

Homo Varians: Diverse Earner Behaviors in the Platform Economy

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September 2020

Under review at *Sociologica*

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Abstract

The “sharing” sector of the platform economy has now entered its second decade, and researchers are developing new theorizations of it as an economic form. One important feature is a heterogeneous labor force with respect to hours of work. In this paper, we identify another type of heterogeneity, which is the diversity of economic orientation of earners. Using in-depth interview data from 102 earners on three platforms (Airbnb, TaskRabbit, and StocksyUnited) we find that even within individual platforms, earners have different behavioral models. We have identified three—the maximizing *homo economicus*; sociologists’ relational *homo socialis*; and *homo instrumentalis*. We present evidence of these three types. We then discuss platform policies and how earner diversity aligns with their imperatives for growth.

1. Introduction

The “sharing” sector of the platform economy has now entered its second decade, and researchers have investigated a wide range of platform outcomes, including inequality, trust, and racial discrimination (For a review, Author 2021.) There are also many studies of workers’ experiences, particularly on lower-paid apps such as ride-hail, shopping and delivery (Ravenelle 2019; Griesbach et al. 2019; Robinson 2017; Cameron 2018; Author 2018). However, there has been a tendency to describe a common platform experience, typically that of highly committed workers. Author (2020) have argued that the literature has not sufficiently addressed how unique features of the platform model—low barriers to entry, choice of hours, and the ease of working for multiple platforms at once—produce a heterogeneous labor force. In this paper, we argue that there is another dimension to the heterogeneity of the platform workforce, which is the diversity of economic orientation of earners, or to use a term from economics, their “behavioral models.”

Using in-depth interview data from 102 earners on three platforms (Airbnb, TaskRabbit, and StocksyUnited) we find that within individual platforms, earners have different behavioral models. We have identified three. Some are maximizers, engaged in the kinds of activities ascribed to *homo economicus*, economists’ archetypal rational actor. A second group displays a more social orientation, and although these earners are also interested in money, they are not optimizers on the financial margin. They have other goals, including sociability. But they also draw ethical boundaries around their platform work, reject opportunities that don’t reflect their social preferences, or act to gain recognition. We call this type *homo socialis*. A third group, which we term *homo instrumentalis*, displays neither maximizing behaviors, nor strong social preferences. They merely aim to earn, and do so in casual, habitual, or targeted ways.

To sociologists, the presence of multiple behavioral models, especially among professionals or the self-employed, is not a novel finding (Fridman 2020). However, Beckert (1996, 2003) notes that sociologists have failed to theorize what he terms “models of economic action.” We contribute to that task by providing an account of three models through our analysis of platform users’ behaviors. We discuss platforms’ tolerance for the heterogeneity we find by discussing how earner diversity aligns with their imperatives for growth. This allows us to contribute to theorizing on questions such as whether platforms represent something different from conventional businesses

and the extent to which they are novel forms. The paper proceeds with a discussion of theories of the platform firm, a brief discussion of the three types of earners we discovered, our methods, findings, and a section on platform responses.

2. Theorizing the platform firm

The presence of diverse models of economic behavior within a single platform's labor force raises questions about the nature of the sharing platform firm. Is it more like a market, in which diversity among participants is tolerated, especially if they are willing to take lower returns? Or are these platforms more like bureaucratic firms which attempt to control the behavior of their employees? Scholars have begun to develop understandings of platform firms which will help shed light on these questions. Adapting Author (2020), we have identified four approaches to theorizing sharing platforms. The most common are 1) accounts of efficiency 2) "Uberization" and precarity narratives, and 3) algorithmic control. These literatures differ in the extent to which they privilege technology as the differentiating feature of platforms and whether they see the platform firm as representing a break from the past, or as a continuation of previous trends. They also vary in whether they see sharing platforms as able to amass power in distinctive ways, and to different extents. We then discuss a fourth type—the platform as hybrid—which we hope this paper contributes to.

A second set of issues is about the behavior of earners. Is there anything distinctive, or novel, about how people use and earn in this context, or are conventional models of economic behavior sufficient? Because this question is almost never explicitly discussed in the literature on platforms, we address it only cursorily in this section, noting how each approach addresses this question. We also make note of how each paradigm thinks about issues of labor force heterogeneity, a key variable in our own formulation. We then turn more explicitly to models of behavior in the next section.

