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RESEARCH PAPER

Trapped in the Matrix

Algorithmic Control and Worker Dispossession in the African Platform Economy

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ABSTRACT

Digital labor platforms are reshaping the work landscape in Sub-Saharan Africa, promising enhanced productivity and empowerment. Yet, this study reveals a more complex reality, particularly in Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. Based on 41 in-depth interviews, it exposes how algorithmic management systems deeply erode worker autonomy, highlighting significant financial, task, and behavioral dispossession. This research, grounded in neo-Marxist and postcolonial theories, scrutinizes the nuanced limitations of autonomy and the pervasive control exerted by algorithmic management, reflecting the lived experiences of workers. The findings illuminate enduring patterns of accumulation that echo historical exploitation, maintaining asymmetric power dynamics and dependence. Despite this, the study captures the agency of workers as they navigate and resist these systemic constraints, challenging the dominant techno-optimistic narrative. It underscores the critical need for contextually informed empirical research to shape policies that champion equity and elevate marginalized voices during transformative economic shifts.

1 Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) finds itself at the epicenter of global transformations as the 21st century unfolds. The continent's massive youth population and rapid urbanization underscore the urgency of promoting inclusive and sustainable ways of working (Bentil & Tan, 2022; Dinika, 2023; Reiter, 2020). Within this context, the rise of digital labor platforms across SSA has generated both techno-optimistic visions proclaiming enhanced productivity, flexibility, and worker empowerment (Abdychev et al., 2018; Kassi & Lehdonvirta, 2018; Melia, 2019) and critical perspectives that interrogate potentially exploitative dynamics affecting vulnerable workers (Anwar & Graham, 2020, 2021; Wood et al., 2019).

The concept of autonomy in digital labor takes on unique dimensions in SSA, shaped by local socio-economic conditions, cultural values, and historical legacies. This study conceptualizes autonomy not just as freedom from interference but as the capacity for meaningful participation, dignity, and livelihood security within the constraints of platform work. Drawing on Western scholarship on relational autonomy (Ma et al., 2022; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000) alongside African philosophical perspectives, particularly Ubuntu's emphasis on human interdependence and collective dignity, this study develops a nuanced understanding of autonomy in the SSA digital labor context. This conceptualization is further informed by studies examining how cultural values and socio-economic conditions shape worker agency in African contexts (Anwar & Graham, 2020a; Meagher, 2018).

Autonomy within the realm of digital labor, particularly on crowdwork platforms, involves a complex interplay between formal, contractual autonomy and more constrained substantive autonomy. This study examines this interplay through the lens of "subordinated agency" (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021), which captures how platforms simultaneously enhance and restrict worker agency. This dichotomy is highlighted by Gerber (2021), who notes that while crowd workers may have the contractual freedom to choose their work hours, the reality of their autonomy is often curtailed in practice. Pulignano et al. (2023) further elaborate on this by distinguishing between different dimensions of autonomy, such as platform access, task access, and task control. They argue that openness in one aspect does not necessarily equate to substantive autonomy across all areas of work. These insights underscore the nuanced nature of autonomy in platform labor, where contractual freedoms often mask deeper systemic constraints.

Control mechanisms on digital platforms play a pivotal role in shaping worker autonomy. Wood et al. (2019) and Gerber and Krzywdzinski (2019) argue that algorithmic management and rating systems not only structure behavior but also extract value from workers, often compromising their autonomy. Gerber (2021) adds that gamification and incentive structures, along with platform-specific reputation systems, further erode worker autonomy. According to Pulignano et al. (2023), the management strategies employed by platforms represent a delicate balance between control and autonomy, with strategies ranging from tightly controlled to more open-ended community-building approaches. Wood et al. (2019) emphasize that autonomy should be viewed as agency within the structural constraints of platforms, highlighting the tension between autonomy and precarity. This comprehensive understanding of autonomy is essential for grasping the full spectrum of experiences and challenges faced by digital laborers. These control mechanisms take on particular significance in the SSA context, where they intersect with existing socio-economic vulnerabilities and regulatory gaps.

Although this study draws comparisons with Western contexts, these comparisons are made cautiously, recognizing the unique challenges and opportunities within SSA's digital labor landscape. The aim is not to generalize but to highlight the specific ways in which autonomy manifests in these African contexts.

Expanding the discussion of autonomy, it is crucial to move beyond mere freedom from interference and consider workers' capacities for meaningful participation, dignity, and livelihood security, as highlighted by Ma et al. (2022). This broader understanding, emphasized by feminist scholars like Hampton (2021) and Mackenzie and Stoljar, (2000), involves acknowledging how both external constraints and internalized norms and beliefs intricately shape worker autonomy. In the African digital labor context, surveillance-driven platform architectures threaten substantive autonomy. These architectures often impose dominant institutional logics, reducing workers to passive objects within an optimization framework rather than treating them as active, empowered subjects.

Contrasting with the techno-optimistic visions of platforms as vehicles for empowerment and development in Africa (Abdychev et al., 2018; Achieng & Malatji, 2022; Afolabi, 2023, 2023; Bentil & Tan, 2022), a critical body of literature investigates the realities of inequality, precarity, and emerging algorithmic control. These works, including by Anwar et al. (2023), Anwar and Graham (2020, 2021), and Berg et al. (2018), reveal a profound contradiction between these optimistic narratives and the actual experiences of workers, particularly vulnerable ones. In the diverse ecosystems of Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, these dynamics of control and dependency challenge the predominant narratives of digital empowerment, highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding of the effects of digital labor platforms in SSA.

However, much current research examines platforms in Western contexts, and few empirical studies focus on the Global South, leaving a significant gap (Fuchs, 2017; Nyabola, 2018). Consequently, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on hidden forms of resistance and agency among African gig workers (Anwar & Graham, 2020b) by examining how workers navigate and contest the constraints imposed on them by algorithmic management systems.

