



Is it possible to outsmart Uber? Individual working tactics within platform work in Poland

Dominika Polkowska ^a and Bartosz Mika ^b

^aInstitute of Sociology, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin, Poland; ^bInstitute of Sociology, University of Gdańsk, Gdańsk, Poland

ABSTRACT

Platform work in general requires workers to apply specific strategies to stay afloat. In Poland, platform work is a complex system of mutual relations and interdependencies between transnational corporations, national regulators, service providers, intermediaries and platform workers. Based on thirty-one in-depth interviews with Uber drivers in Poland and two expert interviews with fleet partners, this article presents the working strategies adopted by platform workers and looks at how the historical experience of communism may shape responses to twenty-first-century global capitalism. The analysis shows that an adequate remuneration can only be made by adopting the strategy called *kombinowanie*, a combination of small cheating, fiddling and exploiting loopholes in the law.



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Introduction

The rise of platform or app-mediated work in the 2000s brought high hopes of increasing the agency of groups on the fringes of the official labour market. The platforms were expected to play a market-oriented function and enable paid work of groups that had been excluded from official employment relations or found it difficult to stay on the labour market for a long time. Scholars like Sundararajan (2016) or Hall and Krueger (2017) stress the flexibility offered by platforms, for example ride-hailing companies, built on the independence of workers' choices and usage of technology. Especially Hall and Krueger (2017) note that Uber has attracted drivers with a wide range of backgrounds who value

CONTACT Dominika Polkowska  dominika.polkowska@umcs.pl  Institute of Sociology, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Pl. Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 4, Lublin 20-031, Poland

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the type of opportunity for self-employment and flexibility that the platform provides.¹

However, instead of integrating workers into the labour market and providing them with relatively stable employment, platform work pushes employees into flexibility understood as the flipside of the precariousness coin. What remains the main function of platforms is to generate income (Drahokoupil and Piasna 2019), often ‘free riding’ on the social security net (Schor et al. 2020). Existing analyses show that platforms have substantial leverage over the price setting process (Hyman et al. 2020) and can determine the use and importance of different pricing mechanisms (Newlands et al. 2018).

But still, platform workers are not deprived of agency. They can implement a variety of collective strategies and individual practices to maintain a sense of agency and earn an income. This paper focuses on the latter: the aim is to identify and describe individual tactics adopted by platform workers to get an income at the level of a living wage. The findings are based on thirty-one in-depth interviews with Uber drivers in Poland and two expert interviews with Uber fleet partners.² The study was conducted between 2018 and 2021 and was devoted to platform-dependent workers, i.e. those who rely on platform work as their main source of livelihood (Schor et al. 2020). The research question was formulated as follows: What are the work tactics adopted by Uber drivers on the Polish ride-hailing market to make an adequate, sustainable remuneration?

The framework used to achieve the goal of the study relies on the concept of *kombinowanie*. It has its source in the Polish historical experience, which included the deprivation of statehood in the nineteenth century, military occupation during World Wars I and II, and Soviet-style socialism. In the general sense, it means searching for a solution to a particular problem based on lay expertise or common knowledge under the circumstances of a certain lack.

This lack is usually diagnosed in a particularistic way (in Parsons’ sense) from a narrow, individualistic perspective. *Kombinowanie* is a *disposition* attitude which is historically rooted but has persisted and today is usually associated with small cheating (Mars 1982), fiddling (Ditton 1977) and exploiting loopholes in the law. In Poland, because of its

¹However, the study has received noteworthy criticism from Berg and Johnson (2019).

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genesis in times of subordination, it is treated more as resourcefulness than an offence and in selected contexts it can be admired to some extent. Below we propose to use this term as applicable to platform capitalism in general – not necessarily admirable but indispensable tactic to earn a decent remuneration.

This article consists of five parts. The first one explains key concepts pertaining to the gig economy, the position of workers in platform economy and *kombinowanie*. It is followed by the section on Uber's presence in Poland and on the methodology of the study. The analytical part discusses the most frequently adopted strategies of *kombinowanie*. These observations are followed by conclusions.