Efficiency accounts, which come mainly from economists, focus on the ability of digital technology to reduce transactions costs and increase efficiency (Horton and Zeckhauser 2016; Sundararajan 2016). This results in a shift from the firm (a command and control entity) toward the market (a voluntaristic, atomistic structure), as well as toward smaller and more peer-to-peer entities (Einav, Farronato, and Levin 2016). This view is consistent with an earlier shift in economics to seeing firms as a "nexus-of-contracts" (Jensen and Meckling 1976) which Davis (2016) argues helped create "Nikefication", i.e., the outsourcing of functions, and the "vanishing" of the American corporation (Davis 2016a). On the question of behavioral models, the economics literature has been silent, assuming that the standard models—either the rational actor or its behavioral economics cousin—prevail here as elsewhere.

Outside of economics the dominant perspective is the precarity or "Uberization" framing. In this view, the platform is little more than a "web page...the firm is a set of calls on resources that are then assembled into a performance." (2016: p 513). Grabher and van Tuijl (2020) formulate this shift as going from employment to a "gig." Uberization is seen as the logical culmination of trends such as fissuring (Weil 2014) and precarious work (Kalleberg (2013) which describe the breakdown of stable employment and benefits, the shift of costs onto workers, and the increasing instability and insecurity of labor. As with the economic approach, the precarity literature does not

focus on the heterogeneity of the labor force other than considering variations in levels of precarity. While some accounts do note that earners fall into different categories (Ravenelle (2019), the focus is on the common worker experience of bearing costs and risks. Similarly, while ethnographic accounts describe differences among people, this approach generally avoids theorizing behavioral models and has not provided a distinctive analysis of economic “action” on platforms.

The third genre sees sharing platforms as novel entities on account of their ability to control labor via algorithms (Aneesh 2009; Rosenblat and Stark 2016; Griesbach et al. 2019). Algorithmic control is enhanced by information asymmetries that enhance the power of the platforms over workers. While this view does not deny the precarity of workers, its view of the firm/market continuum emphasizes top-down authority, the idea of the firm as an all-powerful Panopticon collecting user data (van Doorn and Badger 2020) and a break from previous methods of control. The algorithmic approach does not typically address issues of socio-economic, demographic, or behavioral heterogeneity among the workforce, at least not from the perspective of what it might mean for understanding the platform firm. In this literature, the key variable is the power that technology affords to the platform. A related view focuses less on labor control but on the ways in which technology affords platforms even more power than conventional firms, and allows them to expand their command and control to the markets they operate in (Kenney and Zysman 2016, 2019; Srnicek 2016). This literature harkens back to the early postwar era with its focus on dominant firms with monopoly power.

The fourth view sees the platform firm as novel, because it is a hybrid form, combining organizational and technological factors into a new entity. It emphasizes the networked and market relations of firms, and their departure from the conventional hierarchical corporation. Yet these accounts also hold that firms retain power over the parties with which they transact, including labor. Two contributions are especially relevant for our formulation. Watkins and Stark (2018), who studied platforms in a variety of sectors, argue that these entities have evolved into a “Mobius firm.” They have gone beyond the simple network formulation and are able to co-opt resources that are both internal and external to the firm. A related argument by Kornberger et al. (2017) is that platforms are unique because they employ novel accounting methods that move from traditional hierarchical categories to heterarchies. By introducing new evaluative methods such as ratings and reputational systems, platform firms can radically decentralize control and simultaneously centralize power. This hybrid formulation—decentralization with concentrated power—is common to this genre of platform theorization.

Author (2020) have made a similar argument about sharing economy platforms, arguing that they have enacted a “retreat from control” as they allow earners to choose hours and schedules, and organize their labor processes relatively autonomously. While autonomy varies across platforms, in comparison to conventional service labor, platform work is less scripted and directed by the employer (Leidner 1993). But while the platform allows the worker the freedom to “be their own boss,” it retains power and certain forms of control, including through the use of market discipline. Market discipline may be especially relevant in low-wage sectors, such as ride-hail and delivery, where the availability of these skills is prevalent throughout the population, which gives firms considerable latitude to recruit new earners, a key lever for affecting supply. Finally, we note that “permissiveness” varies by platform, and lower-wage platforms appear to attempt to control their workers more than those with higher-skilled earners.

Willingness to allow worker freedom of choice over schedules and total hours is a unique feature of platform management. It produces a consequential aspect of platform work, the heterogeneity in when and how much earners choose to work on the platform.¹ There has been relatively little attention to how workforce heterogeneity might manifest in other ways. (A notable exception is Manriquez (2019)). In our research we discovered that within and across platforms, earners exhibit different modes of earning. This finding adds another aspect of distinctiveness to platform firms, which we explore below.

