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Outsourcing Domestic Work in the Crisis of Social Reproduction: Platform-Mediated Cleaning and the Role of Clients

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Received: 14 November 2024 | **Revised:** 4 December 2025 | **Accepted:** 8 December 2025

Funding: Hans Böckler Foundation (Düsseldorf, Germany), Grant/Award Number: 2019-367-2

Keywords: cleaning | clients | crisis of social reproduction | domestic work | informal labour | platform labour

ABSTRACT

Amid the crisis of social reproduction, outsourcing domestic work has become increasingly appealing, with labour platforms offering new avenues to do so. This article explores the largely overlooked perspective of clients using platform-mediated cleaning services, focusing on Helpling in Germany. Drawing on a multi-method study, we examine clients' motivations for hiring cleaners through platforms and their perceptions of working conditions. We also analyse interactions between clients and cleaners, and how these are shaped by the platform. Our findings suggest that platforms like Helpling are attractive because of their convenience and their promise of an allegedly legal alternative to informal arrangements. While some clients express concerns over precarious working conditions, others justify them through market logic or assumptions about cleaners' backgrounds. The platform infrastructure helps mediate trust, yet personal relations between clients and cleaners limit the platform's strategy of delegating management and control mechanisms to clients.

1 | Introduction

Welfare state retrenchments, the increased labour-market participation of women, and the erosion of the male-breadwinner model have exacerbated the crisis of social reproduction in many regions of the world (Bhattacharya 2017; Fraser 2016). Rising demands at the workplace and increased domestic standards have further intensified the time scarcity many people experience (Hester and Srnicek 2023; Wajcman 2015). Against this background, outsourcing care and housework becomes increasingly attractive for middle- and higher-income households that can afford it (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004; Lutz 2018). However, employment in domestic work, such as cleaning or care work, is traditionally outsourced to a highly precarious, feminised and racialised workforce and characterised by low pay and informal arrangements (OECD 2021).

For some years now it has been possible to book home care services, babysitters or domestic cleaners online via digital labour platforms. The growing field of care platform studies has shown that precarity and informal working conditions in this field are mostly maintained (Pulignano et al. 2023; Ticona and Mateescu 2018), while the invisibility of reproductive labour is perpetuated (Kluzik 2022). Outsourcing domestic services through platforms has to be considered an individualised solution to the crisis of social reproduction that reproduces intersectional inequalities (Rodríguez-Modroño et al. 2023). Despite the growing research on domestic labour platforms, the role of clients has received only little attention so far (Gruszka et al. 2024; Pignolo 2025). As the concept of the 'service triangle' suggests (Korczynski 2002; Leidner 1996), working conditions in the service sector are not only shaped by the company, in our

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case the platform, but also by clients. This is particularly relevant for care and domestic work, which is often provided on a continuous basis, frequently takes place in the home of the client and requires trust-building and more considerate interactions than just accepting a food delivery. Thus, exploring the role of clients in domestic platform labour is key to better understand working conditions, but also the rise of platforms in this sector.

Against this background, we analyse the perspective of clients in the platform-mediated service setting. We focus on Helpling in Germany, an on-demand platform for domestic cleaning services leading the market in Europe. Based on a multi-method qualitative study, we investigate three research questions: (i) What are the clients' motivations for hiring a cleaner, and for doing so via digital labour platforms? (ii) How do clients perceive and negotiate the working conditions of platform-mediated domestic cleaners? (iii) How do clients experience and shape the interactions with cleaners, and how does the platform infrastructure influence these interactions?

Addressing these questions, we provide an original contribution to the thus far neglected role of clients in the use of domestic platform work. Among other aspects, we shed light on how clients navigate tensions between convenience, cost, and precarious working conditions in the sector of domestic work. Further, we deliver novel findings on how the platform-setting influences trust-building, and to what extent clients make use of the control instruments provided to them, that is, rating and review tools.

The article is organised as follows. Section 2 introduces the concept of the crisis of social reproduction and provides an overview on studies investigating the outsourcing of domestic work. Data and methods used in the study are described in Section 3. Section 4 presents the main findings while Section 5 discusses the latter and concludes.

2 | Theoretical Background and State of Research

2.1 | The Crisis of Social Reproduction

Feminist scholars widely agree that modern societies face a deepening crisis of care (e.g., Dowling 2021; Fraser 2016), marked by time scarcity, care gaps and declining quality of care. Fraser (2016) frames this as a crisis of social reproduction that is inherent to capitalist societies. Rooted in Marxist-feminist theory, social reproduction is understood as the unpaid or underpaid work by individuals and institutions necessary to maintain labour power, such as cooking, cleaning, and education (Bakker 2007; Bhattacharya 2017; Ferguson 2020). Historically separated from economic production, these activities have mostly been assigned to women, devalued, and made invisible (England 2005). With respect to paid reproductive labour, historical accounts stress the continuities in relegating this kind of work to Black and immigrant women (Davis 1983; Glenn 1992).