Theoretical background

The study discussed below concerns platform work, or on-demand work via platforms. The definition has been used according to which platform work is done

on online labour platforms and is a subset of internet work. It covers a variety of jobs and tasks and includes the provision of platform-mediated services and excludes the renting of accommodation and the sale of products online. Labour platforms match supply and demand, provide a set of tools and services that enable the delivery of work in exchange for compensation, and set rules of governance. (Piasna and Drahokoupil 2019, p. 14)

A number of studies show that apart from facilitating flexible work arrangements, platform work leads to an increase in poorer quality jobs, with poor career prospects, and contributes to the growth of precarious work (Mira d'Ercole and MacDonald 2018). Scholars focusing on the precariousness of platform work stress the fact that it involves long working hours, low wages, lack of security – understood as job insecurity, but also lack of social protection of work and lack of support from trade unions – and avoiding employments contracts (Peticca-Harris et al. 2020; Polkowska 2019).

The discussion on the downsides of on-demand workers' flexibility is intensifying around the world. Adriaanse (2016) concludes that Uber is able to function because it uses precarious, insecure work arrangements to keep labour costs low in the interest of the company rather than workers. A considerable number of studies highlight how precarity is determined by platform dependence and gig work attachment, with the main focus on low quality of gig jobs (Piasna and Drahokoupil 2019; Ravenelle 2019; Schor et al. 2020).

Most authors explore more than one aspect of platform work (Kaine and Josserand 2019) but doing so they often lose sight of the behaviour and attitudes of workers. Even Dunn (2020), who takes a worker-centric approach and identifies five categories of gig workers, seems not to concentrate on workers' behaviour but rather on features of their work and their motivation only.

To some extent, this omission is better addressed in studies devoted to algorithmic control. Rosenblat (2018), and Rosenblat and Stark (2016) observe that platforms rely on extensive algorithms to manage, control and manipulate workers. They also point out the inevitability of some degree of algorithmic control for gig workers. Other researchers attempt to develop a more nuanced approach to control, stressing a feedback loop between algorithms and workers' strategies (Wood 2019; Wood et al. 2019). Authors studying algorithmic control pay great attention to workers' autonomy, but this factor is assessed differently. On the one hand, Maffie (2020) suggests that platform control forecloses worker choice and as a result – worker autonomy. Similarly, Ravenelle (2019) notes that the expected autonomy has been usurped by the need to maintain algorithm-approved acceptance and response rates. On the other hand, Wood et al. (2019) claim that algorithmic management techniques offer workers important levels of autonomy, and Galière (2020) observes that that algorithmic control is fallible.

Schor et al. (2020) combine the above approaches, arguing that platform work is weakly institutionalised and thus worker satisfaction, autonomy and earnings vary significantly across and within platforms. Considering studies on Uber drivers, one worth noting is that by Reid-Musson et al. (2020), who explain the drivers' attitude to their work using the concept of organisational misbehaviour. The authors characterise misbehaviour as a struggle over lack of control and lack of autonomy in self-employed work. As observed in their study, the drivers mocked and avoided carpool rides despite the threat of penalties.

There are also other studies on various strategies adopted by platform workers (for example taxi drivers). Chen (2018) describes how Chinese taxi drivers adapt to, manipulate and fight against the rise of ride-hailing platforms like Didi Chuxing. The techniques which they deploy to outmanoeuvre the apps come as proof of their skills in using various technologies and reveal their ability to work around and manipulate their marginality and informality (Chen 2018, p. 2708). The results of a study conducted by Berger et al. (2019) suggest that platform work

may be treated (under certain circumstances) as a strategy of raising income by Uber drivers from migrant background, and a way to improve their life satisfaction.

Organisational misbehaviour, which can apply in the above examples, is a significant concept. It captures informal worker practices that do not conform with managerial expectations of appropriate behaviour at work (Reid-Musson et al. 2020, p. 146). The concept is described by Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) as ‘anything that you do at work that you are not supposed to do’ (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999, p. 2). The authors identify classic forms of informal workplace dissent, including limiting work and appropriating product (pilfering, sabotage, time wasting and absenteeism). Sayers and Fachira (2015), in turn, point out that organisational misbehaviour is very often related to different tendencies within workgroups (e.g. workgroup norms that are contrary to company norms).