3. Models of economic behavior

How do economic actors behave? While economists have historically produced varied answers to this question, by the 1970s, they had coalesced around a single model—the rational maximizer. However, nearly as soon as they had, “behavioral economists” came along to trouble that fiction, with a wealth of empirical findings that violated the principles of selfishness (“fairness norms”), revealed time inconsistency in preferences, loss aversion, and non-linear probability weighting of alternatives. (For a summary of this work, see Kahneman 2011). These developments revitalized ideas such as income targeting and Herbert Simon’s (1957) bounded rationality and satisficing. Among economic sociologists, whose project began as a critique of the neo-classical model, the focus has been on how structures inhibit maximizing behavior. Approaches include Bourdieu’s (1984) *habitus*, social networks (Granovetter 1973), Polanyian embeddedness (Block and Somers 2014), and “relational” economic sociology (Zelizer 2013). However, given the diverse ways economic sociologists have explained economic outcomes, they have generally not focused explicitly on models of economic behavior. Indeed, Frank Dobbin (2007) has made the point that economic sociologists have generally accepted the view that agents seek profits. And Jens Beckert (2003, 1996) has argued that economic sociologists have generally not constructed their own “models of economic action.”

As noted above, our data led us to describe three distinct behaviors, or *homo varians*, a varied economic actor. Before discussing them, however, it is important to note that all the people we studied are active on the platforms in order to earn money. If there were not, they would be more likely to be participating on gift exchange sites such as Couchsurfing (a free alternative to Airbnb) or time banks (multi-lateral barter service exchanges). Therefore, our analysis does not replicate well-worn tropes such as altruism versus self-interest, money versus love, or similar divides (Folbre 2001). What we find is that among a financially-motivated group, there are major differences in how people think, act and transact. It is also worth noting that the platforms included in this study do not include those with the lowest wages, where we would expect more conformity among earners. However, our ongoing interviews with workers in ride-hail, food delivery and shopping suggest they are not uniform in their orientations either.

The first group we call *homo economicus*. These are classic rational, self-interested actors who pursue optimal outcomes. That is not to say that they merely focus on maximizing earnings (although that is a goal for some), but they are engaged in continuous calculations. They develop individualized strategies to maximize the prices they can command, often by seeking out market information. They pursue actionable information about costs, earnings and how to improve their margins. They keep spreadsheets, pay careful attention to costs, and sometimes experiment with pricing. They strategize about ways to increase their earnings, by improving or expanding their

real estate assets, sub-contracting tasks or services, or investing in their platform activities, which they think of in largely commercial terms. Ultimately, they understand themselves, and others, through a lens of idealized rational action.

Noting the shortcomings of the *homo economicus* model, the “new economic sociology” of the early 1980’s questioned how social networks might clarify seemingly illogical behaviors not otherwise explained by the rational actor model (Granovetter 1973). At economic sociology’s core is the claim that economic activity has a social dimension that is integral to understanding why actors make fiscal decisions. Building on this insight, Zelizer argued that economic relations were not merely embedded in social context but that they were “continuously negotiated” and “meaningfully interpersonal” (Zelizer 2012: p 146). Zelizer defined this as a relational package in which actors balance four unique elements: distinctive social ties, a set of economic transactions, media, and negotiated meanings. This framing suggests a robust social actor who will weigh social incentives in their economic decisions. We term this category *homo socialis*.

Homines sociales have varied motivations and behaviors, such as meeting people and socializing, building community or avoiding status threats. They are unified by strategies that are guided, first and foremost, by relational incentives and social considerations. They value income, but instead of spending energy tinkering with the bottom line, *homines sociales* turn their attention towards maintaining personal ethics, seeking validation, and fostering social connections. While a good number of *homines sociales* are prosocial, this category also includes individuals who draw strong boundaries to avoid particular interactions, such as tasks which involve status insults or hassles they’d rather avoid. Some engage in discriminatory behaviors, even at the expense of making money. In short, *homines sociales* do not prioritize income maximization. Nor are they particularly oriented to searching for market information or calculative completeness. Predictably, these earners are happy to participate in economic transactions that can coexist with their social specifications. However, *homines sociales* abstain from economic opportunities that violate their larger “social” orientations.