The organisation of social reproduction is not constant, but subject to historical changes. The shift to financialised capitalism since the 1980s has led to the erosion of the male-breadwinner model and the increase of female labour market participation in many parts of the world. Stagnating real wages have increased the number of hours that households need to spend in paid employment (Fraser 2016). While many women of colour, migrant and working-class women have always carried the double burden of housework and wage labour, these developments increasingly put pressure also on more privileged workers. In Germany, for example, the share of dual-earner couples with children has increased from 54 to 65 percent between 2006 and 2018. At the same time, there is the tendency towards both partners working full-time, and women increasing their part-time hours (BMFSFJ 2020). In addition, many public services related to social reproduction have been retrenched as a result of cuts in public spending, thereby assigning these activities to families and communities (Fraser 2016; Huws 2019; Jürgens 2010). The intensification of work, the blurring lines between work and leisure facilitated by technology, as well as rising domestic standards around cleanliness, food preparation and child care further exacerbate the time squeeze many individuals experience (Hester and Srnicek 2023; Huws 2019; Jürgens 2010; Wajcman 2015). It is important to note, though, that the academic and public discussion on time pressures and work-life balance is largely focused on middle-class experiences, neglecting the financial constraints prevailing for many working-class people, partly as a result of being under- or unemployed (Warren 2015).

Despite some gender convergence regarding unpaid care and domestic work, it is still women who do the majority of this work, even in countries with strong gender equality (Gershuny 2018). In Germany, women spend 1.5 times as much time on unpaid work as men (Federal Statistical Office 2025), and 2.5 times as much time on cleaning (Federal Statistical Office 2015). Women also carry the bulk of the mental load, which involves both cognitive and emotional work associated with family life (Dean et al. 2022). Given the multiple burden of combining employment, care, and housework, and the prevailing unequal distribution between genders, outsourcing domestic work becomes a possible solution on the level of households, for those who can afford it.

2.2 | Outsourcing Domestic Work

In 2019, 7.9 percent of German households employed a domestic worker regularly, and a further 2.3 percent occasionally (Anger and Enste 2022), mostly for cleaning. The likelihood of outsourcing domestic work increases with household income, with key motivations being more leisure or time for oneself, family, or work. Financial constraints and discomfort with strangers at home are common reasons against hiring a domestic worker (Juncke et al. 2019).

Domestic services are usually low-paid and informal, i.e., without a formal employment relation, declared income and social insurance. In Germany, an estimated 90 percent of domestic workers work informally (Anger and Enste 2022). The most important reason why households opt for undeclared services is to save costs compared to the formal market (Feld and Schneider 2010). Clients' low willingness to pay makes it difficult to enforce higher wages, and reinforces the appeal of cheap informal labour (Juncke et al. 2019).

Considering these economic factors, a growing domestic sector is characteristic for class societies marked by rising social inequalities, in which high- and middle-income groups can externalise tasks perceived as unrewarding and associated with low pay and

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status (Bücker 2023; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004). In the context of transnational social inequality, and increasingly segmented labour markets, domestic work is often transferred to migrant, racialised women, leading to global care chains and a 'care drain' in their home countries (Lutz 2018; Parreñas 2015). The result is a 'dualized organisation of social reproduction, commodified for those who can pay for it, privatized for those who cannot' (Fraser 2016, p. 104).

2.3 | The Rise of Domestic Labour Platforms

In recent years, outsourcing domestic work via digital labour platforms has emerged, adding to the common options of word-of-mouth recommendations, informal arrangements, or small agencies. Globally, the number of platforms in this sector has risen eightfold between 2010 and 2020 (ILO 2021). This growth is seen as a reflection of increasing demands for care and domestic services (Altenried et al. 2021; Huws 2019). While domestic work platforms promise 'to plug the care gaps' (Dowling 2022, p. 103), they only continue to offer privatised solutions accessible only to those who can afford them (Rodríguez-Modroño et al. 2023). By providing access to a 'fungible and superfluous workforce' (van Doorn 2017, p. 904), platforms might be able to counteract the undersupply of domestic workers, as identified for Germany (Enste 2018).

Given the high share of informal work in the domestic sector, the potential of platforms to improve the working conditions is a central concern. For example, one of the co-founders and former CEO of Helpling promotes the platform as a vehicle to get thousands of people out of undeclared work and to fight the black market (Höhne 2017). However, research shows that domestic labour platforms tend to perpetuate precarity and informal working conditions (Pulignano et al. 2023; Ticona and Mateescu 2018), thereby facilitating 'an illusion of institutional visibility' (Gruszka et al. 2024, p. 9). Research on countries in the Global South show more ambivalent effects (Tandon and Rathi 2024), suggesting that platforms might also lead to increased formalisation in some cases (Poblete et al. 2024). While domestic platform workers share many problems identified for platform labour in general (see e.g., Vallas and Schor 2020), it is important to consider the heterogeneous conditions across sectors such as ride hailing, delivery, online freelance work or domestic services (Haidinger et al. 2024). Regarding the latter, research stresses the heavy dependence on migrant and racialised women, perpetuating invisibility and intersectional inequalities that have historically been characteristic for domestic service work (Kluzik 2022; Rodríguez-Modroño et al. 2023; van Doorn and Vijay 2021). Studies on care platforms highlight the importance of platform-designed interfaces and rating systems where workers build their reputation and trustworthiness (Kalemba et al. 2024; Ticona and Mateescu 2018). However, client ratings and reviews have been shown to exert downward pressure on hourly rates or to lead to unpaid labour, and to generally favour clients over workers (Pulignano et al. 2023; van Doorn 2023; Wiesböck et al. 2023).

Research specifically on platform housecleaning includes several studies on Helpling that mostly focus on worker perspectives (Altenried 2023; Orth 2023; van Doorn 2023). As independent contractors, workers are responsible themselves for taxes and social security contributions, which means that the platform cannot guarantee formal employment. Commuting, managing bookings, and communicating with clients cannot be billed through the platform. Client ratings and reviews influence workers' chances of receiving beneficial offers (Gerold et al. 2022), positioning clients as preferred, trustworthy party, while workers must continually prove their qualification (Bor 2022). This power imbalance is reinforced by information asymmetries, platform terms and conditions (Gerold et al. 2022), and by the platform infrastructure (Gruszka et al. 2024).