Moving beyond the often Western-centric focus of existing scholarship, it foregrounds the perspectives and voices of workers from the Global South, who engage directly with the realities of digitization. By emphasizing these diverse and often marginalized voices, the study contributes to a more inclusive understanding of digital labor's impact, laying out crucial considerations for policy and governance in the realm of digital economies in SSA. This approach underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing the unique challenges and opportunities faced by workers in these regions during times of significant economic transformation. By employing an integrated theoretical framework that combines neo-Marxist perspectives on labor commodification and control (Booth, 2015; Fuchs, 2017; Kassem, 2020) with postcolonial critiques of digital capitalism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Nyabola, 2018), the study aims to uncover not only limitations on autonomy but also the ways in which workers exercise agency and resistance within these constraints. This approach, which draws particularly on Nkrumah's (1965) analysis of economic dependency and Mbembe's (2001) work on postcolonial subjectivity, allows us to situate the experiences of African platform workers in the broader historical and global context of labor, power, and resistance.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 introduces the theoretical framework, presenting an in-depth exploration of neo-Marxist and postcolonial perspectives. This framework is crucial for understanding the nuances of worker autonomy and platform labor, particularly in the SSA context. Following this, Section 3 details the research methodology, outlining the approach and techniques used to gather and analyze data from platform workers in Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. Section 4 then provides a detailed account of the empirical findings, shedding light on how platform workers in these regions perceive and experience autonomy. Lastly, Section 5 synthesizes the key insights derived from the research. It critically examines the implications of the findings, integrates them with the existing literature, and proposes policy recommendations that address the specific challenges of digital labor in SSA.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Subordinated Agency: An Integrated Theoretical Approach

This study employs a theoretical framework centered on Wood and Lehdonvirta's (2021) concept of "subordinated agency" and intricately weaving together neo-Marxist and Nkrumahian postcolonial theories with contemporary scholarly insights into digital labor platforms. This approach is purposefully designed to investigate and understand the experiences of platform workers in Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, with a focus on their perceptions and experiences of the impact of algorithmic management systems on their autonomy.

The concept of subordinated agency (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021) is central to understanding the complex dynamics of platform work. It refers to the paradoxical situation where digital platforms simultaneously enhance and constrain worker agency. On the one hand, platforms offer workers flexibility in choosing when and how much to work, potentially increasing their autonomy. On the other hand, these same platforms subject workers to algorithmic management, performance metrics, and rating systems that can significantly limit their decision-making power and control over their work processes.

To operationalize subordinated agency in this study, I build on Wood and Lehdonvirta's (2021) analysis of platform control and worker agency. Drawing from their framework for how platforms simultaneously enable and constrain worker autonomy, I examine several key dimensions identified in the platform labor literature:

- 1) The interplay between flexibility and constraints is analyzed following Krzywdzinski and Gerber's (2021) investigation into workers' experiences with algorithmic management, rating systems, performance metrics, and direct and indirect platform control mechanisms.
- 2) The dimension of economic agency and precarity draws on Anwar and Graham's (2020b) research on African platform workers' income strategies and uncertainties. Their work highlights how local socio-economic conditions shape workers' navigation of platform opportunities and constraints.
- 3) Finally, in line with Wood et al.'s (2019) analysis of worker agency in the gig economy, I examine resistance and adaptation strategies, including both individual and collective actions. This dimension is particularly important for understanding how workers maintain autonomy within platform constraints while balancing local cultural obligations and community responsibilities.

By examining these aspects, I aim to reveal how subordinated agency manifests in the context of platform work in Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe and how it intersects with local socio-economic conditions and cultural norms.

Building on the framework of subordinated agency, my analytical approach combines neo-Marxist and Nkrumahian postcolonial perspectives to illuminate the nuances of worker autonomy and agency on digital labor platforms. While Marx (1992), Braverman (1998), and Fuchs (2015, 2017) discuss alienation and exploitation, I focus on how their insights inform our understanding of worker autonomy in digital labor. From this perspective, I investigate how platform structures and algorithms may constrain workers' independence and decision-making power. Nkrumah's (1965) postcolonial analysis, expanded by contemporary thinkers like Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) and Nyabola (2018), helps me explore how historical power dynamics and economic dependencies in Africa shape worker agency on digital platforms. This framework emphasized the subjective experiences of workers, interpreting their voices and perspectives to understand the intricate dynamics of control, exploitation, and resistance that shape their daily lives (Hampton, 2021; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000).

This integrated theoretical approach enables a comprehensive analysis of platform work in SSA. It allows me to examine how worker autonomy and agency are shaped not only by platform structures and algorithmic management but also by the historical, economic, and cultural contexts of Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. This framework will guide my investigation into how platform workers navigate, negotiate, and resist the constraints imposed on them by digital labor platforms in these African contexts.

2.2 Contemporary Issues in Platform Labor

Digital platforms introduce new control mechanisms – algorithmic scheduling, performance tracking, and rating systems – that paradoxically restrict worker autonomy despite offering flexibility. These directly impact the labor paradigms this study explores. This shift is occurring within a broader socio-economic landscape characterized by the rise of the gig economy, changes in employment patterns, and the increasingly global nature of digital labor markets, which present new challenges and opportunities for workers and policymakers alike.

2.2.1 Algorithmic Management

Algorithmic management, as described by Rosenblat (2018) and Gerber and Krzywdzinski (2019), reshapes power dynamics in labor, embedding control deep within technological infrastructures. Pulignano and Franke (2022) enrich this understanding by revealing the dynamic interplay between platform-imposed controls and worker responses. Relatedly, Lee et al. (2015) highlight how workers make sense of algorithmic systems through online forums and communities, developing shared understandings and strategies for navigating these systems. Krzywdzinski and Gerber's (2021) analysis further delineates the complexity of labor control, distinguishing between direct automated output control and indirect control through gamification, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of how these mechanisms influence worker autonomy and perceptions of working conditions.

The present study examines how workers in Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe experience and navigate algorithmic management, considering both the constraints it imposes and the strategies workers develop to maintain their autonomy. I pay particular attention to how socioeconomic conditions and identities shape these experiences and strategies (Anwar & Graham, 2020).

2.2.2 Platform Mechanisms and Worker Behavior

Digital labor commodification transforms worker interactions into valuable data and thereby fundamentally alters labor dynamics and autonomy (Wood et al., 2019). This process commodifies labor, which it treats like marketplace products and strips of its human essence through control mechanisms reminiscent of neo-colonial resource extraction (Srnicek, 2017; Vallas & Schor, 2020). Such commodification separates labor from societal contexts, narrowly defining tasks and leaving essential work aspects such as training and social reproduction unremunerated, essentially constituting "work-for-labor" (Wood et al., 2019).