The third type we have identified, the *homo instrumentalis*, is less well-described in the literature, either in economics or sociology. Like *homines economici*, this group is strongly oriented to making money, rather than to social relationships or social goals. However, their relationship with money is largely instrumental. Some earn for a specific purpose, such as for rent, debt payments, vacations or even beer. Others operate with a target income—when it is reached, they reduce economic activity.² Our *homines instrumentales* lack a coherent strategy, using simple heuristics and resisting pressures to do more, or to optimize their participation. They often settled for the “good enough” outcomes described by Simon. They are satisficing agents, who are not compelled to spend further effort searching for marginally better outcomes (Caplin, Dean and Martin 2011).

4. Methods

Our goal is to explain a variety of participant orientations in the platform economy, therefore we focused on platforms with different business models, barriers to entry, and remuneration structures. In this paper, we discuss three platforms—Airbnb, TaskRabbit, and StocksyUnited. Airbnb is a platform on which hosts rent out rooms or entire homes on a short-term basis, at prices that are significantly more lucrative than long-term rentals. Hosts need access to a property they can sublet. They set the price, manage booking requests, and clean and prepare the home for stays. Depending

on the characteristics of the home, they might spend time with their guests, e.g. as they share a kitchen or a living room. TaskRabbit is a platform for a wide range of tasks, but most are either cleaning or manual labor tasks such as moving. In the first version of the platform, workers used an auction model to bid on posted tasks. In 2014, the site replaced the auctions with a model that let customers search through an inventory of taskers and select workers based on their hourly prices and profile descriptions. The third platform, StocksyUnited, is an artist-owned and governed stock photography co-operative. It has a competitive, limited membership of just over 1000, and members make major decisions about how to govern the platform. Members’ work is included on the company’s website and sold at a flat rate determined by the management. In contrast to Airbnb and TaskRabbit providers, Stocksy artists do not set prices. However, they can boost their sales and increase their earnings by investing in shoots and tailoring their work to the market. They can also vary the number of photos that they submit.

We conducted 102 semi-structured interviews with earners on these three platforms. The interviews were scheduled for 60 minutes, but some lasted longer. The majority of our participants from Airbnb and TaskRabbit were located in Greater Boston and were interviewed in person, but a few lived in other US cities and were interviewed by videoconference. Stocksy interviews were all done online, as its members span the globe. Airbnb and TaskRabbit interviews began in 2013, and continued until 2017; Stocksy interviews were conducted in 2017 and 2018. We recruited Airbnb earners initially by messaging them on the platform, but switched to snowball sampling and social media as the platform deactivated the accounts we were using. For TaskRabbit, we hired interviewees through the platform with the interview as the “task.” We recruited Stocksy members with the help of the cooperative’s management, who provided a list of names and emails. We contacted members and asked them to schedule an interview.³ We initially offered interviewees \$30 per interview, and later raised the incentive to \$40. Demographic details of our sample can be found in the appendix. We began our data analysis by reading transcripts and identified a set of codes for each category of *homo varians*. We then went back to each interview and assigned the respondent to one of the three groups (Table 1). In unclear cases, we deliberated and made decisions collectively. We had a small number of hybrid cases which displayed features of more than one model.

Table 1: Distribution of Behavioral Models Within Platforms

	Airbnb	Stocksy	TaskRabbit	Total
Homo economicus	8 (18.6%)	8 (28.6%)	8 (25.8%)	24 (23.5%)
Homo instrumentalis	15 (34.9%)	7 (25.0%)	9 (29.0%)	31 (30.4%)
Homo socialis	19 (44.2%)	12 (42.9%)	11 (35.5%)	42 (41.2%)
Hybrid cases	1 (2.3%)	1 (3.6%)	3 (9.7%)	5 (4.9%)
Total	43	28	31	102

5. Findings

Homo economicus

Homines economici are not distinguished from others by their motives—as noted above, nearly everyone in the sample is interested in making money. Rather, they are characterized by their maximizing orientation to earning and efficiency. In the words of Ryan, a tasker, being on the platform is “very much a cost/benefit analysis that I run at every opportunity.” For many, these calculations result in effective strategies to set their prices on the platforms or investing time and resources into the work to maximize their earnings. They also fastidiously document and calculate expenses and earnings, and display great personal command of the financial details of their participation. Their orientation is often reflected in their discourse, which analogizes various aspects of the platform to an idealized market and casts their own participation within the boundaries of that analogy.