2.4 | Clients: The Missing Piece in Platform Labour Research

While working conditions on platforms have been researched extensively, studies accounting for clients as platform users are still rare (Healy et al. 2020; Healy and Pekarek 2024). Existing empirical accounts mainly examine users of food delivery services within specific countries. In Spain and the US, Belanche et al. (2021) find that perceptions of working conditions and socially-conscious attitudes impact clients' intention to use and recommend these services. Two studies on Australia (Goods et al. 2024; Healy and Pekarek 2024) find mixed and often flawed views on platform workers' rights. While especially regular users have only limited interest in improved working conditions, a substantial share also support certain entitlements (Goods et al. 2024).

For the domestic sector, only few studies examine clients' perspectives through interviews or surveys. Two studies on Helpling in Berlin (Bor 2021; Gerold et al. 2022), although centred mainly on workers' experiences, show that the platform appeals to clients who cannot find a house cleaner via private contacts, or who seek cheaper solutions than those offered by commercial companies. Gruszka et al. (2024) employ the analytical framework of (in)visibility in platform work (Gruszka and Böhm 2022) to analyse client-cleaner dynamics based on the case of Helpling. These dynamics are strongly shaped by the high perceptible visibility of cleaners towards clients, a result of the personal interactions taking place in the clients' homes. This leads clients to articulate expectations regarding friendliness and task performance. Although individual visibility through ratings, reviews and online profiles is also high, it plays a more limited role because of its interplay with perceptible invisibility. Drawing on the same framework of (in)visibility, a recent study of domestic labour platforms in Switzerland finds that platforms enhance clients' agency by offering an organised space to choose among multiple profiles and service options, thereby creating a 'catalogue effect' (Pignolo 2025).

These findings highlight the important role clients play in (domestic) platform work. From a sociology of work perspective, service work like cleaning is situated in the service triangle (Korczynski 2002; Leidner 1996), where working conditions are shaped by employers, workers (and their representatives) *and* clients. In the context of digital labour platforms, research suggests that clients can shape platform-mediated work in three main ways (Goods et al. 2024; Healy and Pekarek 2023): First, as voters, they can influence work regulation. Second, by deciding (not) to use a certain platform, clients sustain or challenge particular business practices and working conditions.

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Third, by rating the performance of workers, they participate in their (co-)management. The latter role is enabled by platforms' digital infrastructures which can be seen as tools that delegate control over the labour process to their users *and* simultaneously assure that power remains centralised within the company (Kornberger et al. 2017; Vallas and Schor 2020).

As Altenried and Niebler (2024) stress, on-demand platforms in the domestic sector rely heavily on clients to co-manage workers due to the limits of algorithmic control. This is because workers are usually paid by the hour, while tasks are individually agreed with clients. Also, unlike food delivery, domestic service work must occur in a specific place (Kluzik 2022) which makes standard platform control tools less effective in the domestic sector. This aligns with Floros' (2024, p. 10) concept of 'minor algorithmic management' in the context of housecleaning platforms where human involvement is essential to platform functioning.

Previous studies often frame clients as ethical consumers, weighing heavily on individual choice, while broader structural conditions are often neglected. As Culpepper and Thelen (2020) note, higher labour standards would also increase the cost for consumers, which makes them a potential ally of capital. In platform-mediated domestic work, clients' decisions must be seen in the context of the reproductive crisis, which creates a fertile ground for platforms to engage in this sector. However, the close contact with clients and the limited possibilities for rationalising tasks (Bélanger and Edwards 2013) also allows for alliances between cleaners and clients (Altenried and Niebler 2024; see also Leidner 1996).

Against this background, this article provides an original contribution to the thus far neglected role of clients in the use of domestic platform work. The perspective of clients is important to understand the phenomenon of platform-mediated domestic work for several reasons. First, identifying clients' motives and reasoning for using this service is important as their demand contributes to creating or maintaining this form of employment. Second, due to their direct and often repeated interaction with workers, clients influence cleaners' working conditions to some extent. Third, by understanding how clients make use of the control instruments provided to them, new insights can be gained on platform control and management in the domestic sector.

3 | Case, Data and Methods

Founded in 2014 in Germany, Helpling enables households to book workers offering domestic services, primarily cleaning. In 2025, the on-demand platform was active in Germany, the UK, France, Italy, Switzerland, Ireland, and Singapore. Enabled by a series of funding rounds, Helpling has acquired several of its competitors, notably Book a Tiger in 2019. After losses in its first years, the platform claims to be profitable since 2020 (Heuberger 2021). In Germany, Helpling currently operates in 15 cities, providing more than one million cleanings per year (Helpling 2024). Given that about four million households in Germany use domestic services, most of them regularly, platforms like Helpling 'complement the market with their services, but do not transform it' (Haidinger et al. 2024, p. 177).

Helpling mostly relies on self-employed workers and deducts a service fee of 25 to 39 percent.[1] The workers can set their own hourly rates. Cleaners registering on the platform must confirm that they are legally allowed to work self-employed in Germany, operate a properly registered business, and handle their own taxes and duties. Helpling, as an intermediary, does not verify workers' residence status or tax compliance, and uploading a trade licence is optional. Since workers manage their own taxes and social security contributions, the platform cannot guarantee formal employment (Gerold et al. 2022) – despite Helpling promoting themselves as 'a genuine alternative to the black market' [2] (Helpling 2024).