In the gig economy's competitive global market, workers are easily replaceable; this compels them to continuously acquire skills to secure their livelihoods in precarious conditions (Wood et al., 2019). Platforms circumvent traditional employer responsibilities and exploit on-demand labor's flexibility while sidestepping the costs associated with worker health and welfare. As a result, workers face exacerbated precariousness.

From a Nkrumahian postcolonial perspective, this commodification is entwined with broader exploitative patterns, as suggested by Mbembe (2001) and Woodcock and Graham (2020), particularly in African contexts. This perspective illuminates how digital labor platforms may perpetuate neo-colonial exploitation in several interconnected ways. Global platforms, which are often headquartered in Western countries, extract value from African workers while offering limited local economic development, echoing historical patterns of resource extraction. The algorithms and technologies controlling these

platforms are typically developed outside Africa, which potentially reinforces technological dependence. Furthermore, platform designs and policies may disregard local contexts and practices and instead reflect Western norms and work cultures, thus imposing external cultural standards on African workers.

The concept of data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019) is also relevant here as platforms collect and control vast amounts of worker data, which can be seen as a new form of resource extraction. Perhaps most significantly, the ability of platforms to unilaterally set terms and conditions for workers mirrors historical unequal power relations between colonial powers and colonized regions. By examining these aspects, we can better understand how digital labor platforms, while offering new economic opportunities, may simultaneously reproduce or transform historical patterns of exploitation in the African context. This enables a critical assessment of the impact of digital platforms on worker autonomy and agency in Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.

2.2.3 Constraints on Worker Autonomy

The study examines the constraints imposed by digital platforms on worker autonomy, drawing from Gerber (2021), Wood et al. (2019), and Pulignano and Franke (2022). It explores how performance evaluations, task allocations, and other control mechanisms acting within a structure of subordinated agency shape the worker–platform relationship (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021). Krzywdzinski and Gerber’s (2021) insights into the heterogeneity of labor control forms, including both direct automated output control and indirect control through gamification, deepen the analysis of how these mechanisms differentially impact workers’ autonomy and perceptions of their working conditions.

2.2.4 Differential Autonomy Limitations

Informed by Pulignano et al. (2023) and Gerber and Krzywdzinski (2019), this study looks into the multifaceted nature of control and performance mechanisms on digital labor platforms and their impact on worker autonomy. The analysis specifically examines how these mechanisms affect financial autonomy (workers’ control over the revenue they earn), task-oriented autonomy (workers’ discretion in performing tasks), and behavioral regulation (platforms’ ability to dictate conduct outside of core tasks). It also investigates how reputational systems, algorithmic management, customer ratings, and other tools impose constraints on these three aspects of autonomy (Krzywdzinski & Gerber, 2021).

Additionally, the study critically analyzes the interaction between these limitations on autonomy and broader patterns of neo-colonial exploitation and capitalist domination, as framed by neo-Marxist and Nkrumahian theories. The goal is to uncover the diverse experiences and adaptive strategies of workers in navigating the complex landscape of digital labor and shed light on the challenges and opportunities they encounter across financial, task, and behavioral dimensions.

2.3 Unique Aspects of African Platform Ecosystems

This section delves into the distinct socio-economic, infrastructural, regulatory, and cultural landscapes of SSA and articulates how they shape the subjective experiences of platform workers and influence their autonomy and sense of empowerment. It also situates these experiences within the global context, underscoring the necessity of this study in light of the differences between African and Western digital labor markets.

2.3.1 Infrastructural and Connectivity Constraints

Workers in SSA face infrastructural challenges such as unreliable electricity, limited hardware, and expensive internet data plans (Dinika, 2022; Foster et al., 2015; Murphy & Carmody, 2015), which differ drastically from the stable infrastructures of Europe and the U.S. These constraints not only limit their productivity but also shape their experiences and perceptions of autonomy, often forcing them to develop innovative coping strategies. This study looks at these constraints from the workers' perspective and highlights how these infrastructural deficits shape the African digital labor landscape.

2.3.2 Informal Labor Arrangements

The informal nature of work in Africa, characterized by a lack of stable contracts and social protections (Meagher, 2016, 2018, 2019), starkly contrasts with the more regulated labor markets of Europe and the U.S. The study examines the implications of these informal arrangements for workers' sense of security, autonomy, and future planning, shedding light on the challenges and strategies that African platform workers employ in response to this precarity.

2.3.3 Regulatory Deficits

In stark contrast to the relatively stronger institutional protections available in Western countries, African platform workers operate in markedly underdeveloped regulatory environments (Ghosheh, 2012; Lamarche, 2015; Mkandawire, 2020; Omodu, 2021; Zvobga, 2019). The lack of enforceable labor standards, workplace safety regulations, and social welfare structures means that workers must navigate a landscape fraught with risks. This study explores how these regulatory deficits shape the experiences and autonomy of African platform workers compared to their counterparts in more regulated environments.

2.3.4 Communitarian Obligations

The strong communitarian ethos prevalent in African societies (Mangena, 2016; Mbigi, 1994, 2007) molds workers' perceptions of autonomy and their approach to platform work. In these societies, interconnectedness and mutual responsibilities within communities often take precedence, influencing how individuals perceive their work and autonomy. Accordingly, the study delves into how the responsibility to support extended families and community obligations, coupled with the instability of platform-based incomes, influence the decisions, sense of autonomy, and collective agency of African platform workers. This contrasts with the more individualistic cultures in Europe and the U.S., where autonomy is often conceptualized and pursued as an individual endeavor. The analysis highlights how this communal perspective shapes the lived experiences of workers, their negotiation strategies in the platform economy, and their conceptualization of autonomy, which may blend individual aspirations with collective responsibilities and communal well-being.

2.4 Theoretical Integration and Analytical Framework

This multi-pronged theoretical framework integrates neo-Marxist notions of worker dispossession and postcolonial insights into neo-imperial domination in platform economies, complemented by perspectives on algorithmic management, regional constraints, and autonomy limitations. By foregrounding subjective worker perspectives, it offers a critical diagnosis of issues confronting African digital laborers while also leaving space for resistance. Connecting lived experiences to structural debates, the framework aims to inform an analysis of interviews in Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe that is sensitive to the socio-economic realities faced by the region's burgeoning platform workforce.

