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# Navigating platform work through solidarity and hustling: the case of ride-hailing drivers in Nairobi, Kenya

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** Scholarship about worker precarity, economic insecurity, and individualized risk in platform work tends to ignore that these trends are common features of informal economies in countries like Kenya, which has a culture of hustling rooted in economic opportunism and political resistance. Recognizing the parallels between the platform economy and Kenya's informal economy, we examine individual and collective strategies ride-hailing drivers in Kenya use to navigate the precarity of platform work.

**Methodology:** This study draws primarily from interviews with 30 ride-hailing drivers working in Nairobi, Kenya. Interview data is supplemented by two rounds of in-person fieldwork conducted by the first author who solicited rides, engaged in unstructured conversations with drivers, and kept detailed notes.

**Findings:** Although ride-hailing companies severely limit opportunities for driver autonomy and labor power, drivers engaged in several individual and collective acts of resistance to increase their income and wrestle back control from their employers. These acts of resistance include extending rides, adding customers outside of the app, asking riders to cancel requests, and striking.

**Implications:** While ride-hailing platforms exert significant control over drivers' working conditions and income, drivers can exercise labor power through acts of resistance based on hustling and solidarity. These acts of resistance rely heavily on solidarities among drivers as well as between drivers and riders.

**Value:** This study answers calls to de-Westernize platform studies by asking what Kenyan ride-hailing drivers can teach the rest of the world about navigating

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the precarity of global platform work. Our findings extend previous research on platform worker resistance in the Global South by introducing the importance of solidarities between platform workers and clients.

**Keywords:** platform work; in-depth interviews; ride-hailing apps; Uber; informal economy; Kenya

## 1 Introduction

In much of the world, the emergence of new forms of platform work has coincided with increased worker precarity, characterized by economic insecurity, individualized risk, and a disappearing social safety net (Hacker 2006; Standing 2011). Tasks as diverse as driving a ride-hailing car, delivering food, and performing microwork all reflect a transition from increasingly antiquated models of stable, long-term employment to a new work culture defined by short-term gigs managed by and through social media platforms (Poell et al. 2021; Scholz 2017; Woodcock and Mark 2020). Workers in this new platform economy are expected to be entrepreneurial, to juggle multiple part-time jobs, and to forgo traditional workplace benefits in exchange for greater flexibility and so-called independence (McRobbie 2016). Unsurprisingly, these various changes have led to a great deal of interest – and concern – about the future of work (Autor et al. 2023; Standing 2011; West 2018).

Yet, most of this concern has focused on the future of work in wealthy countries in the Global North, overlooking the fact that these employment trends reflect long-standing work practices in large parts of the world. As Munck (2013: 752) argues, Fordism and a robust welfare state are not the global norm; rather, “the type of work described by the term ‘precarity’ has always been the norm in the global South.” In fact, precarious labor and individualized entrepreneurship have long been fixtures of the informal sector, which comprises a variety of economic activities that largely operate outside of the state’s supervision and control (Galdino et al. 2018). The informal sector typically lacks regulatory protections that restrict working hours, ensure worker safety, guarantee fair wages, and mandate employment benefits like health insurance, paid time off, or retirement savings programs (Ng’weno and Porteous 2018). While the size of the informal economy is relatively small in the Global North, it represents more than half of all economic activities throughout the Global South (Polese et al. 2017; Schneider 2002). In Kenya, for example, the informal sector accounts for more than 80 percent of total employment outside of small-scale agriculture (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2021). The prominence of the informal economy in Kenya has significantly shaped the culture of work to emphasize creative forms of self-employment that predate the platform economy (King 1996).

Kenya's work culture based on hustling and entrepreneurship have made the country a fertile ground for the growing global gig economy. Not only is remote app work popular in Kenya (Anwar and Graham 2021), but the country also has several licensed ride-hailing companies, including Uber, that operate in its major urban areas (Mutua 2022). As in other parts of the world, Uber Kenya promotes itself as a technology company that works with a network of independent contractors, rather than a transportation company that employs drivers (Njanja 2022). This rhetorical strategy is designed to allow the company to evade regulations and worker protections that govern the transportation industry (Rosenblat and Stark 2016). Each of Kenya's ride-hailing companies adopt a technological logic wherein driver activities and client relations are facilitated and monitored by the app, largely outside the purview of government regulators (Castel-Branco et al. 2023).

The parallels between the global platform economy and Kenya's well established informal economy beg the question of how the country's work culture premised on hustling, ingenuity, and self-reliance has shaped the nature of platform work in the country. In keeping with Davis and Xiao's (2021) call to de-Westernize platform studies, we seek to answer that question by examining individual and collective strategies Kenyans use to navigate the challenges of platform work. First, we discuss Kenya's informal economy and introduce hustling as an analytical concept that captures both economic opportunism and political resistance (Thieme 2013, 2018). Next, we review scholarship on platform work in the Global South, including research on individual and collective acts of resistance used to improve labor power and working conditions (Anwar and Graham 2022). Then, drawing from interviews with ride-hailing drivers based in Nairobi, we first discuss working conditions in the ride-hailing industry before reviewing a variety of individual and collective strategies drivers employ to wrestle back control from their employers. Based on these findings, we argue ride-hailing drivers rely on individual and collective acts of resistance based on hustling and solidarity, not only between workers but between workers and customers. While previous research has emphasized "entrepreneurial solidarities" (Soriano and Cabañes 2020) between platform workers in the Global South, our findings demonstrate that worker-client solidarity is a valuable resource workers can use to increase earnings and improve working conditions in platform work.