However, organisational misbehaviour has one important fault from the point of view presented in this paper: it tacitly accepts a one-sided judgment of workers’ behaviours, as if formal and informal rules imposed by management simply had to be followed without any protest. Meanwhile, from one perspective particular behaviours may seem unacceptable, but from the other (or in other contexts) they may be indispensable. In the context of strong power asymmetries between company and workers, some degree of resistance can be understandable and even functional.³ Normative judgments aside, some level of ‘making out’ with management (Burawoy 1979) or ‘hidden transcript’ in workers discourse (Scott 1990) is the feature of every relation built on power asymmetry. As mentioned above, asymmetry is definitely part of on-demand workers’ experience. Consequently, their behaviour should be seen more in terms of a particularistic tactic to ‘make a living’, or attempts to cope and rationalise their own behaviour.

The concept of organisational misbehaviour also suggests that the phenomenon only concerns a given company or organisation. Direct work relation between the worker and the company indicates that alleged or actual inappropriate behaviour of workers affects only the employer. As pointed out above, the case of platform economy is different. The Uber company, the main point of interest in this paper, defines itself as an innovative technology infrastructure (Todolí-Signes

³For example, as a way to innovation (Coser, 1964).

2017) and classifies drivers using the app as registered partners, not employees. Friedman (2014) describes Uber as a 'shadow employer' functioning outside official labour law and outside two-sided work relations (Dunn 2020; Mika 2020). The case is no different in Poland (see below). Therefore, workers' strategies usually go beyond the relationship to the platform itself – they concern wider environment, including official regulations, relations with the fleet partner, embeddedness in other work arrangements.

The response of the interviewed Uber drivers to their precariousness – especially considering the economic dimension (Vosko 2010) is to apply a set of tactics, called for the purposes of this study *kombinowanie*. As has been highlighted above, *kombinowanie* has its source in the Polish historical experience, which included the deprivation of statehood and the lack of political sovereignty. This *disposition* attitude involves a particularistic approach to the problem, usually from the individual standpoint. Indeed, in the case of Poland it has been observed that the level of collective engagement and organised struggles in relations with the platforms is low (Polkowska 2021b). Moreover, low membership in trade unions in the private sector and low generalised trust among Poles make the drivers' choice of individual tactics understandable.

Simultaneously, the unique Polish historical experience is an inspiration for proposing a 'general purpose' category. The application of the concept of *kombinowanie* is a theoretical contribution of the paper. *Kombinowanie* should be seen as a broader term than 'organisational misbehaviour' in the way it goes beyond a single organisation and beyond the patrimonial position of the manager or company. As such, then, it is more suited to platform capitalism. All the more, *kombinowanie* seems to be an appropriate conceptual category to describe platform workers' individual tactics in the situation of precarity and strong power asymmetry resulting from 'platform power' (Mazur and Serafin 2022). So, even if drivers from outside Poland do not experience, for example, low trust and other features of the Polish labour market, they still operate in precarious conditions and have to implement individual tactics to earn a decent pay.

According to the informants, they just had to rely on *kombinowanie* because being platform-dependent drivers they could not sustain their livelihood otherwise (the economic dimension of precarious work): they could only survive economically as Uber drivers by adopting certain tactics.

Uber in Poland

According to the existing research on platform work in Poland, it should be observed that this work still plays a marginal role on the Polish labour market (Owczarek 2018). As much as 11% of Poles aged 18–65 have had experience with platform work, but only 4% of them work this way on a regular basis. Among those 4%, a large group of workers (although not estimated so far) are Uber or Bolt drivers.

Uber began operating in Poland in August 2014. Initially active only in Warsaw, it currently offers its services in 27 cities and metropolitan areas (Uber.com, accessed 01/06/2022). In 2016, Uber demanded that its drivers should register as self-employed, and accepted only those with whom it could maintain business-to-business relations. This decision, however, was forced by the Ministry of Finance. Uber decided to comply with Polish regulations not of its own free will but because of its concern over the possibility of continuing operations in Poland. For drivers who treated Uber as an additional source of income, this move was unfavourable both from the financial and the organisational point of view, because the costs of setting up a business outweighed the benefits of this work. At this point, the Uber fleet partners emerged. According to them, the idea of intermediaries between the drivers and the platform in Poland came from Uber. So, the unique feature of the Polish on-demand ride-hailing market is the operation of fleet partners, entities that act as intermediaries between the platform and the drivers. Fleet partners are usually car rental owners or former Uber drivers who set up a business supporting other drivers, because Uber operates only on a business-to-business basis.