For some, maximizing orientations developed over time. Gustav is a full-time photographer who had moved from Sweden to Mexico, which allowed his Stocksy income to stretch further. Gustav readily reinvests his money in Stocksy, hiring local experts that get him access to unique spaces such as medical facilities. Gustav explains, “Follow the money is a way to do it. You could keep it a hobby but I figured out very quickly that certain photos don’t sell at all or very little... So yeah, if I want to have this as my job, if I want to have some income, I better focus on the thing that sells.” On Airbnb, thirty-one-year-old Pete, had a similar experience. Born and raised in Boston by parents who immigrated from Cape Verde, in 2011 he purchased a big house from a 90-year-old who had lived there for decades. He sublets several rooms to pay for renovation costs and the mortgage. Initially he was “afraid” of using Airbnb, but an encounter with an Uber driver who had two successful Airbnb listings convinced him to give it a try.

I started off at \$60 a night because ... I used to rent [out the room] for \$600 a month ... So even if I rent it for 10 nights I’ll still be making what I used to make. And it got booked up. ... So in June I’m like, why don’t I charge more? So I started charging more, and I was getting it. ... My most successful month was August where I made \$5,500 dollars.

The maximization orientation leads participants to identify platform-specific strategies to reach their goals. On Airbnb and TaskRabbit, price setting is an important strategy. Stanley manages his short-term rental unit full-time, and can reach 90% occupancy during busy periods. He adjusts his prices during the year, especially during winter, when demand is low, but also during the week, “because not every night is worth the same.” He uses Airbnb’s price suggestions, which adjust rates by seasonality, but overrules the suggestions at times to further optimize his earnings.

The algorithm that they use to determine [prices]... doesn’t really scale that well to each individual city because there might be an event coming to town or something. Their price tips aren’t going to be all that great for predicting that. So, you do kind of have to know. It is a little bit of a learning curve...I’ve kind of done that to adjust the price.

Rich, a white tasker in his 40s, struggled with poverty on TaskRabbit and was just able to pay his monthly bills. It is not for lack of trying. He has unique strategies for securing earnings: “what I often do in order to get something assigned to me is the guy may say, ‘I’m thinking \$100,’ and I’ll be, like, ‘Look, unless it’s a total train wreck when I get there, I’ll do it for \$75.’ So I always just, like, bring the price way down. And then at the end they end up just paying you the money anyway.” Rich is also aggressive in his pursuit of tasks: “To me it’s a numbers game. Maybe I have 40 open bids going at once. Maybe that’s not very smart. But if it’s a numbers game, why not?” Rich’s “game” analogy is telling; by pursuing multiple bids at once, technically allowed but discouraged by the platform, he is able to pick and choose the most lucrative opportunities.

Ralph is an immigrant from Haiti who moved to the US for his college education. While finishing his degree, working a full-time job and pursuing many opportunities to make money on the side he had completed about 15 jobs on TaskRabbit, sufficient for him to develop a keen understanding of the prices he could command:

Personally, everything over \$50 [an hour] is great... You get a lot of \$55s or \$62s. Those are great to me. Because over \$50, if you spend two hours, that’s \$100 right there. Even though ...you end up getting paid like \$42 [because of the platform’s fee], which is still like closer to \$100 if you spend two hours. So, me, I always, if it’s over \$50, I’m always down for it. I take a lot of, like, \$40 an hour, \$45s and stuff. Those are good, too. I don’t bother taking the \$25 because you get paid like \$19, \$18 or even \$16. It’s not worth it.

On Stocksy, the cooperative sets a flat licensing fee for all photos, so members of this group are left to pursue strategies to maximize their sales volume. Some photographers seek editorial critique to improve their work, while others study sales data to boost their sales. Milo used to work in software development but had transitioned into making his photography hobby his primary work. His strategy to maximize sales volume is “[d]ata driven... If I want to grow the Stocksy portfolio I would have a look at search terms. So I would analyze what are people searching, in which different areas in the world? What are they looking for?”

Homines economici on Airbnb and TaskRabbit pay close attention to prices, time spent, and competition. Aaron, a pharma researcher with a condo in the heart of Boston uses Airbnb to finance his wedding. He spends considerable time figuring out how to price his unit:

You do a little comparative analysis to see what the hotel rooms are in the area...and what other people’s homes look like that are at the price range you’re at, what people are willing to pay for homes that are, in my opinion, a little less extravagantly nice than my home, and be, like, ‘Oh, if people are paying for this home at that rate I can go up a little higher, too.’