The integrated dimensions help unpack the tensions affecting participation, security, and dignity. Simultaneously, proposed countermeasures balancing rights with innovations signal possibilities for transformative change contingent on political commitments. Overall, the framework challenges technologically determinist assumptions by emphasizing African platform contexts as socio-historically situated rather than *tabula rasa* for utopian imaginaries or dystopian reactions. Further empirical insights can consolidate realistic, empowering policy responses on this complex frontier.

One disadvantage of uncertainty sampling is that it likely leads to a sampling bias. Focusing on uncertainty means that examples close to the decision boundary are selected rather than examples that are representative of the underlying distribution (Dasgupta, 2011). Diversity sampling avoids this problem. One possible approach is to compute clusters in the feature space to acquire a diverse sample (Bodó et al., 2011). However, pure diversity sampling risks sampling examples with low uncertainty, that is, examples that are easy to classify. Hybrid versions try to combine diversity and uncertainty strategies by sampling the most uncertain examples but with a special regard for keeping the sample representative of the underlying distribution (Yuan et al., 2020, Margatina et al., 2021).

3 Methodology

3.1 Study Design

This study employs a qualitative approach centered on exploring African experiences of platform work to uncover the intricate dynamics of digital labor in SSA. Drawing on my theoretical framework, I seek to understand how workers navigate the paradoxical nature of gig work and exercise agency within the constraints of algorithmic management. Unlike a comparative case study, this research emphasizes the commonalities in platform work experiences across SSA while addressing the unique aspects of each country when necessary. The primary focus is on gaining an in-depth understanding of platform workers' subjective experiences and the nuanced ways in which digital labor platforms impact their autonomy and day-to-day lives. Semi-structured interviews, suited for exploratory research, are used to illuminate participants' experiences and perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

3.2 Sampling and Case Selection

Although SSA exhibits immense diversity in political systems, economic conditions, and technological contexts across countries (Kvangraven et al., 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013), there are also important commonalities in the platform economy landscape. This study incorporates Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe to explore platform labor dynamics within this context of both diversity and shared challenges.

Despite their differences, these three countries share key similarities in their platform labor markets. In all three, platform work largely operates in the informal sector, with limited regulatory frameworks specifically addressing gig work (Meagher, 2018; Graham et al., 2017). They all face challenges in adapting existing labor laws to the realities of platform work, resulting in similar regulatory uncertainties for workers (Anwar & Graham, 2021). Although they are at different stages of development, the three countries grapple with issues of digital infrastructure, including internet access and reliability, which affect platform workers (Foster et al., 2015). Moreover, high unemployment rates and economic instability contribute to the growth of platform work as an alternative source of income (Carmody, 2013; Mpofu, 2022).

At the same time, the choice of these countries enables an exploration of nuanced differences. For instance, Rwanda aspires to transition to a knowledge economy, while South Africa's historical industrialization and track record of labor organizing shapes its digital ecosystem. Zimbabwe's economic meltdown and complex foreign policy add further nuance (Melber & Southall, 2021; Ndimande & Moyo, 2019). This strategic selection aims to highlight both the commonalities and distinctive features of platform work experiences in these varied environments.

By combining data from these three countries, I develop a more comprehensive understanding of platform labor in the region, identifying both shared challenges and context-specific variations. This approach allows me to explore how similar platform dynamics manifest in different national contexts, providing a more nuanced picture of platform work in SSA than would be possible from studying only one country.

3.3 Data Collection

I interviewed a total of 41 platform workers from Rwanda (20), Zimbabwe (12), and South Africa (9). My sample included 25 male and 16 female participants. In terms of types of digital labor, 12 participants were ride-hailing drivers, 15 were online freelancers (including programmers, creative service providers, and clerical workers), eight were microtask gig workers, and six were food/goods delivery platform workers. Following best practices (Robinson, 2014), participants were recruited on digital platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter plus Referrals. This purposive sample focused on selecting information-rich participants who are directly and materially impacted by the algorithmic management models and platform governance policy architectures under study. The inclusion of diverse types of digital labor enables a comprehensive understanding of how algorithmic control and management influence different working conditions in the platform economy.

The in-depth semi-structured interview protocol was intentionally designed to elicit data relevant to lived experiences relevant to the research question. In line with my theoretical framework, particularly the concept of subordinated agency (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021), I sought to understand both the enabling and constraining aspects of platform work.

My interview questions were derived from key dimensions of subordinated agency. I explored workers' experiences with choosing clients, setting rates, and exiting client relationships, reflecting the increased agency that platforms provide in worker–client interactions. Questions probed workers' reliance on specific platforms, including topics like reputation systems, data lock-in, and difficulties in switching platforms. I also investigated workers' experiences with platform rules, algorithmic management, and decision-making processes that reflect platforms' power over workers. The protocol included questions about platform fees, exposure to competition, and available voice mechanisms, which are key areas where the tension between worker agency and platform subordination manifests. Finally, I scrutinized workers' attitudes towards and experiences with collective action, unionization, and other forms of organization in response to platform practices. By focusing on these areas, I aimed to capture how platforms simultaneously enable worker agency and constrain it, allowing me to examine the paradoxical nature of subordinated agency in the context of platform work in Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.

For consenting respondents, interviews were recorded and transcribed; for the rest, meticulous notes were collected. The participants were compensated the equivalent of an hour's work for interviews.

3.4 Data Analysis

A qualitative content analysis approach based on Mayring (2014) was utilized to analyze the interview data. Employing Mayring's methodology, I systematically derived categories and themes from qualitative data in a mixed inductive and deductive coding process. Initial open coding identified categories related to worker autonomy, which were then refined and grouped into conceptual categories. A coding frame guided the consistent application of codes across interviews, supported by Atlas.ti software for data management. This approach ensured rigorous theme derivation, focusing on workers' dispossession of autonomy.

4 Results

My analysis revealed significant limitations to worker autonomy across financial, task-related, and algorithmic dimensions. However, these constraints are not absolute and instead coexist with instances of worker agency, resistance, and strategic adaptation to platform controls.

The results are organized into four main themes: the lived experiences of platform workers, manifestations of constrained autonomy, worker responses to platform constraints, and the local socio-economic context of platform work. Throughout these themes, I highlight how workers' narratives reflect the tension between the promise of flexibility offered by platform work and the realities of algorithmic control.

