in this category, which we labelled as “transcending cleaning” were accounts on what a clean home can mean:

*Beyond cleaning – creating an enabling environment for good and improved health. (Profile 4 2020)*

In some profiles, this positivity relates not only to the result of the cleaning but also to the process. So that some cleaners present cleaning as something they like doing, such as a hobby or even as sport (“cardio and meditation” (Profile 5 2020)):

*For me cleaning is not only a job, is also a hobby. I like it and make me happy! Always a clean house is more comfortable and details are important. (Profile 6 2020)*

What is missing in these descriptions is also interesting, namely information on how a good gig would look like for the cleaners. This could for example entail a pet-free household or the like. Demands like these are however missing, pointing to the clear power asymmetry of the users.

In this section we outlined our insights into the three sites of valuation and explored where (de)valuation takes place, who is (de)valuing whom, and what is (de)valued. We zoomed in on the platform infrastructure, the reviews, and the profiles. In what follows, we build a bridge between the themes identified in the findings and broader issues pertinent to the devaluation of cleaning.

### ***6 Sites of valuation in household cleaning: what do platforms bring to light?***

As other platforms mediating labor, Helping aims to leverage their infrastructure to manage the matching process and the quality of services mediated via its interface in an efficient, optimized manner. Consequently, Helping must excel in designing a digital infrastructure that enables informed comparison and personalized selection for the clients and provides the cleaners with space for building their reputation online. In this paper, we looked into Helping’s infrastructure and the data one is able to access and collect in the “digital world” via netnographic research to unpack the long-devalued sector of household cleaning. Below, we delve further into selected themes identified in our findings and discuss these in connection to the broader overarching issues related to (de)valuation of household work and the role of digital mediation therein. These center particularly on the problematic distinction between the domestic/economic spheres; affective labor entailed in cleaning; and the questions of trust and safety. Throughout the discussion, we draw attention to the recurrence of certain themes on and across the three investigated sites of valuation, stressing their co-constructed character.

Across all sites of valuation, we observe how the boundaries between the work and the worker seem to blur. Although in principle such blurred boundaries also exist in other types of work, we find this particularly striking in the case of cleaning and household work. During the analysis, we repeatedly asked ourselves whether the adjectives used in the clients’ reviews pertain to the cleaner’s service or to their personal character. Be it on the website, in the profiles, or in the reviews and ratings, personal and professional aspects go hand in hand. This resembles

the fuzzy lines between the domestic and the economic spheres, and between paid and unpaid work. A fitting example reflecting this blurriness is experience. This theme is present in two sites of valuation investigated: the cleaners' profiles and the platform infrastructure. In the latter, experience is defined as the number of cleaning jobs performed by a given cleaner – a parameter turned into a search filter according to which the clients can sort their search results. In the former, cleaners allude to their experience in a professional setting (for example, prior work experience at a hotel), as well as in a personal setting of cleaning at their own homes. These two sides of gaining experience in cleaning reflect the two spheres that intersect in the job of a domestic cleaner, and both might be valued by clients who essentially “let” a stranger into their private home in their final choice of a cleaner. This sensitive personal/professional intersection is further amplified by the platform infrastructure. By means of evaluating, reviewing, and rating, the personal side of cleaning work does not only become visible and pronounced, but also measurable. This is highlighted in the case of the theme of friendliness – measured by Helping in the client-sourced rating on a scale of one to five and identified in all three sites of valuation we examined. It remains unclear to what extent the assessment of friendliness weighs in the overall rating. This chimes in with the tendency of digital labor platforms to create a certain socio-technical obfuscation (van Doorn 2017), consequently boosting their immunity as a digital match-maker. However, one can argue that this personal side is explicitly framed by Helping as part of what the clients pay for, or at least what they should expect, and further reinforced in the profiles of the cleaners.

Furthermore, the theme of friendliness – recurring in the cleaner profiles, the client reviews, and in the platform-predefined rating criteria – feeds into the debates around gendered work and feminist politics where affective labor is seen as a way “to realize a profit for a specific company” (Oksala, 2015: 290). In addition to producing a clean environment, the workers are also producing affection by working “with a smile” (Hardt and Negri 2004: 108). As shown in our findings, as well as in other studies of the sector (Bor 2021; Digital Future Society 2021; Rathi and Tandon 2021), the performance of affective labor by workers in private households is built into the infrastructure and becomes digitally exposed – in our case, literally on all three sites of valuation investigated. For Helping (and other platforms in the domestic sphere), this begs the question of what does it mean that affective labor entailed in cleaning becomes exposed via this digital intermediation? According to feminist scholars such as Oksala (2015), the psychological costs of affective labor could, for example, justify demands for increasing the economic value and level of pay of cleaning work.

Continuing, a detailed look at cleaner profiles on Helping allows us to see how affective labor further resonates with the degrading imagery surrounding this type of work, namely: of cleaning still having the image of a dirty job (Duffy 2007; Schürmann 2013; Simpson et al. 2012). Its devaluation is part of the historical devaluation of housework, rooted in the division of paid and unpaid labor, as thoroughly outlined earlier. Moreover, household cleaning takes place in the sphere of private homes and is notoriously undeclared, thus being rendered spatially and legally invisible (Hatton 2017). Grasping the platform as a “technologically and materially constituted topos or stage” (Andersson Schwarz 2017: 377) allows us to look for emancipatory potential within this infrastructure of algorithmic control and management. As shown in the findings via the theme of transcending cleaning, the cleaners oftentimes include humorous or creative

content in their online profiles. By curating their profiles (Bor 2021; Ticona and Mateescu 2018), Helping cleaners bring forth other or new meanings of cleaning and what a clean home could mean. Cleaning is framed as a hobby, a sports activity, a type of work that can be done while listening to music. A clean home is linked to happiness and portrayed as an enabling environment. Framing cleaning along the lines of leisure, fun time, or a form of help or care – as visible in our findings – can also be yet another trace of affective labor and a reinforcement of the “labor-of-love myth” (Jaffe 2021: 268). As elaborated earlier, certain types of work are devalued through being seen as effortless and “natural”, and, eventually, as something that should be done out of passion rather than for a proper wage. As such, in their online profiles workers also reinforce this myth with such “transcending cleaning” framings, thus contributing to a further devaluation of their work, rather than claiming fair payment and recognition thereof.