## 2 Kenya's informal economy and hustling

The phrase 'informal sector' was introduced by anthropologist Keith Hart in the early 1970s to describe various income-generating activities of migrant workers in urban Ghana (Hart 1970, 1973). Hart's research focused on small-scale entrepreneurs who

did not fit traditional Western definitions of entrepreneurship but, rather, included “Ghanaians from all walks of life who convert their savings from income into working capital for some part-time enterprise or into fixed capital assets” (1970: 107). Hart’s research challenged prevailing notions of entrepreneurship at the time by drawing attention to Ghanaians engaged in a variety of income-generating opportunities characterized by individualized and diversified work practices. This type of work, he argued, was made necessary because the migrants he studied largely were excluded from work opportunities in the formal sector (1973).

Hart’s concept of the informal economy was quickly applied to other parts of the developing world, including Kenya. A 1972 joint report by the United Nations Development Programme and the International Labour Office argued the informal economy “must play a major role in any strategy to solve the employment problem in Kenya” (Chakravarty 1972: 52). The report described key characteristics of the informal sector in Kenya, which included ease of entry, small-scale operation, skills acquired outside of the formal school system, and unregulated but competitive markets. These features were of particular interest to development economists and political scientists who viewed Kenya’s informal economy as an entrepreneurial success story that contrasted with the slow-growing formal economy (King 1996). Kenya’s informal sector often is referred to as the *jua kali* sector. The phrase *jua kali*, which means “hot sun” in Swahili, originally was used to describe the open-air working conditions of artisans, manual laborers, and service workers that earned a living outside of government intervention and external aid, but the concept has evolved over the years to describe a particular type of work culture and aesthetic (Daniels 2010; King 1996). *Jua kali* signifies a sense of urban entrepreneurship, self-employment, and a creative do-it-yourself approach to solving problems that is rooted in community solidarities (Kinyanjui 2020; Momanyi et al. 2024; Nyairo 2007). While *jua kali* artisans and trade workers have been slow to incorporate digital technologies into their business practices (Momanyi et al. 2024), other informal industries within Kenya have embraced platformization (Manga 2022).

A key feature of Kenya’s informal economy is hustling. Colloquially, hustling refers to the daily struggle to find work, which often involves earning one’s livelihood through a variety of income-generating activities. Yet, according to Thieme (2013, 2018), hustling is not only a survival strategy and a creative form of economic opportunism; it is also an act of political resistance that contests traditional authority. Hustling signifies both an element of work culture within informal economies as well as a critique of the neoliberal logics that romanticize the unregulated and unwieldy nature of this work (Thieme et al. 2021). Whereas idealized depictions of ‘the hustle’ emphasize hard work and creative innovation, they also mask the unjust economic systems that offload risk onto individual workers, particularly workers already marginalized within the dominant

society (Cottom 2020; Hart 2009; Thieme 2013). As such, Thieme et al. (2021) re-conceptualize hustling as “a profoundly analytical concept” that can be used to capture “the ‘positioning and agency’ that has grown *out of and in resistance* to persistent racial capitalism” (p. 8–9, emphasis in original). In keeping with this scholarship, our study seeks to foreground hustling as a form of resistance that implicitly and explicitly critiques the neoliberal logics that make worker resilience and economic opportunism necessary.

### 3 Platform work in the Global South

While there are certainly differences between the informal sector and platform work, there are also important continuities. Platform work describes contingent, short-term employment “that happens through, via, and on digital platforms” (Woodcock and Mark 2020: 3). The platform economy consists of a variety of forms of contract labor, some of which are geographically tethered, like ride-hailing, food delivery, and vacation rentals, and others that are digitally mediated forms of outsourcing, like freelancing, content moderation, and crowdwork (Gray and Suri 2019; Woodcock and Mark 2020). Similar to informal work, platform work is advertised as flexible and entrepreneurial, which can be particularly attractive to those who are seeking freedom from rigid work requirements (Anwar and Graham 2021; Soriano and Cabañes 2020). Platform work also has a relatively low barrier to entry, which can be appealing to those without formal employment and limited start-up capital (Castel-Branco et al. 2023). Yet, because platform work is premised on short-term contracts facilitated via digital and social media, platform workers lack many of the regulatory protections afforded to those employed in the formal economy (Ravenelle et al. 2021; Schor 2021). Like informal workers, platform work is more precarious than many traditional forms of formal employment (Anwar and Graham 2022). Interestingly, in her study of motorcycle taxi drivers in Indonesia, Frey (2020: 41) conceptualizes platform work as “formalized informality, [...] precarious work originally outside of state and corporate control that has been partially drawn into it through registration and reorganization, without the provision of additional protections (labor rights, contractual guarantees of work) commonly associated with formal-sector employment.” Conceptualizing platform work as a hybrid of formal and informal elements provides further justification for studying platform work in countries like Kenya with work cultures rooted in long-standing informal economies.