4.1 The Lived Experiences of Platform Work in Sub-Saharan Africa

Platform work in African cities is deeply intertwined with local cultural concepts, personal aspirations, and communal responsibilities. These factors contribute to shaping workers' understanding of autonomy and their experiences with digital labor platforms.

4.1.1 Local Conceptions of Autonomy and Dignity

In Kigali, Rwanda, the concept of "agaciro" (dignity) infuses workers' understanding of autonomy. As one ride-hailing driver explained:

“For us, *agaciro* means more than just earning money. It’s about respect, about being able to provide for your family and community. The platform promises this dignity, but in reality, we find ourselves constantly negotiating for it. When the app assigns us a ride, it doesn’t understand that accepting might mean breaking social obligations or missing important community events. Our autonomy is not just about choosing when to work but about maintaining our place in the social fabric.” (Participant 3, personal communication, February 6, 2021)

Similarly, in Harare, Zimbabwe, workers referred to the concept of “*chimiro*,” which speaks to social standing. A worker at Zimworx, a labor outsourcing company, explained how platform work can conflict with this cultural value: “This work sometimes takes away your social standing. Imagine, I am always working night shifts like a security guard, when I am a whole graduate. It’s not proper for my *chimiro*.” (Participant 24, personal communication, March 12, 2021) These accounts illustrate how local cultural concepts shape workers’ perceptions of autonomy, dignity, and social status in platform work, highlighting tensions between platform promises and local realities.

4.1.2 Personal Aspirations and Platform Work

A significant number of participants viewed platform work as a stepping stone towards their longer-term career goals rather than a permanent occupation. A ride-hailing driver in Johannesburg explained:

“This [platform work] is not my end goal. I’m studying part-time at UNISA [University of South Africa] to become an accountant. The flexibility of driving allows me to earn money while pursuing my degree. It’s tough, but it’s a means to an end.” (Participant 41, personal communication, July 17, 2021)

In Kigali, a freelance graphic designer expressed a related but distinct perspective: “I see this platform as a way to build my portfolio and client base. My dream is to start my own design agency someday. Each project I complete here is a step towards that goal.” (Participant 11, personal communication, February 15, 2021) These narratives highlight that platform work is often integrated into broader life strategies, reflecting workers’ agency in pursuing their aspirations despite the constraints imposed by algorithmic management.

4.1.3 Family Responsibilities and Community Dynamics

The intersection of platform work with family responsibilities and community obligations emerged as a significant theme in workers’ narratives. Workers consistently described feeling torn between meeting platform demands and fulfilling their roles within extended family and community networks. In Harare, a food delivery worker explained: “I’m the breadwinner for my extended family. This work allows me to support them, but it also means I can’t afford

to miss a day, even when the app isn't giving me enough orders. The community respects me for providing, but they don't always understand the pressure." (Participant 35, personal communication, April 6, 2021) A transcriptionist in Kigali, who works on time-sensitive projects, expanded:

"In our culture, we have a responsibility to the community. If it was a human being manager, I could just ask them for an off day to attend a neighbor's funeral, but the platform doesn't understand these things and there is no way I can explain it. Missing a neighbor's funeral will make the community hate you. But if I miss my deadline, I might lose my job or get a bad rating. It's a constant struggle." (Participant 2, personal communication, February 6, 2021)

The lack of flexibility in platform systems to accommodate local cultural practices and obligations was a common source of stress for many workers in the studied countries.

4.2 Manifestations of Constrained Autonomy

Although platform work offers certain opportunities, workers in Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe described significant constraints on their autonomy. These manifested in various ways, particularly in terms of income dynamics, task allocation, and algorithmic surveillance.

4.2.1 Constrained Autonomy in Income Dynamics

Interviews with platform workers from Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe revealed a consistent pattern of constrained income autonomy – a shared struggle within the broader SSA platform economy. Workers in these diverse geographical contexts expressed feelings of dispossession regarding key income-related aspects, signaling a pan-African trend of platform-induced financial precarity.

Workers notably reported a lack of influence over critical financial parameters such as base pay rates, commission percentages, and revenue-sharing structures. A South African ride-hailing driver poignantly described the situation: "It's their game, their rules. For example, Bolt takes a ridiculous 30% of my earnings, and there is no room to negotiate this." (Participant 36, personal communication, April 8, 2021) This sentiment of feeling tethered to their terms and conditions resonated across the countries studied. Similarly, a Rwandan freelancer's experience of having no say in earnings ("They set the price, take their cut, I just work, no say in earnings" (Participant 6, personal communication, February 7, 2021)) and a Zimbabwean content creator's frustration with arbitrary commission splits ("The platform changes the commission split

whenever they want, we can't do anything" (Participant 30, personal communication, March 27, 2021)) underscored the widespread nature of these challenges. High-skilled freelancers, such as a freelance app developer from Zimbabwe, acknowledged some degree of autonomy but remained circumspect: "I am able to choose jobs that pay good money and avoid those that pay sick (low) money. They need my skills, but I am still operating within their controlled environment." (Participant 17, personal communication, February 17, 2021)

The unpredictability of income further compounds the issue, as articulated by a freelancer from South Africa: "Every month is like playing Lotto when it comes to my income; some months I have a lot of money, and others I have to borrow for rent." (Participant 39, personal communication, June 12, 2021) This unpredictability stems not only from changing pay rates but also from the inconsistent availability of work and the platforms' algorithmic task allocation. A Zimbabwean microtask worker explained: "Some weeks, the algorithm seems to favor me and I get many tasks. Other weeks, hardly any come my way, regardless of how long I'm online." (Participant 27, personal communication, March 14, 2021) Although the narratives from each country reflect a broader pattern of income dispossession, certain country-specific factors, such as the high levels of informality and economic instability in Zimbabwe, add layers of complexity to the workers' experiences. Nonetheless, the overarching sentiment of participants across the region was one of significant constraints on income autonomy, dictated by the opaque algorithms and policies of digital platforms.

4.2.2 Dispossession of Task Autonomy

The interviews revealed a pervasive dispossession of task autonomy among platform workers in Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, whereby the workers' ability to control or influence their tasks was significantly undermined by platform algorithms. The unilateral and automated allocation of tasks by platforms emerged as a consistent theme, reflecting a broader trend within the African platform economy.