As it is today, the ride-hailing sector in Poland is regulated by the amendment to the Road Transport Act (the so-called Lex Uber), which governs the operation of passenger transport and adapts it to the new situation, that is, the functioning of ride-hailing apps. It is now the intermediary's obligation to obtain a licence (which can only be issued to entities registered in Poland) and to contract out passenger transport only to self-employed drivers (or drivers associated with fleet partners) who hold a relevant passenger transport licence. The law provides for fines for both the intermediary operating without a licence, and for the driver accepting orders from such an intermediary. The intermediary is obliged to keep track of all orders (Koziarek 2019).

Many Uber drivers, especially young ones and those who are migrants, lack the legal knowledge on those issues and thus the option of having all

formalities handled by fleet partners is convenient for them and gives them a greater sense of security. Thanks to fleet partners, drivers do not have to set up their own business to do this job. The presence of fleet partners in the Polish market is also very convenient for Uber, because in this way the company shifts the entire responsibility onto fleet partners as it is only a technology provider (Kashyap and Bhatia 2018; Kenner 2019).

Taking into account legal regulations in other European countries (De Stefano and Aloisi 2018, p. 36), it must be said that Uber's situation in Poland and its business perspectives have been much more favourable than elsewhere in Europe. The fleet partners are recognised by law, which allows Uber to operate according to its self-definition of technology provider. The American platform is not involved in work relations with drivers or with fleet partners, and can enjoy all the benefits of operating on the Polish market without incurring any employee responsibility.

It can be noted that in terms of its formal status Uber has achieved more in Poland than in any other country: it started from bypassing Polish law (Muszyński 2018) and functioning outside any regulations, and ended up with platform drivers being formally equated with taxi drivers (Mazur and Serafin 2022). The newly introduced regulations have practically integrated Uber and similar platforms into the passenger transport system. What comes as a confirmation of its 'special' status in Poland is that it became an official partner of the largest Polish airport, the Chopin Airport in Warsaw: Uber drivers can pick up passengers from the arrivals terminal and use airport parking spaces (the other official transport partner is a traditional taxi corporation which had a monopoly at the airport). This is the first such case in Central-Eastern Europe (Duszczyk 2022).

The methodology of the study

This article proceeds by examining the *kombinowanie* tactic undertaken by Uber drivers in Poland to survive within this work. Thus, *kombinowanie* is approached as misbehaviour of Uber drivers resulting from Uber's business model of low-cost transport and the uncertain legal situation (there were no strict regulations for ride-hailing at the time of the study). The aim of the article is to identify and describe the tactics implemented in this kind of platform work adopted by Uber drivers in Poland. In broader terms, the study is an attempt to

investigate whether Uber's business model 'forces' drivers to constantly resort to *kombinowanie* to 'make money' (Ditton 1977) and earn a decent pay. The drivers work in the environment characterised by lack of employment protection (they should be self-employed but in fact few of them are – in the sample: none of them), low rates for their services, and the presence of an additional intermediary (fleet partner). The study assumes that drivers' tactics can be described using the concept of *kombinowanie*. Therefore, the research question was formulated as follows: What are the work tactics adopted by Uber drivers on the Polish ride-hailing market to make an adequate, sustainable remuneration?

In order to answer the research question, a qualitative study among 31 Uber drivers in one of the Polish cities was conducted. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling (Yin 2013), including contact with members of closed Facebook groups for Uber drivers. The study relied on the use of in-depth interviews (IDI) and was carried out in 2018 (10 interviews), 2019 (11 interviews) and 2021 (10 interviews). The interviews lasted between 75 and 130 minutes. It is important to note that for all participants (27 males and 4 females aged 20–58) work as a ride-hailing driver was their basic source of income; none of them was registered as self-employed; all of them were Polish. The sampling process allowed the researchers to focus on platform-dependent drivers tied to their place of residence. This means that considerable attention was devoted to those most interested in obtaining an income that would be sufficient to make a living. In order to confirm the information from Uber drivers and to analyse this issue from another perspective, we also conducted two expert in-depth interviews with fleet partners. Both of them lasted about 120 minutes and were conducted online in January 2021, due to Covid-19 pandemic restrictions.

The adopted multi-stage coding procedure (largely based on grounded theory) consisted of several rounds. The first round – open coding (Gibbs 2018) – was based on the general categories connected with platform work discussed in the literature. The second one (focused coding) involved classification of codes into categories that emerged during the analysis. In the next stage, categories were classified into topics, which enabled the identification of three work tactics adopted by Uber drivers. What emerged as the core analytical category (Glaser and Strauss 2017) was the practice known in Polish as *kombinowanie* (as explained above).