Platform work has become particularly popular in low- and middle-income countries, in part, due to poor economic conditions at home. Economic challenges including large-scale unemployment and high inflation can make platform work

appealing to a vulnerable workforce faced with few employment opportunities locally (Anwar and Graham 2022; Casilli 2017). This is certainly true in Kenya, which has sizable labor underutilization particularly among those under the age of 30 (International Monetary Fund 2010; Mercy Corps 2019). Kenya is also fertile grounds for platform work due to the rapid growth of mobile technologies in the country. In 2022, Kenya registered approximately 65.7 million mobile connections, a number that exceeds the total population of the country (Okafour 2023). In addition, Kenya has been a leader in mobile banking, with nearly all households possessing a mobile money account where they transact business through M-PESA (de Soyres et al. 2018). This confluence of mobile internet connectivity and high employment has led to a boom in the platform work in Kenya and Nairobi, in particular (Olawoyin 2023). According to a 2024 report by the Digital Economy Task Force, the gig economy employs 36,000 Kenyans and is valued at more than \$100 million (Vidija 2024).

The growth of platform work in the Global South has raised important questions about worker exploitation and job quality. Platform workers, especially those based in the Global South, earn very small salaries relative to the massive profits earned by technology companies, typically based in the Global North (Casilli 2017). Beyond income, job quality is a multidimensional concept that includes labor power, worker autonomy, freedom of association, and more. Using this multidimensional approach, Anwar and Graham (2022) argue that platform work in Africa lacks many features of good jobs, as workers often experience social isolation, are concerned about being replaced, have limited bargaining power, and experience few opportunities for advancement. For ride-hailing platforms in Kenya, in particular, drivers are instructed that the customer is always right, “which means that any disagreements or grievances raised by drivers usually work in favour of the clients and not the drivers” (Manga 2022: 495). Despite these disadvantages, Soriano and Cabañes (2020) argue that platform workers in the Global South exhibit an “ambivalent marginality,” in which they recognize their marginalized position while also finding platform work more lucrative and prestigious than local alternatives. As such, some platform workers in the Global South acquiesce to their marginalization, while others seek out ways to challenge unsatisfactory working conditions.

Previous scholarship has found numerous examples of platform workers in the Global South engaging in individual and collective acts of resistance to improve working conditions. In terms of individual action, Anwar and Graham (2020, 2022) argue that platform workers exercise labor agency in three ways: resilience, coping strategies that help workers endure everyday oppression; reworking, drawing from local resources and knowledge to recalibrate oppressive relationships; and resistance, direct and indirect challenges to exploitative relationships. For example, Chen (2018) found that ride-hailing car drivers in China exert individual agency through a variety of tactics, such as working on multiple platforms simultaneously

and using “bot apps” to thwart company policies and algorithmic control. While such actions are unlikely to significantly reshape power relations between platforms and workers, Pollio (2019) argues that individual acts of resistance can lead to “marginal gains” in the face of corporate policies and technological restrictions intended to limit worker agency. Thus, while individual agency is always circumscribed by institutional policies, cultural traditions, and technological affordances (Havens and Lotz 2016), focusing on individual acts of resistance can help us understand how Global South laborers improve working conditions and mitigate the challenges of platform work.

In addition to individual acts of resistance, previous scholarship has demonstrated the importance of organized collective actions like strikes and labor unions as well as new forms of networked solidarity among platform workers. For example, Iazzolino’s (2023) study of a 2018 strike of ride-hailing drivers in Kenya offers an example of platform workers using collective action to contest platform subjectification from above. During the strike, drivers logged off ride-hailing apps to become invisible to platforms while rhetorically connecting their labor struggle to the 1950s Mau Mau anti-colonial movement (Iazzolino 2023). Some platform workers have also attempted to create unions that can advocate for greater benefits and protections; yet, these efforts are often hampered by a lack of shared vision, disorganized leadership, and platforms intentionally designed to keep workers disconnected from each other (Anwar and Graham 2020; Castel-Branco et al. 2023; Heeks et al. 2021). Research by Castel-Branco et al.’s (2023) on ride-hailing drivers and the Transport Workers Union in Kenya also demonstrates the difficulties with organizing workers in new and evolving sectors. Along with traditional collective action, several scholars have argued that the affordances of social media platforms enable networked solidarity among Global South platform workers, which can lead to valuable forms of mutual aid and information sharing (Qadri 2023; Soriano and Cabañes 2020; Zhou and Pun 2024). Soriano and Cabañes (2020: 5) refer to these communities as “entrepreneurial solidarities” in which digital workers “attempt to discuss strategies and create networks of support to overcome the ambiguities and challenges posed by digital labor platform conditions.” Such forms of collective action are rooted in formal and informal solidarities – enactments of shared identities that seek to provide mutual support and aid (Qadri 2023; Soriano 2023). As Qardi (2023: 3,913) notes, it is important for research on platform work in the Global South to focus on collective relationships and “the social norms, cultural codes, and collaborative networks from which these counter-optimizations are borne.”