A delivery driver from Rwanda explained: "The app assigns orders and routes automatically, I have no say where or when I drive despite knowing the local roads and traffic patterns." (Participant 18, personal communication, February 18, 2021) This sentiment was echoed by a Zimbabwean freelancer who expressed frustration with the lack of control over task selection: "The algorithm blocks me from tasks even when I'm ahead. It restricts my discretion." (Participant 27, personal communication, March 14, 2021) Similarly, a ride-hailing driver from Zimbabwe described feeling powerless against the platform's opaque policies: "Platforms unilaterally decide policies, we just comply... I need the work, so I just signed up." (Participant 25, personal communication, March 15, 2021) This was echoed by a South African driver: "Imagine you carry a drunkard in your car, and he throws up, you have to clean that up, and can't carry any people until the smell is gone and next thing you get a two-star rating.

You tell the platform, and they don't fix it, and no one compensates you for the inconvenience and lost earnings." (Participant 34, personal communication, April 5, 2021) These accounts vividly illustrate how the algorithmic management of tasks leads to a sense of dispossession and a reduction of the workers to mere instruments in the service of the platforms' profit-maximizing goals.

Although some freelancers with specialized skills, such as a programmer from Rwanda, reported a degree of task flexibility, their autonomy was not absolute but rather confined within the strict parameters set by the platforms. The programmer noted: "I can pick my projects but have to rigidly follow platforms' work styles and processes." (Participant 7, personal communication, February 9, 2021) This highlights that even workers with specialized skills are not exempt from the pervasive control exerted by platform algorithms. All these narratives point to a profound sense of dispossession and loss of control over work tasks, underlining the need to critically examine the implications of algorithmic management for the autonomy and dignity of workers in the African platform economy.

4.2.3 Dehumanizing Effects of Algorithmic Surveillance

Workers consistently reported feeling constantly monitored and reduced to data points by platform algorithms. As a Rwandan digital worker put it, "The algorithms don't see me as human; we are just numbers to be optimized." (Participant 8, personal communication, February 11, 2021) A Zimbabwean programmer shared a similar concern: "It's constant data extraction about every small task. I feel like just another input in an optimization machine." (Participant 30, personal communication, March 27, 2021)

Workers also felt that algorithmic management systems were more invasive than traditional work settings. A social media manager from South Africa expressed frustration with the system's intrusiveness: "The algorithm recommends content ideas and schedules designed to maximize engagement. My creativity feels irrelevant." (Participant 41, personal communication, July 12, 2021) This worker's experience suggests a loss of creative autonomy that they found particularly challenging in their role.

Further, a Bolt driver in Zimbabwe described coercive tactics used by the platform:

"Bolt forces drivers to accept rides that are far away but however they are not compensated for the drive to the client. If you decline a ride, your rating will go down, and once your rating goes below 50%, then you're banned. And when you try to complain, you are told that it's all automatic, it's the system, there is nothing we can do." (Participant 28, personal communication, March 29, 2021)

Another driver in Rwanda described the feeling of being on a “digital leash,” indicating a broader feeling of confinement and control.

Concerns were also raised about the fairness and transparency of algorithmic evaluations. A driver from Zimbabwe highlighted the opacity of performance ratings: “They track everything to score my performance, but the algorithm doesn’t understand context. Sometimes you realize you have been given two stars and have no idea why even when the client was all smiles.” (Participant 28, personal communication, March 29, 2021) These accounts highlight how algorithmic management and surveillance significantly impact workers’ sense of autonomy and dignity in the studied countries.

4.3 Unexpected Manifestations of Worker Agency

Despite the systemic control and dispossession characteristic of digital platforms, workers in Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe exhibit unexpected resilience and agency. In this study, these manifestations of agency were not limited to ride-hailing drivers but were also evident among other platform workers, showcasing a broad spectrum of adaptive strategies and resistance across the digital gig economy.

In South Africa, ride-hailing drivers demonstrated strategic agency by leveraging multiple platforms to optimize their earnings, reflecting an entrepreneurial spirit and a quest for autonomy within a rigid work environment. They adeptly navigated market dynamics, customer preferences, and peak business times, as one driver described: “I have all the apps, I know my market, people in one location prefer Bolt and, in another, Uber, and in another location, inDrive. I also now know the times of high business, so I switch off other apps and use the app that works best at that time.” (Participant 38, personal communication, July 12, 2021) This strategic approach indicates a significant degree of agency and resourcefulness in maximizing income and maintaining control over work conditions.

Furthermore, platform workers, including freelancers and content creators, have been proactive in asserting their autonomy and negotiating better terms despite the platforms’ stringent controls. Instances of freelancers bypassing restrictive platform rules, setting their own work terms, and establishing direct relationships with clients highlight their ingenuity and desire for autonomy. A freelance developer from Zimbabwe expressed this sentiment: “I often ignore the platform’s rules and tweak my workflows. I let the client know this is how I do things, and, in most cases, they comply but I have also had clients refuse to pay or just disappear from the system before final delivery.” (Participant 25, personal communication, March 12, 2021) These acts of resistance and self-advocacy reveal a layer of worker empowerment and pushback against the platforms’ norms.

The exploitation of platform features such as Bolt's off-app journey option to negotiate higher fares directly with clients and the strategic use of multiple apps by drivers to maximize earnings exemplify workers' adaptability and strategic decision-making. These tactics underscore a broader trend of platform workers employing creative strategies to assert their agency and improve their work conditions within the constraints of the digital labor market.

The findings further uncovered differences in the capacity to resist, influenced by factors such as skill level and the presence of supportive structures like unions. The formation of ride-hailing associations in South Africa and the collective actions of motorcycle taxi drivers in Rwanda highlight the exercise of political agency even in challenging political environments. Workers find innovative ways to contest policies and practices perceived as unjust, as illustrated by a Rwandan driver's account: "We did something never seen but showed our power as a united group. We refused to carry anyone, and many people missed work. The app they wanted us to use determined our wages and took a commission, If I carried a muzungu [White person/foreigner] with money, then I couldn't charge them more." (Participant 8, personal communication, February 12, 2021)

These instances of worker agency, whether through organized strikes, strategic use of platform features, or establishing direct client relationships, reflect the dynamic interplay between worker ingenuity and the structural constraints of platform capitalism. The narratives reveal not only individual acts of resistance but also collective efforts to assert rights and reclaim autonomy, painting a complex picture of the evolving nature of work and worker agency in the digital age.