***Kombinowanie*: an effective tactic of working with Uber**

The analysis of study material made it possible to identify three most frequently adopted strategies as follows we can treat this as *theoretical coding* (Hernandez 2009), presented below from the least to the most serious in terms of violating formal rules.

(1) Optimisation practices or how to outsmart Uber's algorithm

Working for Uber means that one needs to constantly walk a tightrope between financial expectations and what Uber offers. Most of the drivers dependent on the platform want to earn as much as possible and this is their main goal. At the same time, the algorithm which determines the allocation of rides sometimes makes it difficult or even impossible to earn as much as they plan.

Informant: Those algorithms in this app, they're just impossible to understand; this dynamic pricing, the order of who gets a ride and all that; the whole thing is a puzzle. It's completely unpredictable and I never know how much I'm going to earn. (U17 Female)

As a consequence, the drivers try to cheat the algorithm in various ways and thus undertake a number of different tactics that can optimise their work. The simplest, but also the most self-destructive way is to work virtually all the time. Although the algorithm does not allow them to work longer than a certain number of hours (usually 12 hours), after completing their 'shift' they log into another account on another phone and continue driving. Most often, the other account belongs to a friend who let them use his/her personal details to create an additional driver account (and who has nothing to do with working for Uber). It also happens that drivers even sleep in the car to be 'available at all times'.

Informant: If I wanted to earn more, I would just drive more. (U13)

Another way to outsmart the algorithm is to reject requests for rides which require a long drive to the pick-up point. Due to the fact that drivers do not see in the app where prospective passengers want to go (this information is available only when the request is accepted), the only thing they can rely on in their calculations is the distance they would have to cover to pick them up. The vast majority of informants have a maximum distance they are ready to drive to pick up the passenger (although this is a variable issue). The main argument for rejecting such

requests is the fact that Uber does not pay them for the journey to the customer. This means that if the pick-up point is very far and then the ride is short – not only does the driver not make money on the ride but also, in most cases, loses on it. As stressed by the informants, such rides are most often requested from the outskirts of the city. Accepting a ride like that would most often mean returning to the centre without a passenger, i.e. ‘for free’. Of course, Uber is well aware of this tactic and, in order to limit it, blocks the accounts of drivers who repeatedly reject requests for rides with a long distance to the pick-up point. Again, this means walking a tightrope between the rules set by Uber (and working to the benefit of the app) and one’s own calculations.

There is also a third tactic which can be considered an attempt at outsmarting the algorithm. It consists in doing the job using all ride-hailing apps available in Poland (in most cities Uber, Bolt, FreeNow). This tactic increases the driver’s chances for more rides and makes it possible to select them more freely, for example, those where the distance to the pick-up point is shorter. In addition, different apps offer different rates and different bonuses at different times (depending on the demand in the app). A driver using several apps can follow those changes and make a choice that will be more beneficial to him/her in financial terms and in terms of effective use of working time.

The tactics presented in this section resemble ‘classic’ organisational misbehaviour connected with flexibility provided by platform (but, as mentioned above ended up as precarity for worker). It is worth stressing, however, that their effectiveness is rather superficial. Although they allow the driver to significantly optimise certain aspects of his/her work, at the same time they do not change the driver’s position: the driver is an app user and takes part in a ‘game’ orchestrated by the platform. The driver makes more effort and spends more time working, which indirectly contributes to the success of the platforms. *Kombinowanie* may be effective from the individual standpoint but it is more like a social trap from the point of view of collective action.

(2) The Covid-19 survival tactic or ‘wage seeking’

The Covid-19 pandemic changed the reality of most societies. One industry that was particularly affected by restrictions and lockdowns introduced by particular countries was the ride-hailing industry. The vast majority of people (especially at the beginning of the pandemic) stayed at home and did not need to travel. The decrease in the turnover

of ride-hailing companies in this period was about 80% (Haber 2020). It is hardly surprising that the drivers had to somehow adapt to the new conditions. It turned out that most Uber drivers either suspended their activity or switched to food delivery, which developed remarkably during the pandemic (Polkowska 2021a).