Our study contributes to this growing body of research on resistance by platform workers in the Global South by examining individual and collective strategies used by ride-hailing drivers in Kenya to navigate the precarity of platform work. Kenya’s

thriving informal economy has acculturated workers to hustling, which signifies more than creative entrepreneurship and perseverance; it represents a form of political resistance and solidarity in everyday work (Thieme et al. 2021). Therefore, we ask the following research question: *What are the individual and collective acts of resistance ride-hailing drivers in Kenya engage in to mitigate the challenges of platform work?* The answers to this question will not only help us understand the adoption of platform work in countries like Kenya with sizeable informal economies, but they will also demonstrate the value of hustling and solidarity for platform workers around the world.

## 4 Method

This study draws primarily from interviews with 30 ride-hailing app drivers working in Nairobi, Kenya. Based on initial fieldwork in August 2019, the first author constructed an interview protocol in conversation with a Nairobi-based research assistant who was hired to recruit and conduct interviews. After the first few interviews were conducted, the first author and research assistant reviewed audio recordings of the interviews and revised the interview protocol accordingly. The research assistant conducted the remaining interviews first by visiting parking lots and open areas where ride-hailing drivers were known to congregate while awaiting ride requests. He then used snowball sampling to expand the subject population until data saturation was reached. Because the interviews took time away from the drivers' work, interview subjects were compensated financially for participating.

Interviews opened with questions about the driver's previous work experience as well as their initial interest in driving for a ride-hailing app. Questions then moved to their experiences on the job with a focus on the challenges they faced and how they navigated those challenges. The interviews closed with questions about a July 2019 strike that was organized by ride-hailing app drivers to protest inadequate compensation and working conditions (Njanja 2019a; Nyawira and Cynthia 2019). Interviews were conducted in English, Swahili, or both, based on the interviewee's preference.

All interviews were transcribed and, when necessary, translated from Swahili to English by two native speakers – first, by the research assistant during the interview and second, by the transcriptionist during the transcription process. When applicable, both the original Swahili quote and English translation are provided below. Both authors reviewed each transcript to produce preliminary categories based on major themes in the interview data. After this initial round of open coding, the authors returned to the data for axial coding in which initial coding



categories were collapsed and connections between categories were identified (Lindlof and Taylor 2017). In January 2020, the first author conducted a second round of brief in-person fieldwork to triangulate initial findings from the interviews. During both rounds of fieldwork, the first author solicited rides using multiple apps, engaged in unstructured conversations with drivers, and kept detailed notes. In the findings section below, interview data is supplemented with notes from the first author's fieldwork.

Our interview sample population includes a wide variety of drivers for ride-hailing apps. The median age of those interviewed was 27 years old, with the youngest driver aged 22 and the oldest aged 58. Driving is a male-dominated field in Kenya (Chason 2021; Osman 2019), which is reflected in our sample population, as only 3 of the drivers interviewed identified as women. In terms of ride-hailing apps, 13 drivers reported driving for Uber, 7 for Bolt, 3 for Little Cab, and 7 said they used multiple apps. Most drivers had been driving for one to two years at the time of our interview, with a range from 4 years to three months experience. About a third had driven a taxi before transitioning to ride-hailing apps while two-thirds came to this work from a variety of industries, ranging from commercial driving, manual labor, and retail. More than half of our interviewees did not hold any other formal jobs, although a third balanced driving with a variety of other forms of employment including small-scale vending and ad hoc hustling. Of those who drove full-time, most reported working 6 days a week, with 4 claiming to work every day of the week. Drivers reported a median workday of 11 h, although working hours can be difficult to calculate. Several interviewees started their working day between 5 am and 7 am to catch the morning commute, then rested during the midday when there were fewer ride requests, and then returned to work in the evening when ride requests picked up again. There was a wide variety in reported income, but most said they earned between 20,000 and 50,000 KES a month (approximately \$200–500 USD at contemporaneous exchange rates), which matches or exceeds the average monthly income in the country (Mwaniki 2022).

## 5 Working as a ride-hailing driver

Prior to the emergence of ride-hailing cars in Nairobi, the ground transportation industry was dominated by taxis, buses, and shared minibuses known as *matatus*. While buses and *matatus* continue to be popular forms of transportation for working-class Kenyans, many middle- and upper-class Kenyans have transitioned from taxis to ride-hailing cars. As Lawrence, a former taxi driver explained, new customer preferences have forced drivers to adapt:

After the introduction of the platform or the online cabs, there was so much competition, such that many riders or clients, all of them are very partial to the move to online taxis. So, we had to move [from driving taxis to driving app cars] so that we could have something for us.

In Kenya, taxi fares are negotiated before each ride, which allows the driver to exert agency over the price as well as whether they want to accept the transaction. With ride-hailing apps, fares are set by the platform, and drivers are required to keep their acceptance rates high, forcing them to accept ride requests before knowing where the customer is going or how much drivers will be paid. So, while ride-hailing apps have made it much easier for drivers to find clients, they have also limited the ability of drivers to exercise control over their compensation and working conditions. Certainly, these ride-hailing policies are more advantageous to customers, but they also create challenges for drivers. As Uber driver Francis said, “the advantage is to the customer now.”