During the booking process, clients are presented with a list of cleaner profiles upon providing basic information such as the date of the cleaning, its duration, or the size of their place. Clients then shortlist several cleaners who can accept the cleaning. The profiles are rich in information and include, e.g., first name, ID verification, ratings and reviews by previous clients, a short bio-like text, the length of their experience on the platform, among others, ensuring high individual visibility of workers (Gruszka et al. 2024).

In this article, we focus on Helpling in Berlin, drawing on data from a multi-method research project on platform-mediated cleaning in Germany. Centred on clients' perspectives, it mainly uses qualitative analysis of client interviews, while also integrating findings on the platform infrastructure and cleaners' working conditions to explore the triangular dynamics among clients, workers, and the platform. At the core of our empirical research were 21 qualitative semi-structured interviews with 11 self-employed cleaners and 10 clients. Both groups were actively using the platform, that is, they provided cleaning services or booked them (regularly or one-time) during the study or shortly prior. The interviews, conducted mainly via video-conference tools or telephone due to the COVID-19 pandemic, took place between November 2020 and October 2021 (see Table S1 for details on the interview partners). The qualitative interview sample among clients included six women and four men, mostly German citizens (for more details, see Table S2). The sample was thus rather small, a typical challenge when researching domestic platform labour (Orth and Baum 2024), but the information obtained from the interviews was extensive (see Saunders and Townsend 2016).

To gain an understanding of the platform infrastructure of Helpling and its functioning, especially from the perspective of clients, we drew on the walkthrough method (Light et al. 2018). This method is suitable for analyses of interactive apps, making platform mechanisms (such as sorting, filters and ratings) and related cultural meanings visible, and is therefore growing in relevance in platform labour literature (Gruszka et al. 2022; McDonald et al. 2024). We conducted several 'walkthroughs' of the platform's website, both as unregistered users and as users with a registered client profile. The process was documented in research diaries with notes and reflections, accompanied by screenshots.

As for field access, the clients were recruited through snowballing, posting advertisements on social media, and contacting potential interview partners via an online forum where different companies are rated by clients. The cleaners were reached through an association for migrant workers, snowballing, and by recruiting them as cleaners via the platform and handing out flyers afterwards – a common practice in platform labour research related to thorough ethical and methodological

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reflections to ensure consent (Gruszka et al. 2024; Orth and Baum 2024).

All interviews were transcribed and pseudonymised. For the analysis, we combined *structural coding*, as described by Saldaña (2009: 66), with *initial coding* (Charmaz 2006). This was complemented by memo-writing and the principle of iterative research, inspired by Charmaz' (2006: 44) strand of grounded theory, and assisted by the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. *Structural coding* enabled a deductive analysis of the interview data along the research and interview questions. For clients, these included, for example, experiences with the booking process, descriptions of the cleaners, or handling issues. *Initial coding* allowed us to remain open and to inductively develop new codes, so that the 'study fits the empirical world (…) that crystallize[s] participants' experience' (Charmaz 2006: 54). We coded the first interviews together in the team, testing the coding system. An iterative process led to the development of the additional inductive codes. Figure 1 below illustrates our coding strategy based on a sample code related to the findings of this paper. The example illustrates that parts of the coding referred to the interview questions ('Why household cleaner?'), while others were inductively created, grounded in the data ('Luxury – treating oneself').

4 | Findings

Drawing upon our research questions, we first discuss the motives behind outsourcing cleaning and the reasons for doing this through the platform. Second, we focus on clients' views on working conditions in domestic cleaning, particularly critical reflections on the topic, along with justification strategies for outsourcing cleaning via labour platforms. Third, we zoom in on how clients refer to their interactions with cleaners and investigate the role of the platform in co-shaping these.

4.1 | Fixing the 'Trouble at Home'? Motives for Outsourcing Domestic Work Through Platforms

Clients often accounted for the first decision to outsource cleaning by referring to the time squeeze experienced in their households (4.1.1). Once the decision was taken, clients provided several reasons for choosing a platform like Helpling. These included (4.1.2) the uncomplicated booking and the lack of alternatives (4.1.2), and the desire to avoid undeclared work (4.1.3).

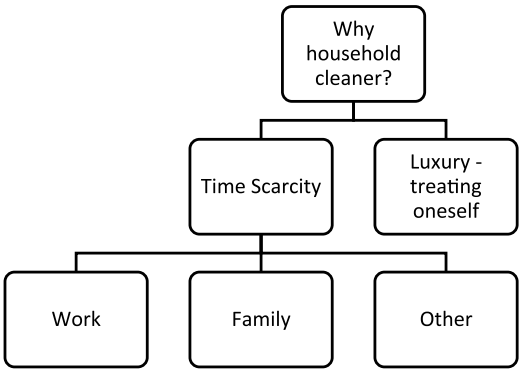


FIGURE 1 | Illustration of the coding strategy and its different layers from deductive to inductive.

4.1.1 | *Tackling the Time Squeeze*

Most respondents explicitly mentioned time scarcity as a reason to engage a cleaner, such as Olivia:

> *'With my husband, we both work full time, two children and […] we have moved 5 years ago into […] a larger apartment. And there was the point where we have said, we need to re-organise, so [we need] support, that there is someone who comes once a week for 3 hours to clean the most important things.'*

Especially for the respondents in households with children and with both partners being employed, hiring a cleaner was seen as valuable 'support' (Olivia, Esma) in juggling paid and unpaid work. It ensured that the basic cleaning would be regularly taken care of. However, this did not mean that all domestic cleaning would be outsourced. Particularly interviewees with children mentioned that they vacuumed additionally, for example. Clients without children also brought up heavy workloads as a reason to engage a service provider. Sara hired a cleaner during a period when she was facing the double burden of working full time and finishing her thesis. Outsourcing cleaning appeared as the most feasible way to reduce her workload. These examples show how hiring a cleaner is often a practical response to chronic time pressure, helping clients to manage multiple time-related burdens.