Aaron’s attention to what the market will bear is typical of a number of the people in this group. Eric manages a friend’s apartment on Airbnb. He tries to maximize revenue and minimize his workload, mainly by avoiding short stays because of the work of communicating, exchanging keys, and cleaning. “I do tinker with [the calendar], and I tinker with the price, and I have a different weekend rate, and I change the price for the next two weeks if they’re still empty, so I

charge more out front. You know, I'm playing with it, trying to figure it out." For taskers, optimization sometimes means a focus on travel distance, time, and costs. Ralph, introduced above, lives about an hour north of Boston and typically gets tasks that require significant driving. He explains his process for deciding whether to take one: "I think about, okay, so how far am I driving? Because my car's really good with gas ... when I'm accepting the task, I do a quick calculation. I'm like, okay, so this, this, this...is it worth it? Is it worth it? Yes, it's worth it. Then, boom. I go do it, I get paid. That's it." Unlike quite a few other maximizers, Ralph does not write the distances down and instead will "go back to it after I get paid to see if I actually benefited," but his larger orientation is calculative.

Stocksy's cooperative model includes end-of-year profit-sharing for all members. This leads to *homines economici* trying to get other members to sell more. Some use the community forums as a space to espouse best practices in the hopes that it will encourage others' maximizing behavior. The majority of Stocky's *homines economici* are critical of members who fail to adopt their data-driven strategies. Derrick, a commercial photographer who specializes in industrial photography, argues that he has found a niche and always strives to become more adept at his specialization to increase his earnings. However, he resents peers that "only wanted beer money" and are not "serious" enough:

They're not investing, reinvesting into stock, they're not seeing it as a business. They're seeing it as an artistic passion and there's a place for that, God bless them, but that's not how you build a successful agency. You cannot build it by holding the hands of brand new shooters who don't know how to run this as a business. They don't have enough editors, they don't have enough psychiatrists, they don't have enough people who can put up with the bullshit.

Almost all earners in this group invest significant time and resources into their platform activities. Taskers buy new tools and build up their skills, Airbnb hosts renovate and decorate their properties, Stocksy members invest money into their equipment and shoots. Consider Juan, a full-time accountant and active tasker who has a keen understanding of the platform, including the diversity of available tasks, the skills and education levels required, the factors that affect the length of time a task will take (e.g., traffic, the client's expectations) and the hourly rate. He started a small translation business, securing tasks on TaskRabbit and subcontracting the work to translators he found on Odesk. Investing his own money on these subcontractors allows him to offer a large number of languages. Juan explains that "TaskRabbit is the ultimate capitalist tool, really. I mean, you will make as much money as you're willing to put the work into." And while many saw things just in terms of their own efforts, others based their participation on ideas of idealized markets. Mark, talking about the occasional lulls in TaskRabbit where he struggled to find enough tasks, explains: "[F]rom the way the markets work, a market term, I know something will come up tomorrow. I don't know how many. I don't know if I'll do one job or two jobs...There's no guarantee... I guess maybe the way any market works. There may be one or two slow days but then everything kind of catches up."

Homo Socialis

Unlike *economici*, *homines sociales* have primarily social motivations. Many championed the platforms as a way to connect. Some flock to the platforms for esteem-related reasons, using them as avenues to feel productive or helpful. Others are less interested in social dynamics but see economic gain as secondary to maintaining personal boundaries. Though the rationales are diverse, this group prioritizes social goals. The platforms are spaces of social connection but also spaces to navigate status identities and personal ethics.

The *homines sociales* on Stocksy primarily frame their involvement as an outlet for creative passions instead of a paycheck. As a brand, Stocksy emphasizes “boutique” stock photography. Drawn to this aesthetic, members prize artistic autonomy over the profitability of their photos. As a result, they often struggled to balance their creative outlook with the demands of the competitive stock photography market. Olivia had made a major career switch from the medical field to photography. To her, this change signifies prioritizing passions over profit: “I want to stay true to my voice and I’m growing as an artist. A lot of things change and I’ll probably lose audiences and I’ll probably lose some business too but the artist part of me is like, this is real and this is honest, you have to do it.”

Although these artists value income, they often view profit-maximizing strategies as antithetical to personal ethics. Kayla started in graphic design but transitioned to stock photography after receiving a high-tech camera as a gift. Kayla wants to make a living from stock but was not willing to adjust her artistic choices to do so. She enjoys photographing macabre subjects—decaying plants and animals found in the arid landscape of her hometown. However, this “dark” imagery rarely sells and the site’s editors are encouraging her to consider new subject material. She was even contacted by some other members, *homines economici* who provided strategies for increasing income. A key suggestion was forgoing artistry for profitability. To Kayla, this was an affront. She is, first and foremost, an artist. When asked to favor commercial demands over her vision, she has a visceral reaction characteristic of Stocky’s social earners: “It hurts my heart.” This group prioritizes personal ethics over earnings—whether by staying true to their “art” or refusing to charge what the market will bear on Airbnb because it feels unfair to the landlord, who charges a lower rent.