Overall, the drivers we interviewed expressed ambivalence toward their work, praising some aspects of the job, while criticizing others. On the positive side, many appreciated how easy it is to become a ride-hailing driver. Entering the taxi industry is quite challenging and requires drivers to rely on professional networks and build a regular customer base, but almost anyone with a driver’s license, access to a car, and a reliable smartphone can become an app driver. In fact, only a third of our interviewees had previously driven a taxi; most left unrelated jobs to begin driving for ride-hailing apps. In addition, very few interviewees owned their vehicles; most borrowed a car from a friend or rented a vehicle from secondary services that have sprung up to support the ride-hailing industry. Those who were new to driving said it provided a more stable income than their previous jobs. For example, 28-year-old Edwin began driving for Uber after years of hawking clothes:

*Napenda hii uber sana kuliko hiyo kuuza manguo. Juu kaa bado nilikuwa nauza manguo unaweza pata sometimes, unapata sometimes unauza manguo siku zingine, siku zingine hauuzi, unakaa tu hivyo. [...] Uber, juu, Uber at least inanisadia kuliko kazi ile nilikuwa nafanya kitambo.*

[I like this Uber so much more than the work of selling clothes. This is because, when I was still selling clothes, you would find that sometimes you will sell clothes and on other occasions you will not sell anything, you will stay idle. [...] I joined Uber because at least with Uber it helps more than my previous job.]

In addition, many said driving offered more income than their previous jobs while others noted that driving provided them with an opportunity to be independent and self-employed. For example, Johana was previously employed at a store where he worked 6 days a week with no vacation time. Driving for Uber, he now works every day, but he can take time off when he wants to, and he makes nearly twice as much money. Finally, almost everyone we interviewed praised the ease and speed with

which they are connected to customers through the app. Taxi drivers must promote themselves to passersby or wait for regular customers to call. With ride-hailing apps, drivers are connected to customers without the hassle. As Bolt driver Elly said, “there are so many clients, you do not need to advertise so much.” Thus, the experience of many drivers we interviewed reflected the platform economy rhetoric that promises a low barrier to entry, flexibility, and independence.

At the same time, drivers also shared several critiques they had with this new platform work. The primary complaint was that all fares are set by the app, and those fares have decreased over time. For example, experienced ride-hailing driver Samuel said he was frustrated that Uber dropped its fares significantly once other apps entered the market: “When we used to drive Uber the first time, the prices they were good. But when competition came ... competition is about bringing your prices low.” News reports at the time support this claim. In July 2016, Uber reduced its prices by around 35 %, which significantly affected drivers’ earnings and led to strikes, particularly from those who had taken out loans based on the initial, higher rates (BBC 2016; Sperber 2020). Since entering the market, Uber has consistently lowered prices to fend off competition against rivals while also increasing fees to offset the impact of regulatory changes (Ambani 2022; Williams 2021). In addition to complaints about reduced pay, drivers also lamented that the platform did not adjust fares to account for local conditions, which can include the dangers of driving at night and decaying roads that can damage vehicles. For example, on his way to pick up the first author, Uber driver Felix hit a pothole that caused his car to make a loud screeching noise. Felix expressed frustration that the company would not assist him with paying for repairs and, further, he would be unable to earn any income while his car was in the shop.

As these accounts demonstrate, the introduction of ride-hailing cars in Nairobi provided new employment opportunities for working-class Kenyans, but this platform work also created significant challenges that reflect the neoliberalization of Kenya’s transportation industry. While ride-hailing drivers are initially attracted by the rhetoric of freedom, flexibility, and higher pay, ride-hailing companies consistently respond to increased competition by instituting lower fares, which advantages customers over drivers. In addition, consistent with broader neoliberalization trends in the technology sector (Neff 2012), ride-hailing companies offload risk onto drivers, who must bear personal responsibility for damaged vehicles and threats to personal safety. Because platform work is designed to limit worker agency (Anwar and Graham 2022), our goal was to discover individual and collective acts of resistance drivers use to improve working conditions in response to these challenges in the ride-hailing industry. We have organized our findings below into individual and collective strategies to better understand the promises and perils of each.

## 6 Individual strategies

The primary way ride-hailing companies seek to limit the agency of drivers is by managing all work activities within the app. Drivers noted that ride-hailing apps were designed deliberately to eliminate labor autonomy on the platform. When asked what could be done *within the app* to wrestle back the advantage, drivers said they had few options. The two most mentioned strategies for working within the parameters set by the platform were working longer hours or setting their work schedule around times with the most ride requests. While these strategies do not violate company policies, they bely the rhetoric of freedom and flexibility that is used to promote app driving. In theory, drivers can choose when and how long to work, but experience has taught drivers that certain times of day are more profitable than others and most drivers work 10- to 12-h shifts to earn as much money as they can. This was especially true for drivers who rented their vehicles, because they needed to work a certain number of hours just to break even for the day. Besides adjusting their work schedules, several drivers signed into multiple apps so they could use whichever app offered the most favorable rates with the highest demand at any given moment. While this practice of “multi-homing” (Chen 2018) is a violation of company policies, it is difficult for ride-hailing apps to detect this practice.