Another time-related theme revolved around engaging a cleaner as a 'luxury' to treat oneself (Sara, Philipp, Edith, Paul), or a 'pleasant comfort' (Lena). Clients also repeatedly referred to monetary evaluations, e.g., describing this service as 'costly' but affordable, given their income situation (Sara, Lena, Paul). The time required for cleaning was seen as 'too precious' (Philipp) and preferred to be spent differently. Clients pointed to the benefits in terms of time, 'because [outsourcing] cleaning immediately leads to free time and leisure' (Paul). Hiring a domestic cleaner allowed them to carve out some time to spend, for example, with children or partners, for themselves, or on voluntary work. Interestingly, only Edith and Philipp explained that they explicitly dislike cleaning.

Our interviewees also reflected on the fact that women are still responsible for most of the housework, including the mental load linked to it. As Daria described:

> *'We totally divide the work between me and my husband. But it is me who is planning everything, so […] the mental load is on me. So […] I have to say like: "today we have to clean here" and "this week is the time to clean the windows".'*

Outsourcing cleaning thus seems to benefit especially women in heterosexual couples regarding their workload, while relieving male partners from increased participation in domestic work. Hiring a cleaner was also described as a means of conflict-solving in a household (Philipp). Richard recalled engaging a cleaner when his wife returned to work after parental leave and could no longer do the cleaning herself: 'My wife went to work,

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and I had to take care of the groceries – or I offered – to take care of the groceries and the cleaning, and then I installed two apps. One was the app [name], [...] and the other was the Helpling app.'

These insights highlight how outsourcing cleaning might ease conflicts around housework without significantly increasing men's involvement, thereby largely stabilising traditional gender roles.

4.1.2 | *Easy Booking and Comparisons to Other Hiring Options*

Having decided to outsource cleaning, why did clients choose an online platform? Providing a large pool of workers is a typical platform strategy to ensure a prompt handling of client demand (van Doorn 2017). Indeed, several clients described finding and booking cleaners on Helpling as easy. As the walkthrough data shows, the platform lets the clients set their own criteria (e.g., date, duration, and type of cleaning) and lists cleaners meeting those. Clients can sort the results according to the 'lowest rate' or the 'highest number of cleanings'. This 'catalogue effect' has been shown to increase clients' agency on digital platforms (Pignolo 2025). Lena found the booking experience:

> *'very practical and convenient [...], so this option to enter the times there and then to get a larger offer of service providers. And then to be able to select and try that out.'*

In contrast, clients described more conventional ways of finding cleaners as time-consuming and exhausting. While some immediately used Helpling, assuming other options to be cumbersome, others had tried different means before using the platform (Lena, Paul, David). Lena had asked her sister and posted ads on Facebook but received only vague responses. David recounted that finding a cleaner used to be easier when he had lived in a rural area, while he struggled finding cleaners in a city:

> *'I had already made flyers myself, so these notes that you see on the streetlights saying, "cleaner wanted" [...]. That was all very, very futile [...], also conducting the interviews. The trust wasn't quite there and then I thought I'd give the whole thing – Helpling – a chance.'*

As this quote illustrates, not only the limited options but also the lack of trust in self-recruited candidates led David to trying Helpling, supporting previous findings on platforms' role in establishing trustworthiness between clients and domestic workers (Kalemba et al. 2024; Ticona and Mateescu 2018; see also 4.3.1).

Being asked about why Helpling was chosen over other platforms, clients said that Helpling was 'top-of-mind' (Philipp), or because of a larger offer of cleaners in a suburban region where the client lived (Olivia). Most clients reported having their attention drawn to Helpling through outdoor advertisement or seeing it among the top Google search results. This suggests that the high market power of Helpling, enabled by substantial funding rounds and a series of acquisitions, is key for attracting clients.

4.1.3 | *Avoiding Undeclared Work – For Cleaners' and One's Own Sake*

Another important reason for choosing platform-mediated cleaners was clients' intention to avoid undeclared work. Paul had tried to hire an insured cleaner based on marginal employment but failed to find somebody via 'offline' means like a bulletin board who would be interested in such an arrangement. His attempt to hire a cleaner through an online marketplace also failed. Paul's impression was that the demand for cleaners largely exceeded supply, which is in line with empirical studies on the domestic sector in Germany (Enste 2018).

The desire to avoid undeclared work and hire an insured cleaner was an important motivation also for other clients. Most interviewees assumed that Helpling mediated insured cleaners. Accounting for her choice of Helpling, Edith explained that:

> *'[the platform] actually seems serious to me, because I don't want to take on any illegal work, [or] commission it, and it's just secured via the platform with social security and so on, yes.'*

Asked whether the cleaners were insured, Edith responded: 'I'll just assume that now, otherwise I wouldn't need the platform. However, I have never read their terms and conditions.' Quite a few clients believed that Helpling ensures formal, insurable employment. While the website and the terms of use clarify that the booking includes only liability and theft insurance, during the time of our study Helpling appeared with the slogan 'Book insured cleaners easily online'[3] in Google search results (Gerold et al. 2022), based on which many clients may assume full social security provisions.