Finally, as shown extensively in studies of cloud work and ride hailing (Rosenblat et al. 2017; Wood et al. 2019), a successful and well-managed platform-mediated matching process builds largely on digital tools that facilitate trust building and assure safety of the service. Since household cleaning requires entering private homes, it entails specific risks and uncertainties for both clients and cleaners, hence placing even more meaning (or value) on trust between and safety of both parties (Bor 2021; Digital Future Society 2021; Hunt and Machingura 2016). Helping describes “your” cleaners on their platform as trustworthy directly on the starting page and reinforces it with the prospect of a secure service and a personalized match. The client-sourced star ratings and reviews for individual cleaners are digitally embedded tools that facilitate this trust, security, and personalization. Online profiles of the cleaners enable further trust building through offering the clients a peek into more personal details. However, in line with platform labor literature, our findings confirm the striking single directionality of the elements of the platform design just mentioned, tilted towards the benefit of the clients, resulting in both information and power asymmetries among platform users. This starts already with the moment of registration (Mateescu and Ticona 2020). While we are unable to account for the data that Helping requires from the cleaners during onboarding, we do know that browsing through the profiles on the platform is possible literally with a zip code. We also show how cleaners feed personal details, photos, and descriptions into their online profiles, none of which exists for the clients. In the field of household cleaning, this asymmetry appears particularly striking, as work happening in private households requires trust of *both* parties. While cleaners were neither able to review nor rate the clients in the past, they appear to have this option now. However, they are not offered personal descriptions of the clients (Bor 2021). As Rathi and Tandon put it, on platforms in the domestic sector “the onus of being trustworthy [is] placed exclusively on workers” (2021: 38). Examples of imbalanced treatment of cleaners and clients also include Helping’s reaction to the ongoing pandemic. The platform introduced a Covid-19 badge as a confirmation of respecting the essential safety measures. Again, the badge can be added only to cleaner profiles. This begs a question: why are the infrastructure and the matching process organized as if trust and safety would be more valuable for the clients than for the cleaners? The answers might lie in the persistent and intricate devaluation of work taking place in private households. These hierarchies, present in the offline world, are reproduced (or even amplified) in this new digital environment.

## ***7 Concluding Remarks***

In our article, we argue that the digital infrastructure of platforms makes aspects of (de)valuation of household cleaning visible, some of which have otherwise been hidden behind closed doors. We identified three sites of valuation which allowed us to see what is considered good quality cleaning and what makes a good cleaner. Using Helpling as a case, we described the infrastructure of the platform and its mechanisms; the ways the clients evaluate the cleaners in their written reviews; and how the cleaners present themselves to clients in their online profiles. The findings expose the blurry lines between workers and their work in household cleaning, and the consequent common engagement of cleaners in affective labor. In fact, all three sites of valuation investigated allow us to single out the particularly stressed aspects of friendliness, experience (professional and/or gained in the private sphere), care, or trustworthiness of cleaners. Furthermore, the prioritization of user-clients by Helpling when it comes to trust and safety of the services mediated on the platform is clear. The imbalance in what the clients and cleaners are able to learn about each other based on the data collected, managed, and displayed by the platform is striking. The feedback tools built into the infrastructure are also geared towards the clients.

On a concluding note, let us close the loop by looking at Helpling through the lens of invisible labor and the comprehensive dimensions which underlie the devaluation of cleaning, as suggested by Hatton (2017). Platforms such as Helpling obviously cannot make work happening in private households more visible in socio-spatial terms. Helpling, however, could theoretically contribute to a change in the two remaining dimensions. However, by not breaking up with the narratives of naturalization of cleaning work, the platform perpetuates the socio-cultural invisibility of cleaners. Second, the platform defines itself as a provider of a matching infrastructure and relies on independent contractors, which is a choice of a business model enabled by the respective legal framework. These two factors together perpetuate the legal invisibility of cleaners. Moreover, cleaners decide on their own hourly rate from which Helpling deducts a hefty share as commission. This might lead to a “race to the bottom” when it comes to hourly rates, thus maintaining the poor level of wages in household cleaning, and the continuous devaluation thereof. All in all, what emerges is a rather daunting picture of faux emancipation. This picture leaves little prospect for platforms such as Helpling to foster actual valuation and appreciation of historically devalued domestic work such as cleaning that could result in improved working conditions, higher wages, and stronger social security. Rather, it digitally exposes the privileges one party in the match over the other, thus perpetuating the issues in the sector.

While we emphasize the ways the infrastructure shapes the interactions between the different users on the platform and the intertwinements between the scrutinized sites of valuation, we call for further research in the field. Urgent questions require clarification, ideally with a demand of transparent access to data provided by the platforms themselves. This could encompass examining whether and how platforms affect the gender composition of household work, or problematizing the negotiations that lead to a certain feature becoming a filter or a rating category. As discussed, the rating of friendliness was especially telling. More research that investigates alternative platform designs which possibly do not perpetuate the devaluation of cleaning, such as platform cooperatives, is needed. Together with what we framed as

“transcending of cleaning work” we wonder if the exposure of affective labor in cleaning work could make a case for more decent work in this sector? After all, this kind of work is more than *just* cleaning.

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