The only real strategy for increasing driver pay within the app was risky and seldom used: extending the length of a ride. At times, it was possible for drivers to get the customer’s permission to take a longer route to avoid traffic, but a few drivers also said they would occasionally extend the length of the ride if the customer was not paying close attention. As Jeziel explained, “[some customers] know the place where they are going, but they don’t know the road which they are using to arrive there ... so I can use the long way for me to get that money I need from him or her.” Yet, Jeziel was in the minority. Most drivers said they never extended the length of the ride for two reasons. First, with fluctuating gas prices, drivers noted it was not always profitable to extend the ride farther than the established distance and rate. Second, drivers were concerned about doing anything that would result in a customer complaint or a negative review. If a driver’s rating dropped below a certain threshold, they would be put on probation by the app. As such, drivers were very careful to avoid negative reviews, even at personal expense. For example, Lawrence said that he was driving a customer just before our interview when he had to take a detour that wasn’t accounted for by the app. His customer did not appreciate this route change even though Lawrence tried to explain that it was necessary: “the customer felt so furious that she had to complain to the application and the application said that the only amount to be paid is the one that was shown there by

the application already.” The fear of customer complaints and low ratings kept most drivers from extending the route, which was one of the only ways to exert agency *within* the app.

Although ride-hailing apps limit opportunities for improving pay and working conditions for drivers, several interviewees devised creative strategies that involved working *around and outside of the app*. One such way was to switch off the app and negotiate with the customer directly. Doing so afforded drivers the freedom to set their own rates and avoid the commission taken by the app. This strategy was particularly effective during times of heavy traffic or when completing a ride in a busy area. For example, Uber driver Florence said after she finishes a shift, if there is a traffic jam, or if it is raining, she will look for people who want to go to popular destinations like the Central Business District (CBD). She will offer those waiting for a ride a lower fare than the app, knowing that she won't have to share any of the money with Uber: “*sasa hapo ni kuwa mjanja ... si unaona hiyo unamake pesa* [this is where you become wise ... you see, you can still make money].” Similarly, Uber driver Edwin explained, “maybe *kuna mwingine ako hapo amekusimamisha ... bado unamupeleka kwenye anataka* [maybe there is another customer who is at the drop off point ... you still take them where they want to go].” In other words, when the opportunity arose, drivers would revert to familiar taxi practices of promoting their services directly to customers, which allowed drivers to negotiate their own fares and avoid paying a commission.

Another strategy drivers mentioned was to add a second rider during a trip with a customer that was facilitated through the app. Drivers said this option was possible when they accepted a ride to take a customer to or from a heavily trafficked area where others also would be looking for rides. For example, Dennis said when taking a customer to a popular destination like CBD, he would look around to see if “*kuna ule unaweza okota tu kwa njia pia* [there is one that you can pick to on the way also].” While adding another rider provided an opportunity for an additional fare outside of the app, as web-developer-turned-Uber-driver Athanus explained, it was only possible if the original client agreed to it: “*kuna wengine hawapendi kama wamelipa hiyo distance hawapendi uchukue mtu mwingine kwa barabara* [there are some who are not comfortable if you have paid for that distance, they do not like it if you pick another person on the road].” Because drivers are always concerned about receiving negative reviews, they have to be savvy about when and how to suggest adding a second customer to the ride. Of note, both strategies – adding a rider and negotiating outside of the app – are dependent on high rider demand. When demand is high, drivers have more opportunities to increase their earnings, but when the demand is low, they are dependent on the platform to connect them with customers.

In addition to strategies that allowed drivers to earn additional income, drivers also found a way to navigate the algorithmic surveillance of acceptance rates. At the time of this study, drivers were forced to decide whether to accept a trip request without knowing the details, including the destination, and drivers were punished if their acceptance rates dropped below 80 percent (Rosenblat and Stark 2016). These policies often led to drivers accepting trips to undesirable destinations, especially at the end of the working day. In response, drivers sometimes would accept a trip request through the app and then call the customer to find out more information. After learning more, if the driver was not interested in accepting the trip, they would ask the customer to cancel the ride and then make their request again so that another driver would be assigned. This practice was particularly useful for drivers nearing the end of their shifts as well as those looking to avoid heavily trafficked areas. Not only was this strategy mentioned during interviews, the first author received such calls on multiple occasions after being connected with a driver through a ride-hailing app. Although app companies can punish drivers for declining too many trips, drivers are not penalized if customers initiate a trip cancellation. As long as the customer is willing to accept a minor convenience, this strategy allows drivers to learn about the ride before the details are disclosed by the app. While this is not an income-generating strategy, it is a creative form of reworking as an act of resistance (Anwar and Graham 2022) that enables drivers to subvert corporate policies concerning acceptance rates.