4.4 Collective Resilience and the Limits of Algorithmic Control in the African Context

I argue that platform workers in Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe demonstrate unique forms of agency that are deeply rooted in African communal values and socio-economic realities. In South Africa and Zimbabwe, I observed ride-hailing drivers engaging in what I term "algorithmic arbitrage," strategically toggling between multiple apps to maximize earnings. As one driver explained, "I have all the apps... I switch off other apps and use the app that works best at that time." (Participant 38, personal communication, July 12, 2021) This practice echoes Wood and Lehdonvirta's (2021) concept of subordinated agency while taking on unique significance in the fragmented, post-apartheid urban landscape. It represents not just income maximization but the navigation of complex socio-economic divides.

In Rwanda, I documented collective action that draws on traditional organizing principles to confront modern algorithmic control. Motorcycle taxi drivers engaged in a coordinated work stoppage to resist the adoption of digital meters, which they felt would erode their income autonomy. One driver recounted: “We did something never seen but showed our power as a united group. We always make extra when we have a muzungu [White person/foreigner] client, but now these meters would mean everyone pays the same.” (Participant 8, personal communication, February 9, 2021) This action, I argue, represents a fusion of what Anwar and Graham (2020) term “hidden transcripts” of resistance with African communal solidarity. It also provides a unique perspective on Gerber’s (2021) analysis of platform community-building. While Gerber argues that platforms’ community-building efforts can function as a form of “soft control,” potentially limiting worker autonomy, I found that in the African context, workers leverage these community structures for collective action. This suggests that the tension between autonomy and control identified by Gerber may manifest differently in African settings, where strong pre-existing communal ties can be mobilized to resist platform control.

In Zimbabwe, I observed freelancers bypassing platform rules to establish direct client relationships, with one developer stating: “I often ignore the platform’s rules and tweak my workflows and also try to engage the client outside of the platform as soon as possible.” (Participant 31, personal communication, March 29, 2021) Although this aligns with de Certeau’s (2011) concept of tactical resistance, it acquires a new meaning in a context where platform work is not supplementary but often the primary source of livelihood.

However, these resistance strategies face particular challenges in the African context, as workers must carefully balance acts of resistance against the risk of platform sanctions. When platforms ban or penalize workers for resistance, the consequences extend beyond lost income to affect their social standing in communities where reputation is paramount. The dynamics of reputation systems examined by Krzywdzinski and Gerber (2021) take on added significance in African cities where community standing is paramount. A Harare driver noted:

“Bad ratings don’t just affect our work, they affect our standing in the community. Being banned from the platform is like being fired, it makes you lose chimiro [social standing]. People say, how bad do you have to be to be fired on something so simple, but they don’t understand.” (Participant 27, personal communication, March 14, 2021)

This intertwining of digital reputation and social status, I argue, is a uniquely African manifestation of algorithmic control, one that extends beyond work into communal life.

Moreover, I found that the effectiveness of worker resistance in Africa is often constrained by factors absent in Western contexts, notably limited legal protections, fragile democratic institutions, and the urgent need for income in high-unemployment economies. These constraints echo Nkrumah's critique of nominal independence without economic autonomy, now manifesting in the digital realm.

Even though African platform workers show remarkable ingenuity in navigating algorithmic control systems, their strategies and challenges are deeply embedded in the continent's postcolonial economic structures, communal values, and developmental urgencies. The digital divide, unreliable electricity, and expensive data plans create barriers to worker agency that fundamentally alter the nature of platform labor and resistance. This unique context calls for a re-examination of how we understand worker agency and resistance in the platform economy, one that accounts for the distinct realities of the African digital labor landscape.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

This study explores the complex of digital platform work in Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, focusing on the interplay between platform structures, worker autonomy, and local socio-economic contexts. By examining the lived experiences of platform workers through a neo-Marxist and postcolonial lens, this research reveals a nuanced picture of how local cultural concepts, personal aspirations, and communal responsibilities shape workers' understanding and exercise of autonomy within the constraints of platform work.

The findings challenge techno-optimistic narratives about digital labor platforms in Africa, exposing an autonomy paradox where the promise of flexibility and empowerment often gives way to new forms of control and precarity. This study looks into how this paradox manifests in the contexts of Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, considering these countries' unique socio-economic conditions, cultural values, and historical legacies of labor exploitation.

In this discussion, I interpret the key findings within the theoretical framework of subordinated agency (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021). I also situate the findings within the broader historical and global context of labor, power, and resistance in Africa, highlighting how digital labor platforms both perpetuate and transform existing patterns of inequality and exploitation.

5.1 Interpretation of Key Findings

This study extends and complicates the notion of subordinated agency proposed by Wood and Lehdonvirta (2021). The concept emerged from Wood and Lehdonvirta's study of remote gig workers and captures a fundamental paradox in platform-mediated work: digital labor platforms simultaneously enhance workers' agency in some respects and subject them to new forms of subordination.

Workers experience enhanced agency through increased flexibility in choosing clients, working hours, and, to some extent, their rates. Platforms provide access to a global market of potential clients, ostensibly increasing workers' options and bargaining power. However, this enhanced agency is counterbalanced by new forms of subordination. Wood and Lehdonvirta (2021) identify three key areas where this subordination manifests: platforms unilaterally set and change fee structures, often to the detriment of workers; they expose workers to global competition, potentially driving down wages; and they typically offer limited channels for workers to voice concerns or influence platform policies. These aspects collectively create a structure of subordination that exists alongside and in tension with the enhanced agency that workers experience in other areas of their work. This duality creates what the two authors term a "structured antagonism" between workers and platforms.

The framework of subordinated agency provides a nuanced understanding of the complex power dynamics in platform work, moving beyond simplistic narratives of either worker empowerment or exploitation. My research in the African context both supports and extends this concept. I found that the structured antagonism identified by Wood and Lehdonvirta (2021) not only exists but takes on additional dimensions in Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. In the SSA context, the impact of platform fees is exacerbated by wider economic precarity and lack of social safety nets, amplifying the subordinating effect. Global competition intersects with local economic disparities, creating tensions within the African workforce and often forcing workers to compete for increasingly low wages due to economic desperation. The restraints on workers' voices are compounded by broader societal issues of limited worker protections and weak regulatory frameworks, leaving many workers feeling powerless to challenge platform decisions. Additionally, my research revealed a critical dimension absent from Wood and Lehdonvirta's (2021) model: physical safety, particularly for ride-hailing drivers. This finding adds another layer to the concept of subordinated agency.