Some clients also voiced concerns about their own risk related to informal work, for example Edith:

> *'I do not want to support undeclared work. For one thing, I think random checks are made by whoever, customs or whatever. Then we would both have a problem. And if something happens here, has fallen or something else, then I would have a problem.'*

Thus, clients' motivation to avoid undeclared work stemmed both from a desire for legal and secure working conditions *and* from the fear of being held personally responsible. Olivia and Paul reported that cleaners offered them to work off the platform, which would increase the (net) income for cleaners and potentially lower the cost for clients. Such offers were not appealing to them, precisely due to not wanting to support undeclared work. However, many cleaners interviewed in the course of our research project confirmed to be occasionally successful in convincing clients to go off-platform and discussed it as common practice. This often goes hand in hand with cleaners informing clients about their working conditions – an occasionally successful attempt in alliance-building (Altenried and Niebler 2024).

4.2 | Between Bad Consciousness and Justification: Clients' Perspectives on Working Conditions

As shown in the previous section, the desire to avoid facilitating informal labour was an important reason for choosing Helpling.

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This suggests a lack of engagement with the workers' actual status under labour law, as many are unaware of the cleaners' self-employed status and lack of social protection through the platform. However, some clients were also aware of certain problems associated with platform labour. Our findings showed a spectrum of views among clients on undeclared work, low pay, and precarious working conditions in domestic cleaning, reflecting different ways of (dis)engagement with the topic. Below, we explore two framings: how some clients expressed their awareness of and concern with those issues (4.2.1), and how some legitimated and justified them (4.2.2).

4.2.1 | *Critical Reflections*

Several clients reflected on problematic working conditions, especially regarding the payment. As our platform walkthroughs showed, the hourly rate is one of the sorting and filtering criteria for finding a suitable cleaner. The clients referred to cleaners' hourly wages as rather low, just above the minimum wage, and/or close to the minimum. Some clients responded with strategies intended to increase fairness, like only selecting cleaners who charged minimum €15 per hour (David), or by tipping, as explained by Olivia:

> *'The pay is certainly rather at the lower end. [...] And that's why, let's say, we give tips to recognise the work, because it's clear that they don't make much money.'*

While both strategies aim at improving platform workers' conditions, they may also 'unwittingly bolster the very labour practices and legal distinctions that keep gig workers trapped in positions of precarity and deprived of basic employee rights' (Healy and Pekarek 2023, p. 254). This is because workers remain dependent on clients' individual 'mercy' to tip or choose cleaners with higher hourly rates out of ethical considerations. Improved minimum standards for all workers, however, would require different platform business practices or external regulation.

Some clients were also critical of the fact that cleaners could not charge for commuting via the platform, of the high commission collected by Helpling, and the lacking social insurance. Sara learned about the insurance and commission details and realised that her cleaner would be left with 9 Euro per hour (before taxes). Eventually, this made her leave the platform, thereby using her power as 'market participant' (Healy and Pekarek 2023) in shaping platform labour by challenging particular business practices. David, driven by similar concerns, asked Helpling to only receive suggestions of potential cleaners with, as he put it, their self-employment status 'verified' by the platform. Again, this shows that some clients employ strategies to improve the situation of individual cleaners within the platform setting, while overall conditions remain unchanged.

4.2.2 | *Justifying the Use of Services*

Some clients also used strategies to legitimate cleaners' working conditions, thereby justifying their use of the service. Philipp explicitly referred to his cleaner's education level to rationalise the low hourly rates:

> *'I don't find it immoral. Frankly, I wouldn't work for the money [the cleaners earn], but I'm a bit of a classist. Unfortunately, we're not in socialism where everyone is entitled to the same thing, so to speak. [...] My impression is that [name of cleaner] doesn't have any special training either [...]. And from that point of view, I think [...] 17 euros is okay for her.'*

Daria expressed feelings of guilt about the precarious working conditions. However, those feelings were tied to her cleaner's profession as a lawyer in his home country, making him 'overqualified' for household cleaning: 'I was like, oh my God, I feel so bad that this person is cleaning my flat. Because it was not like he is not educated.'

In fact, both Philipp and Daria referred to the same pattern of interpretation yet drew different conclusions from it: they perceived low pay and precarious working conditions as more acceptable for cleaners with little formal education or working-class background – also Daria who seems to feel bad only *because* her cleaner is highly educated. This mirrors the sociocultural associations of cleaning as a low-skilled profession (Costas 2022), acceptable to be outsourced to workers with only low qualifications.

Some clients also referred to market forces to legitimise the working conditions on the platform. For instance, Lena argued that the working conditions were 'quite good, otherwise there wouldn't be so many people. So I think it's supply and demand that regulates itself.' Accordingly, the high number of cleaners visible on the platform functioned as a confirmation of acceptable working conditions. Esma argued that cleaners could set their own rates, assuming that a job well-done would be a reason for increasing those. These views reflect a belief in the self-regulating power of the market, neglecting the asymmetric power dynamics on the platform to the disadvantage of cleaners (Gerold et al. 2022; Wiesböck et al. 2023), and structural conditions under which workers offer their services as independent contractors on platforms like Helpling.

4.3 | Trust, Love and Ratings: Exploring the Dynamics of Client-Cleaner Interactions

Regarding clients' perceptions of interactions with cleaners and the role of platforms, we find three aspects of particular relevance: the importance of trust and trust-building (4.3.1), the manifestations of the 'labour-of-love' myth in framing cleaners and cleaning (4.3.2), and the attitudes of clients towards ratings and reviews, contextualised in the role of those tools in trust-facilitation, quality management, and client-outsourced control (4.3.3).