## 7 Collective strategies

Despite ride-hailing platform attempts to classify drivers as independent contractors with no in-app mechanism to communicate with each other (Heeks et al. 2021), there have been several examples of app drivers around the world engaged in strikes (Bessa et al. 2022; Iazzolino 2023) as well as ‘go-slow protests’ in which drivers refuse to accept rides from particular neighborhoods for a period of time (Okafour 2022). Because a large strike took place in Nairobi a month before our interviews (Njanja 2019a; Nyawira and Cynthia 2019), we asked interviewees what they thought about the strike, whether they participated, and what changes (if any) they believed resulted from the strike. Only 7 of the 30 drivers we interviewed said they did not participate in the strike. Of those, only 2 admitted to driving during the strike while another driver indicated he didn’t participate in the strike because he was happy with his pay.

For those who participated in the strike, striking was seen both as an important opportunity to voice their concerns and a necessary action to demonstrate driver solidarity. For example, Uber driver Athanus said, “*nilipenda sana kilio chetu*

*kisikike, maana kilikuwa kilio cha haki* [I really wanted our cry to be heard, because it was a cry for our justice].” Similarly, Nelson emphasized the importance of driver solidarity:

It’s us Uber Drivers that take care of [each] other. So, if it is a thing concerning us, we will have to automatically go together as one. We show that solidarity so that our grievances can be heard.

In addition to voicing concerns and demonstrating solidarity, some drivers said it was important to show respect for elders who called for the strike, while others noted that they feared being targeted if they didn’t participate. Jonathon, who drove for both Bolt and Little Cab, demonstrated this mixture of motivations in explaining why he joined the strike:

I participated because we are all the drivers. And if [...] you decide yourself you want to [drive during the strike], they will accuse you, they will do you, they can destroy your car. So, you follow the elders what they are [doing]. There is no other way, just only striking. There is no other way.

In general, strike participants discussed the importance of working together to advocate for all ride-hailing drivers while adding there could be material consequences for breaking the strike.

Although most of the drivers we interviewed participated in the strike, they were split on whether they believed this collective action was effective at enacting meaningful change. Among those who said the strike was effective, they pointed to minor policy changes, which included a 29 % fair increase for Uber rides, a reduction in commission payments for shared Ubers, and the discontinuation of specialty services that drivers opposed (e.g., Bolt Go, UberSelect) (Njanja 2019b; Paul 2019). Others, like Little Cab driver Aggrey, added that the collective action was most effective in changing the narrative around ride-hailing companies in the public and in the media: *“Tulipitisha ujumbe ilifaa ipite. Kwa upande mwingine, upande wa kampuni, waliona ni kama tuliwaharibia jina, but the truth of the matter ni, tu madriver tunaumia.* [We sent a message that had to be sent. On the company’s side, they felt as if we tarnished their reputation, but the truth of the matter is that drivers are suffering.]” Bolt driver Elly agreed that strikers succeeded by voicing their concerns and informing the public: “We raised our points and it was captured [...] in the media.” Yet, many drivers told us the strike was ineffective because drivers’ primary concerns – low fares, high commissions, poor working conditions – were not significantly changed following the strike. These skeptics argued that ride-hailing companies are too big and powerful to be swayed by a single day of striking. Yet, even those like Moses who felt the strike was ineffective still believed it was necessary: “there is nothing else [to do] just strike, because nobody can hear you without striking; that is the only language.”

## 8 Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine individual and collective acts of resistance used by ride-hailing drivers in Nairobi, Kenya. Our findings demonstrate that although ride-hailing platforms severely limit opportunities for worker autonomy and labor power, drivers devised several creative strategies to increase their income and contest the neoliberal logics of the ride-hailing industry. These strategies include extending rides, adding customers outside of the app, asking riders to cancel requests, and striking. At the same time, it is worth noting the “ambivalent marginality” (Soriano and Cabañes 2020) demonstrated by our interview participants. Certainly, drivers expressed frustration that their working conditions were determined by multinational corporations largely unresponsive to driver complaints; yet, most drivers viewed this work as better than alternatives. This ambivalence was best demonstrated by Johana who left a 12-hours-a-day, 6-days-a-week job at a store so he could drive 12 h a day, every day of the week for Uber. The key difference for Johana was that Uber offered better pay, the ability to take time off, and the opportunity to be his own boss. So, while drivers’ income and working conditions were severely constrained by app affordances and the neoliberal logic of platform work, many found ride-hailing driving to be preferable to other options available to them. While this fact does not excuse ride-hailing platforms for poor labor practices, it may help explain why the drivers we interviewed did not engage in more radical and sustained forms of resistance.