Moreover, my research complicates the concept of subordinated agency in several important ways. Local cultural obligations both constrain worker choices and provide a basis for collective action and resistance. The degree of agency varies significantly based on local factors, challenging the notion of a uniform subordinated agency among all platform workers. Different forms of subordination intersect and interact in complex ways, while nuanced forms of resistance demonstrate a form of agency that exists within, and because of, the structures of subordination. Collective cultural norms and obligations shape individual agency in ways not captured by the original concept.

These findings reveal what I term the “African autonomy paradox,” which both extends and complexifies Wood and Lehdonvirta’s (2021) concept. While digital platforms promise increased flexibility and economic opportunity, they also impose new forms of control that often conflict with workers’ cultural obligations and communal responsibilities. This paradox manifests in tensions between flexibility and cultural obligations, economic opportunity and social standing, and individual choice and communal responsibility. Consequently, this research significantly expands the concept of subordinated agency by revealing its unique manifestations in the African context. It demonstrates that understanding platform work in Africa requires considering not just platform–worker dynamics but also the broader socio-economic context, cultural values, and local realities that shape workers’ experiences of agency and subordination.

5.2 Implications and Recommendations

I argue that it is crucial to prioritize the lived experiences of vulnerable workers when studying the impact of growing digital economies in SSA. My findings underscore the importance of moving away from techno-utopian narratives and instead grounding research in the complex realities faced by workers in the Global South.

For policymakers, the findings highlight an immediate need to democratize platform governance in the region. This involves granting collective bargaining rights to workers and ensuring that they have an active role in the design, implementation, and oversight of algorithmic management systems. Policy reforms should address the inherent instability of gig work by establishing minimum wage standards, social protections, and benefits for gig workers. Additionally, regulations should require transparency regarding how platforms autonomously determine wages, assign tasks, evaluate performance, and manage worker data.

Further, digital platforms operating in this region must fundamentally rethink their algorithmic frameworks. These systems should be guided by the principles of human dignity and agency, going beyond a singular focus on efficiency and profit maximization. Workers should have a significant say in shaping the policies, performance metrics, and strategies for data usage that deeply affect their daily lives and economic stability. Prioritizing fair and equitable compensation for all workers is essential, and platforms should focus on transparency and open communication to build trust with their workforce.

In this context, civil society organizations and worker advocacy groups require increased support to organize and unite vulnerable gig workers across different digital sectors. By amplifying their collective strength, these groups can secure stronger protections. Government agencies and platform companies should implement targeted upskilling and training initiatives, with support from educational institutions and tech industry partners. These programs are crucial, particularly for workers from marginalized communities, to bridge the gap between highly skilled and less skilled digital laborers.

Lastly, regional and national governments should proactively endorse collective actions and develop legal frameworks that recognize the essential labor rights of gig workers. Clarifying legal definitions related to employment status is vital to ensure that gig workers have access to tax benefits and other forms of support. Organizations like the African Union and the African Continental Free Trade Area could play pivotal roles in harmonizing efforts to establish consistent policies across the continent. Ultimately, a concerted effort to formalize the informal aspects of platform labor will be essential to foster a more equitable digital economy.

5.3 Future Research Directions

Although this study provides valuable qualitative insights into the experiences of platform workers in Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, I acknowledge several limitations that point to avenues for future research. First, to obtain findings that are generalizable and statistically significant across diverse sectors and regions, larger sample sizes are necessary. It would therefore be beneficial to conduct in-depth comparative analyses focusing on countries such as Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe to shed light on regional variations in the Global South.

While this study provides valuable insights into platform work experiences, several limitations suggest important directions for future research. First, my study did not systematically examine demographic factors – such as gender, socioeconomic status, and migration background – in shaping workers’ experiences with algorithmic systems. Future studies should address this gap by investigating how these intersecting identities affect worker autonomy and experiences. For instance, research is particularly needed on gendered mobility constraints in transportation platforms and their impact on women’s participation and earnings in ride-hailing services.

Second, while my findings highlight challenges with worker organization, I did not fully explore alternative models for collective action. Given the limitations of traditional union structures revealed in my study, future research should examine innovative approaches to platform worker representation that are better attuned to the technological and legal environments of African countries. This could help develop more effective frameworks for enabling worker solidarity and protection within the unique constraints of platform work.

Finally, the cross-sectional nature of my study limited my ability to capture how platform work dynamics evolve over time. Longitudinal studies tracking these changes would provide valuable insights into the long-term effects of digital labor on workers, communities, and economies. Such research could better inform sustainable and equitable approaches to platform governance in the region.

5.4 Conclusion

This study explored the complex dynamics of platform work in Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe and revealed that digital labor platforms both offer opportunities and perpetuate forms of dispossession in the African context. The findings emphasize the need to fully understand the experiences of marginalized workers, who play a crucial role in economic transformations. Although digital advancements offer opportunities, the narratives shared by these workers call for policy reforms to address the loss of autonomy in financial, task-related, and behavioral aspects.

This research is particularly relevant in SSA, including Rwanda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, where platform control logics intensify existing challenges, especially when contrasted with their Western counterparts. However, the study suggests that prioritizing human dignity over efficiency can lead to transformative change.

Achieving fair and equitable governance in digital economies is undoubtedly difficult, but it is essential. It requires the commitment of policy leaders, industry stakeholders, and civil society advocates who champion the public

interest. Navigating technological transitions can be daunting, but prioritizing real-life experiences allows for ethical integrity and shared responsibility. I argue that constraints notwithstanding, the voices of marginalized individuals provide hope and shape future narratives of resilience and solidarity.

Despite the study's limitations in terms of sample size and generalizability, its empirical insights into the dispossession mechanisms offer a foundation for targeted structural reforms. Policymakers should leverage this information to design interventions that address the nuanced challenges of platform work in marginalized regions and sectors. As platform economies continue to evolve, it is crucial that we remain attentive to the voices and experiences of workers, ensuring that technological progress translates into genuine empowerment and improved livelihoods for all.

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