One of the interviewed Uber fleet partners described this period as follows:

Informant: On the one hand, of course the pandemic quite drastically affected the taxis; I mean, this business. But delivery services – that was it. Even before the first full lockdown we received over four hundred calls a day from people who wanted to work, and when it was imposed all we did the for first few weeks was just keep switching people from Uber to Uber Eats. (FP01)

Most of the respondents interviewed in 2021 began their career in platform work in the ride-hailing industry, but because of the situation in spring 2020 they had to switch to food delivery. Indeed, many of them said that due to the drastic drop in the number of passenger rides (especially in the period between March and May 2020) they had decided to try their luck in a different sector. In the case of Uber drivers, the matter was quite straightforward: after simple registration and a quick switch from Uber to Uber Eats in the fleet partner's system, instead of driving people they began to make deliveries practically overnight. In late spring and summer 2020, when most restrictions were loosened, they were back to passenger transport, only to return to the food delivery sector in October 2020 (during the next lockdown).

In the interviews conducted in early 2021, some of them mentioned that they tried to use both applications depending on the demand for a given service. They themselves noticed that until then they had thought that delivering food orders by car could not be profitable, and, secondly, that it was less respected: an occupation – as it were – for foreign students who want to earn some extra money delivering such orders by bike. It turned out, however, that you can also find advantages; the drivers were more satisfied with their earnings in a situation where it was possible to combine the seemingly incompatible passenger rides and food deliveries. One of them talked about this as follows:

Informant: Sometimes you have to do a bit of kombinowanie. When I drive to pick up a delivery and there's a passenger ride that comes up and it's more or less in the same direction, sometimes I take the

risk and I do both at the same time – a food delivery and a passenger ride. But in general, I don't recommend it because it's a lot of stress, especially when it turns out that you have to deliver the food to one place and drive the passenger to another. And another thing is that as a rule I try to be available on both apps so that I can switch depending on where I get a request from first. I don't know if this is in line with Uber's regulations [laughter]. (U31)

The pandemic made it apparent that it was only possible to make a living from platform work by applying the 'wage seeking' form of *kombinowanie*, switching between apps and sometimes working on two different apps simultaneously. Those who did their work this way most often had quite a long experience of working as a passenger driver (over a year), but it was only during the pandemic that they started working as food couriers. For many of them, a switch between different types of platform work was a kind of survival tactic in unpredictable times.

Considering the informants who applied this tactic, it can be observed that, on the one hand, there were risk-takers among them: they risked deactivation due to failure to perform their work (failure to deliver food or pick up a passenger within the specified time) for the prospect of 'double earnings' (from the food delivery app and the ride-hailing app). On the other hand, there were also desperate people in this group. They stressed that Uber was a way to keep them afloat, especially during transition periods or in situations when they faced higher expenses in the absence of other sources of income.

Informant: Uber saves me when I don't have my basic job which is in line with my qualifications. (U16 Female)

In such moments Uber appears to be a real saviour: the ease of entering this occupation (and leaving it) means that it saves many people from falling into debt.

The strategies presented here, applied by Uber drivers, reveal that those who want to 'make money' (Ditton 1977) and earn a decent pay in this occupation have to 'fiddle'. *Kombinowanie* applies to all aspects of their work: where and what time they start and finish, which areas of the city they target for customers, and how they use all available apps. They have no problem about doing things on the edge of the law because their very short-term perspective (the accounts are settled on a weekly basis) makes them feel that they are the ones who decide about everything and can withdraw at any moment if there are problems.

(3) The cynical tactic – exploiting the social security net and enjoying flexibility

The cynical tactic is based on the attitude whereby the driver will do whatever it takes to earn a living remuneration. In view of its particularistic features, the tactic is in line with *kombinowanie*. For example, the driver quoted below displays a materialistic mindset oriented at making money at all costs:

Informant: The one and only thing is financial considerations. I was motivated by money. I can take time off whenever I want. I mean, I have to lie to my employer, of course, but everyone does that. Everyone does a bit of cheating when they work. (U11)

It is a typical *kombinator* (noun; person implementing the *kombinowanie* strategy): in order to maximise his/her income, s/he does not hesitate to consider solutions that are not only ethically questionable, but are also on the edge of the law.