Homines sociales frame market interactions in relational terms, filtering for particular social experiences. While *economici* hosts on Airbnb are more likely to accept all interested parties, *sociales* tend to be more selective, cherry-picking candidates who match their qualifications. Emilio is a 33-year-old internet marketer. At the time of the interview he was renting out a spare bedroom in his Cambridge apartment but had earlier had a full apartment in the city and other earlier listings. He has typically earned about \$6,000 a month from his Airbnb listings. He lowers the price of his rental below market value to increase inquiries, allowing him to judiciously select the “right kind” of visitor. He estimates that he has had over 1,300 inquiries but has only accepted about 66: “I want people who are going to cause me no problems. That is more valuable to me than profit maximizing ... Every time I’ve taken on someone who I kind of knew in the back of my mind they could be a problem, it’s never been worth it.” He also discriminates against potential renters for their nationality and age because he wants to avoid “discomfort”:

One time I hosted someone from, it was somewhere in Eastern Asia. I don’t know where exactly. The food they cooked smelled awful ... There was another time, I

will never forget. There was this one German man who was in his probably his forties, like he, you know, I was in my late twenties. It's an apartment in Allston. It's a college house. It's a clean college house, but it's a college house. He was just super high maintenance. I ran into that again with another Eastern European older man. Now I'm like, you know, no older people, you need to be young.

Other *homines sociales* hosts are less discriminatory and excited by the opportunity to meet and speak with a diverse array of clientele. They view Airbnb as an opportunity to step outside of their normal social bubble. David was originally from Croatia and “loves” spending time getting to know his renters. He thinks of himself as a local ambassador, enriching the travel of his guests:

I met some such cool [people] ... So there was a young couple from Munich. They had only started dating like a month before they decided to like take a trip to America. It was so cool because, you know, they were there for four or five nights, and it's almost like we're...they're learning about each other as I'm learning about them.

Whether their choices lead them to have more or fewer guests, *sociales* use the platforms to manage their social preferences and seek out interactions that will be the most rewarding to them, even at the cost of income.

Because *homines sociales* are more concerned with social incentives, they are cautious to invest funds to maximize profits. From poorly-behaved renters to high-cost gear, they believe that risky choices are “not worth it.” Before entering the stock photography industry, Lisa had been a painter. She eventually transitioned to photography as it demanded less time than painting. For Lisa, Stocksy is a side gig that gives her the freedom to explore different passions. She uses the platform to seek validation for her work. However, when she experiences editorial rejection she takes extended breaks from the platform. To her, Stocksy is already an emotional gamble—will her talent be recognized by the platform? Will she feel vindicated? Or will she experience a crippling rejection? Investing income in addition to that emotional gamble makes rejection all the more difficult:

And it's funny. It's emotional too because some people will invest and myself included, gobs of money doing a photo shoot and it's a leap of faith because it's doubly speculative, right? It's like double jeopardy. First of all, you're hoping you get through the gauntlet of the editors. Second of all you're hoping a buyer buys it. So it's very crazy to invest money.

Lisa invested in creative projects and turned a profit but that success doesn't outweigh the moments in which staff rejected a costly photoshoot. She holds onto those latter experiences as proof that financial investment only intensifies the emotional risk of rejection.

Many *homines sociales* are invested in the sociability of the platforms. Despite the brief nature of most TaskRabbit interactions, these taskers try to form bonds with their clients. Paul is a Black man in his early 30s who mostly does furniture assembly and handyman tasks. He highlights the importance of meaningful interactions with people. He outlines this while recalling a task where he helped a Jewish family with their Seder dinner, “I learned a lot, you know, I was able to have a

great conversation with them and share some thoughts, and vice versa.” For him “it’s just really cool meeting people, talking to people, and learning from them, and trying to share things with them that I may know. It’s really a cross-pollination-type experience.” In fact, some of his interactions evolved into personal relationships. For this group, connectivity is not merely a characteristic of the work but a boon that encourages further involvement.