Overall, the most successful strategies employed by drivers to navigate the precarity of platform work in the ride-hailing industry were rooted in solidarity and hustling. The importance of solidarity between workers is consistent with previous research on platform workers, particularly those in the Global South (Qadri 2023; Soriano 2023; Soriano and Cabañes 2020; Zhou and Pun 2024). In the case of ride-hailing drivers in Nairobi, traditional worker solidarity was most evident in the collective action of striking. Striking is an overt form of resistance that relies on a willingness of workers to elevate the needs of the many over individual short-term gains. It is a public form of labor solidarity that affords workers the opportunity to draw customer and media attention to unsatisfactory working conditions while putting pressure on employers to respond to worker demands. For ride-hailing drivers specifically, it is a way to make themselves and their needs visible while also impeding the data-collection efforts of app companies (Iazzolino 2023). Yet, it is important to recognize that labor solidarity expressed through collective action does not signify perfect harmony among workers. A few drivers we interviewed indicated



they participated in the strike out of fear of reprisal, and some believed the strike failed to produce meaningful change. Still, most drivers, like Moses, viewed striking as “the only language” to demonstrate work solidarity rooted in long-standing relationships of mutual support.

While previous research on platform work in the Global South has emphasized solidarity between platform workers, our study also found that many of the individual strategies discussed here are predicated on demonstrations of solidarity between platform workers and clients. In other words, several acts of resistance discussed by the drivers we interviewed are only possible when customers agree to work with drivers to the disadvantage of ride-hailing companies. Whether drivers sought to negotiate fairs outside of the app, add a second rider, or cancel an undesirable request, their efforts were only successful if customers were willing to enact solidarity with drivers. Certainly, not all customers were willing to agree to such arrangements, but those who were amenable demonstrated a form of collaborative solidarity that allowed drivers to improve their income and working conditions. Qadri (2023) argues relationships of care and mutual aid are central to urban life in the Global South and, thus, these solidarities shape the articulation of platform work in such contexts. Kenya’s informal economy, in particular, is rooted in community solidarity (Kinyanjui 2020) and hustling, which “deriv[es] value from African business logics of solidarity and reciprocity in relationships of exchange” (Thieme et al. 2021: 8). Thus, collaborative solidarities between drivers and customers are consistent with Kenya’s *jua kali* work culture that values mutual aid and support. While these driver-client solidarities are informal and temporary, often lasting the length of a single ride or a cancellation request, they are nonetheless central to drivers’ efforts navigate the precarity of platform work. Of note, the only act of resistance available to drivers within the app – extending the length of a ride – involved drivers attempting to gain a personal advantage at the expense of their customers. Yet, most drivers did not engage in this practice as they did not want to exploit their customers or risk that a breach of trust with a rider would lead to a complaint or a low rating. For collaborative solidarities to work, drivers and customers must see the benefit of mutual support. Therefore, our study extends existing scholarship on resistance strategies in platform work (e.g., Qadri 2023; Soriano and Cabañas 2020; Zhou and Pun 2024) by considering not only solidarities among platform workers but also solidarities between workers and clients. By expanding our understanding of who engages in solidarity with platform workers, we can better recognize enactments of mutual aid and support within the broader communities where platform work takes place.

## 9 Conclusions

The goal of this study was to examine individual and collective acts of resistance by platform workers through a case of ride-hailing drivers in Nairobi, Kenya. Concerning trends in platform work, including increased worker precarity, economic insecurity, and individualized risk, are quite familiar to Kenyans raised with a vibrant informal economy rooted in hustling and *jua kali* culture (King 1996; Thieme 2013, 2018). Previous research has also shown that platform workers in the Global South engage in a variety of individual and collective forms of resistance to navigate the challenges of global platform work (Anwar and Graham 2022). Based on interviews with ride-hailing drivers in Nairobi, our study indicates that the most successful strategies for increasing labor agency and improving working conditions rely heavily on solidarities, not only between workers but between workers and clients. Such solidarities are reflective of local culture practices that emphasize hustling and communal support (Kinyanjui 2020; Thieme et al. 2021). While ride-hailing platforms separate drivers from each other and seek to constrain driver-rider relationships to fares and destinations, drivers are most effective at contesting neoliberal logics when they work with each other and their customers. Similarly, while apps seek to limit the range of possible actions drivers can take, hustling outside of the app provides drivers with opportunities to increase their income and autonomy. Thus, through a combination of hustling and solidarity, ride-hailing drivers in Nairobi work around and outside the app to navigate the limited autonomy and worker power of platform work. As such, our study demonstrates the importance of examining enactments of solidarity between platform workers and the broader communities where they work.

Our study and its findings provide several opportunities for future work. First, because we focused on the experiences of ride-hailing drivers, future research should examine the perspectives of riders. Understanding what riders think is vital, not only because ride-hailing apps are designed to privilege the customer's experience (Manga 2022), but because worker-client solidarities are dependent on rider collaborations. Future scholarship should examine when and why riders act in solidarity with drivers, how riders perceive these acts of resistance, and whether riders ever feel coerced to demonstrate solidarity with drivers. Second, while our interviews focused on a large strike that took place in Kenya shortly before data collection, future studies should expand the scope of collective acts of resistance to consider networked solidarities on social media as well as traditional forms of collective action like labor unions and Savings and Credit Cooperative Organizations (SACCOs) (Castel-Branco et al. 2023). Finally, although the demographics of participants reflected gender imbalances in the ride-hailing industry, future research

should focus on the experiences of female drivers, including whether and how they develop solidarities with their clients in the face of additional challenges, including sexual harassment (Castel-Branco et al. 2023; Ravenelle 2019).

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