The same informant: I've never been interested in it [a contract with Uber] because I sometimes went on long sick leave; a contract of mandate would've been in breach of my sick leave from my employer. The scheme was like that: I got employed somewhere, I worked there for a month and then I went on sick leave for half a year. (U11)

In this case, the income maximisation scheme is as follows: it is enough to get employed anywhere under an employment contract, for example in the sectors with a strong labour shortage or high turnover of workforce (e.g. commerce), work there for thirty days in order to become entitled to sick leave benefit (80% of the salary) and claim it for the next several months while working for Uber at the same time. Drivers implementing this tactic obtain a sick leave certificate based on false statements about their physical or mental condition, for example: back pain, sleeping issues or mental health problems, which are hard to verify by the physician not to mention the authorities or the employer. In this way, they benefit from Uber's flexibility, but also from the protection that is provided by the social security system in Poland. They are not afraid of official inspections and they think that if the system makes this scheme possible they will profit from it as long as possible.

The popularity of this tactic (also confirmed by fleet partners), may indicate that drivers mainly focus on pursuing higher income. In this

case, balancing on the edge of the law means working for Uber (without an employment contract) and at the same time claiming sick leave benefit, which is illegal but quite difficult to verify by relevant authorities. We deal here with simple unjustified absence (Hollinger and Clark 1983) and destructive practices (Analoui and Kakabadse 1992), or more straightforwardly – misuse of sick leave (Trevino 1992) as examples of *kombinowanie*.

Informant: You have to drive a lot in Uber, and you really have to figure out how to earn enough ‘no holds barred’. (U12)

Who are those drivers? Most of them have a considerable work experience (at least ten years). However, guided solely by their own interest, they have only taken such jobs that brought them sufficient remuneration with the appropriate effort on their part, and when this balance began to change, they left for another job. Working for Uber will probably be just another stop on their way, and when the costs begin to outweigh the benefits, they will leave without much sentiment. All the drivers who implemented the cynical tactic had been driving for Uber for at least a year, but not more than two years. This indicates that the cynical tactic requires a significant experience in platform work – those who applied it had been exposed to precarity for a long time.

Theoretically, Uber can temporarily block the driver’s account for such behaviour or even deactivate it. However, in practice (which is stressed by fleet partners) this happens very rarely. For *cynical* drivers, this comes as a further reassurance that *kombinowanie* is the best possible tactic. It involves combining⁴ two sources of income, one of which provides welfare benefits and the other of which offers the advantage of flexibility.

By describing those three tactics, we have shown that *kombinowanie* can be manifested in various ways. What is common is the income seeking behaviour resulting from the precarious working position. One of the characteristics of the cynical tactic is that the drivers obtain sick leave benefit at the expense of another employer. Nevertheless in the case of *cynical* drivers their main work arrangement and source of income is with Uber. Therefore, even if the harmfulness of particular tactic is different to particular stakeholders (other employers, the state, etc.), it indicates the same type of action in relations with the company and the broader social environment.

⁴Interestingly there is a direct semantic connection between the English verb ‘to combine’ and the Polish noun ‘*kombinowanie*’.

Conclusions

On the basis of the above analysis, it can be concluded that ride-hailing drivers' attitude can be understood as implementation of *kombinowanie*. As Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) observe, misbehaviour means that workers adapt to what is imposed and demanded of them, while at the same time also trying to avoid these demands. This is what Uber drivers do when they adopt the tactic of *kombinowanie*. They only observe those rules that favour their chances to increase remuneration, and at the same time look for legal loopholes and tricks in order to bypass others. From absenteeism and fraudulent sick leaves to constantly breaking Uber's rules, the drivers' tactic of *kombinowanie* may be added as a more comprehensive term referring to workers' behaviour in platform work. Unlike organisational misbehaviour, *kombinowanie* is not limited to the shop floor of one company. The worker implements *kombinowanie* in relations with the company, as a response to circumstances (for example Covid-19), and in relations with the broader social environment.

This concept fits better in the Central-Eastern European context and seems to better reflect the context of platform work in general. It denotes not only avoiding the rules imposed by the company or following the desire to increase income, but also a strategy of individual coping with earnings uncertainty. However, also in developed countries and developing countries outside CEE, many examples of workers' effort in the platform sector are analysed through the prism of individual strategies of avoiding precarity and maximising income. For example, we can find evidence in Spain (Reid-Musson et al. 2020) and China (Chen 2018).