4.3.1 | *Trust-Building at Home*

As shown in our walkthrough data, trust and safety of the service are explicitly addressed on Helpling's webpage. Cleaners can add a short description to their online profiles – worker-curated digital spaces, critically discussed as spaces for visibility management in the domestic sector and beyond (see also Gruszka and Böhm 2022; Ticona and Mateescu 2018). Client ratings, along with cleaner profiles and short written reviews, function as the central quality assurance tools from the perspective of the platform. However, Pignolo (2025) argues that these forms of individual visibility employed by platforms do

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not equal trust, a finding that is also supported by our data. The clients we interviewed stressed the importance of trust, but also the initial lack thereof towards the cleaner. Overcoming this lack often required time management of household members regarding their presence at home. Like Olivia, several clients stayed home during the cleaning, at least initially:

> *'[...] the feeling that a stranger is coming. That's why it was important for us to say that there is always someone at home with them [the cleaners]. We picked a day when my husband worked from home, so that we could first build up trust.'*

Trust was often discussed in relation to safety and the choice of particular cleaners. Some clients also referred to 'hunches' that affected their perception of cleaners as trustworthy. David mentioned having a 'good gut feeling' towards a cleaner while Paul recounted 'a feeling [...] of not wanting to have the person at your home'. Thus, despite the platform providing various forms of information to support cleaner selection, intuitive and personal aspects still played an important part (see also Gruszka et al. 2024; Kalemba et al. 2024).

Some clients also stressed the difficulty of trust-building due to the high fluctuation of workers on the platform. As Olivia clarified: 'But I think [...] it's that they [Helpling] are probably not attractive enough for the cleaners in the long run. That's a stopover for them'. Here, the clients' desire for more stability in the work arrangement cannot be guaranteed by the platform but is partly compensated by providing a large supply of cleaners to choose from on an easy-to-navigate digital infrastructure.

4.3.2 | Employing the 'Labour-of-Love-Myth'

Another theme in our findings evokes the 'labor-of-love myth' (Jaffe 2021, p. 268) – the assumption that certain types of work, such as housework and care, are done out of passion rather than for a decent wage. Accordingly, while clients valued the ability of cleaners to work without excessive supervision, they also seemed to expect the cleaners to enjoy their job. A positive attitude towards cleaning tasks was noticed, thanked for, and linked to feelings of comfort and trust. Esma remarked how her cleaner:

> *'told me she likes to clean, that's why she's doing it as a part-time job at the moment. [...] She didn't come across as if she didn't feel like it or that she was grumpy. Quite the opposite. She was very positive, which of course I liked.'*

Cleaners were also framed as helpers rather than service providers – a narrative the platform explicitly employs in its name. As explained by Lena, rather than saying 'I commission you to do something now', she would prefer to say 'okay, you can help me with that.' This also became prevalent in our walkthrough of the platform, as reviews often highlighted the help that clients received. These narratives blur the line between professional service and personal favour, downplaying the transactional nature of the work. In doing so, they reinforce the affective, feminised labour-of-love interpretation that contributes to the perpetuated devaluation of this kind of work (England 2005), obscuring the need for fair pay and proper labour protections.

4.3.3 | Ratings as Response and Responsibility

Providing feedback and assessing the quality of the service is an important aspect of the client-cleaner relation, also with respect to trust(-building). In addition to written reviews, clients rate cleaners along three criteria on Helpling: quality, reliability, and friendliness, each weighing equally in the overall rating of maximum five stars.

The treatment of ratings and reviews as criteria for choosing cleaners varied in our findings. Some interviewees saw high ratings and positive reviews as an indication of experience and reliability, providing 'a feeling I could trust' (Daria). Philipp trusted cleaners with reviews more than 'somebody who has no reviews.' Lena recounted to regularly rate cleaners but stressed that her choice of cleaners was not influenced by ratings. Esma also brought up the platform's large size and its high Google ratings, both seemingly increasing trust and giving 'a feeling of security.'

Clients use the platform infrastructure for managing bookings, including cancellation or rescheduling. The platform also shapes communication flows, restricting contact until a booking is made and positioning ratings and reviews as the main formal feedback mechanism. However, many interviewees preferred direct communication about cleaning-related issues or complaints over rating/reviews or contacting the customer service. Some clients evoked emotionally loaded vocabularies, for example of not wanting to 'escalate on the platform unless it is a must' (David). Philipp saw reporting dissatisfaction via the platform as 'disloyal' and 'cowardly.' Others reflected on the power of ratings and hesitated to voice their dissatisfaction via the platform (or refrained from doing so), fearing its impact on cleaners' access to future offers. While none of the interviewed clients indicated having posted negative ratings themselves, this practice of course exists. In fact, the cleaners interviewed in our research project confirmed that one negative rating can impair their chances to receive beneficial offers, and complained about the lacking possibilities to respond through the platform or to obtain a deletion of false claims. Clients were therefore often directly asked by cleaners to provide high ratings, which Paul sees as a powerful act of support and even an expression of empathy:

> *'You put yourself in the people's shoes and think, "okay, he wants to clean somewhere else, too, and he needs the job and is dependent on it, so I'm giving him an extra good rating now. Yes, so that he has more work."'*

All in all, our findings show multiple approaches to the tools of control and quality management provided to clients. This is reflected in the different extents to which ratings influence clients' choice of cleaners, and in the different ways feedback tools are used. In other words, our data shows that rating is not a straightforward process as anticipated by the platform design. As such, these findings contribute to the more sceptical perspectives on the functioning of algorithmic management and control in platform-mediated domestic work such as cleaning (Floros 2024).