As an analytical concept, *kombinowanie* also has the advantage that it concerns not only the level of a particular enterprise – the term connects the level of attitudes towards immediate superiors, the level of the entire company, and the level of its socio-economic environment. In this sense, *kombinowanie* can be implemented as a general purpose category. In the situation of precarity, platform-dependent workers have to implement a certain tactic to gain a decent remuneration. In this study we framed it as a *kombinowanie*.

According to the research presented above, the *kombinowanie* tactic took several forms: combining platform work with the use of health insurance with another employer; apparent in the calculated selection of rides and doing work for several apps simultaneously; bypassing maximum working time regulations imposed by the app; switching

between the ride hailing and the food delivery sectors (especially during Covid-19 pandemic). Each of them has different social consequences but they are all implemented as tactics aiming to reduce precarity and increase remuneration.

Another conclusion of the study is related to understanding that without adopting a relevant tactic it is not possible to earn decent money when working for Uber in Poland and that only balancing on the edge of the law and sometimes – crossing the line between legal and illegal makes the job remunerative. Only taking actions that go against the rules set by Uber enables the drivers to make a living remuneration. It is worth remembering that Uber's general business model of stalling regulations (Mazur and Serafin 2022) goes hand in hand with the platforms' 'free riding' on the social security net (Schor et al. 2020). In the case of Poland, Uber's operations based on blurred rules during the first two years of its presence in the country; vague rules were conducive to undertaking equally vague actions. This includes the system of work based on the operation of fleet partners as intermediaries between the Uber company and the driver, which opens a space for misbehaviour.

Based on Schor et al.'s (2020) classification of analytical approaches to platform work, it can be seen that the approach described in this paper can be included on the list as well. In addition to precarity, efficiency and algorithmic control, the fourth approach is focused on platform workers' organisational misbehaviour, defined in this paper as the broader concept of *kombinowanie*. The analyses show that *kombinowanie* could be an attempt to improve their situation within platform work (Lewchuk and Dassinger 2016) but brings unforeseeable consequences. Searching an answer to the main research question (*what are the work tactics adopted by Uber drivers on the Polish ride-hailing market to make an adequate, sustainable remuneration?*) we diagnosed three individual tactics. **Optimisation practices** were focused on outsmarting Uber's algorithms, '**wage seeking**' was connected with seeking any income during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the **cynical tactic** exploited the social security net. All three tactics involve violations of particular rules: different in scope and character but still rules imposed by the platform or explore by the platform thanks to 'platform power' (Mazur and Serafin 2022). Simultaneously, all diagnosed tactics require a certain degree of resourcefulness and involve combining different assets available to the driver. Also, all of them result in significant overwork on the part of the drivers. Low rates, high Uber's fee (25% in Poland) and rising

operating costs result in longer working hours. As has been shown, most of the drivers worked 12-hour shifts (sometimes more). No matter what tactic (or combination of tactics) they used, they usually worked more than on the standard employee contract (in Poland: 40 hours a week).

From the presented study, we can conclude that individual tactics based on a particularistic approach do not hurt the interest of the platform. In the end, Uber receives what it wants, i.e. drivers without employee status working long hours to gain a decent remuneration, because what matters most is the company profit, which is maintained. Placing themselves solely as a technology provider (Kashyap and Bhatia 2018), on-demand ride-hailing platforms do not have to worry about the fact that drivers end up overworked and on the fringe of law.

At the same time, the study, does not make it possible to predict whether this would be the case if drivers were better rooted in the workers' movements and implemented collective strategies. Another limitation of the study is that it does not consider the agency and control issues, both of which could significantly change the usefulness of the category of *kombinowanie*. But still, on the level of individual strategies, it can be a handy category, broader than 'organisational misbehaviour' and better adapted to the experience of platform workers in CEE and beyond.

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Notes on contributors

Dominika Polkowska is an associate professor of sociology at the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Poland. She is a Deputy Director of the Institute of Sociology. Her research focuses on platform work and working conditions of platform workers as well as on labour relations. Recently she has conducted a research among migrant workers.

Bartosz Mika is an associate professor at University of Gdańsk, Poland. His scientific interests are focused on classical sociological theories, sociology of work and the

problem of social inequality. He is an active member of ‘The Workers’ Initiative’ Trade Union. He recently published a book on sociological understanding of intellectual property rights.

ORCID

Dominika Polkowska  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6698-5821>

Bartosz Mika  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8204-5373>

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