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5 | Discussion and Conclusion

This study sheds light on the perspectives and practices of clients who engage domestic workers through a digital on-demand platform, thereby addressing a significant gap in the literature on platform labour in general, and on the domestic sector specifically. Based on the case of Helpling in Berlin, our findings also provide important insights on how the platform infrastructure mediates the interactions between clients and cleaners. These insights are especially relevant given the key role of clients in shaping working conditions in the service sector (Korczynski 2002; Leidner 1996), particularly in the context of labour that happens in the intimate sphere of private households, often on a recurring basis. All in all, this article contributes to the literature by providing empirical research on clients' motives for hiring domestic (platform) workers, and their strategies to justify cleaners' precarious working conditions. This study also reveals the limitations of control and management tools outsourced to clients, and suggests that the process of trust-building cannot be established by digital tools alone.

Our findings show that clients' decisions to outsource domestic work are often driven by time scarcity and rising demands both at work and at home. The appeal of domestic labour platforms thus needs to be seen against the background of the current crisis of social reproduction (Fraser 2016; Huws 2019; Rodríguez-Modroño et al. 2023), but also the general lack of legal alternatives. Clients choose platforms such as Helpling not only because they are seen as convenient, but also because they appear as ostensible solution to the problem of informal domestic work – despite the platform's inability to guarantee formal employment. It is thus important to explore clients' motives and decisions in the context of the wider societal and regulatory landscape.

Many clients remain unaware of the actual working conditions of cleaners, including their self-employed status and lack of social protection. Critical reflections regarding cleaners' working conditions mostly refer to their low pay, which is partly justified as being adequate for a (seemingly) low-skilled job like cleaning (Costas 2022). Such framings are deeply intertwined with the persistent devaluation of feminised, classed and racialised reproductive labour (England 2005; Glenn 1992). This is also reflected in the language used on the platform webpage, and in how clients evaluate and frame cleaners and their work, conveying an affective, feminised labour-of-love interpretation (Jaffe 2021).

Moreover, this study provides important insights on the interaction between clients and cleaners in the platform setting. The platform infrastructure plays a key role in shaping client-cleaner encounters, for example, by providing specific options for preselection and filtering, communication tools and feedback mechanisms. However, our findings stress the importance of direct interactions between clients and cleaners, e.g. in the process of trust-building which is vital in domestic services. This is also in line with previous research stressing the limitations of individual visibility created by digital tools to build trust in platform domestic work (Gruszka et al. 2024; Kalemba et al. 2024; Pignolo 2025). Many clients make selective use of the control functions outsourced to them as they prefer face-to-face feedback over digital mechanisms such as ratings and reviews. These insights add to debates on the position of clients in the 'platform edition' of the service triangle (Healy and Pekarek 2024; Vallas and Schor 2020), and expose the limits of delegating control to clients (Floros 2024). Clients' reluctance to rate cleaners, but also the practice of tipping them, or to even decide for off-platform arrangements can be seen as manifestations of client-cleaner alliances – fostered by personal interactions typical for domestic work (Altenried and Niebler 2024; Leidner 1996).

Platforms provide a novel option to outsource domestic work, but as previous studies show, this individualised solution to the crisis of social reproduction only reproduces existing inequalities by shifting the burden onto precarious platform workers (Bor 2021; Dowling 2022; Rodríguez-Modroño et al. 2023). A growing sector of household-related services is typical of class societies where high-income groups can outsource tasks that are low-paid, in order to spend more time on more rewarding and socially recognised activities. In this context, Bücker (2023) argues that we need to start insourcing these activities again. This would require a societal process of revaluing and redistributing unpaid domestic work, especially among genders. Shorter working hours are key in this context (Gerold and Nocker 2018), as they would enable all genders to participate more equally in different kinds of work. Such an approach also differs from liberal feminism, advancing gender equality mainly by increased female labour market participation – often only enabled by outsourcing housework to precarious domestic workers. Instead, tackling the crisis of social reproduction at its roots requires acknowledging the essential role of care and domestic work in our societies, and addressing the underlying gendered, racial and class-based divisions and devaluations.

However, it needs to be recognised that the demand for cleaners in private households will probably not vanish in the near future, and its sudden disappearance might in fact deprive underprivileged workers of their livelihoods. It is thus key to improve the conditions in domestic (platform) work by more stringent regulation and policy. The new EU Platform Work Directive is already an important step forward, aiming to end worker misclassification and exploitative algorithms (European Union 2024). Further demands include legal minimum standards also for self-employed workers, digital access rights for trade unions, or better protection against discrimination and sexual harassment (DGB 2021). Norway also provides an interesting case on how to combat informal cleaning more generally (Sardadvar and Reiter 2024): For some years now, all cleaning companies have to apply for legal authorisation, and approved firms are listed in a public register. Both businesses and private customers are prohibited from buying non-approved cleaning services (Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority n.d). Given that many of our client interviewees resort to platforms because they assume legal employment conditions, such an approach could also be welcomed by clients.

Acknowledgements

Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Funding

This publication draws largely on the research of the co-authors within a project funded by Hans Böckler Foundation (Düsseldorf, Germany), entitled 'Platform Cleaners. The Potentials and Risks of Platform-mediated Cleaning Services in Germany' (Project number: 2019-367-2).

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Due to the sensitivity of data and the importance of anonymity, it is impossible to share the interview and small-survey data in greater detail.

Endnotes

[1]Since 2021 until recently, it was also possible to book cleaners who are employed by partner companies.

[2]Translation by authors.

[3]Translation by authors.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.
Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of interview partners (cleaners). **Table 2:** Socio-demographic characteristics of interview partners (clients).

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