Homines sociales often frame their engagement on the platforms in terms of wider networks of helping, aiding those in need of their services, which is its own reward. For some, feelings of usefulness countermand the frustration from their primary jobs. Hope is a 29-year-old white tasker who enjoys feeling productive and appreciated on the platform. Though she had an MA in International Relations, she works as a substitute teacher in the public school system and expresses dismay at being ignored as “Miss Smith the sub.” Yet, on TaskRabbit, she feels as though her work has more of an impact: “It makes me feel useful...so yes it makes me feel really good...I'm actually doing well and helping people, which is another thing I really like to do.” The positive valuations from “helping” are an important incentive for some.

Similarly, some *homines sociales* reject tasks that make them feel undervalued. Certain tasks are seen as status insults, asking taskers to do menial work below their skill levels. Elise is a 24-year-old tasker with an MA in a science-related field. She works in a lab as her primary occupation but uses TaskRabbit to help with her \$40,000 in student loans. However, she often limits her engagement by refusing work that undermines her status identity, even easy tasks such as buying and delivering a latte: “Like no, get off your butt and get it yourself. Because that’s lazy.” Her sensitivity to status slights is another characteristic separating her from *homo economici*—she is “leaving money on the table” to use a common phrase, which is something that maximizers do not do. The low social status of much of the work on the platform clashes with her sense of self as a highly educated professional. Therefore she draws firm boundaries to exclude certain tasks in order to preserve her social identity.

Homo Instrumentalis

As with the other two groups, *homines instrumentales* are motivated by making money on their respective platforms. This is the primary goal they express during their interviews, similar to *homo economici*. However, they pursue earnings in a different way. Their activities are frequently centered on a target income, either a pre-set amount, or enough to cover specific expenses, such as rent, or a vacation. To reach their targets, they follow a scattershot approach to pricing and activities, relying on simple heuristics rather than calculations or information seeking. They are often resistant to expanding their earnings beyond this target or optimizing how they pursue it. For some, this resistance is rooted in a more tenuous commitment to prioritizing their work on the platform, despite their desire to make money.

Lucy, a 34-year-old Airbnb host is a self-described member of the upper class, with assets valued at more than \$14 million. She has hosted people on more than 50 occasions, and uses that income to pay for her horses and her mortgage: “I have horses. More than one. They cost a lot of money... Basically I do my Airbnb...to pay the horse board every month...Otherwise it pays the mortgage... money is allocated for those two things.” Elisabeth, a 31-year-old single Latina who works full-time on TaskRabbit, is on the other end of the wealth spectrum. She is living at home with her

parents, feeling humiliated by the loss of a previous nanny job and the need to ask her parents for money for bus and subway fare. She uses her earnings to see her boyfriend who lives in another state and her goal “is to actually make ten-thousand dollars to go to Israel for a month. And that’s a long way off. That’s a long way off for the time being.”

Earners in this group do not generally articulate an overarching strategy for how they pursue this income. Instead they describe patterns of behavior that are the result of simple heuristics that can operate without the commitment of time and resources that go into the decision-making processes of *homo economici*. Elisabeth explains that she bid for the task of the interview by referring to two focus groups she had done for iPhone apps, for which she’d earned \$20 and \$40. “So I figured, ‘Okay fine I’ll go somewhere in the middle. I’ll say, you know \$25. It’s only an hour.’” She explains that she does cleaning and organization tasks “because they’re quick and easy, honestly. Very straightforward, no hidden things... I want to know that I cleaned your house, it’s clean, and I’m gone. I don’t want things that sort of linger.” Christina is a Stocksy member who has successful enterprises as a photographer and yoga instructor outside of the platform. She enjoys balancing different projects, but for her Stocksy is primarily a good way to further monetize work she was already doing, so she snaps a few Stocksy photos during her other gigs. But beyond circulating leftover images, she is disinterested in doing specific work for Stocksy itself.

For some, the simple heuristics are the result of financial struggle. George, a Black visual artist in his late 20s, is dependent on TaskRabbit to pay expenses that aren’t covered by his precarious art-related income. He reports that he would take any task he could get on the platform. “So I was just trying to stay financially stable so that’s why my prices were kind of scattered, like \$50 here, \$25 here, \$100 here.” When we asked him about any risky interactions he might have had with deliveries of packages that may contain illegal items, an issue other taskers have identified (Ravenelle 2019), he explains: “That’s the thing about me, maybe it’s bad or maybe it’s good but I don’t care. As long as I don’t hear anything ticking in it, I’m all right, I’ll bring it there and that’s it. Like I don’t care, like just because TaskRabbit to me is like out of desperation, like I need this money.”

Homines instrumentales are not interested in expanding their work on the platforms or optimizing it to maximize their earnings or minimize their labor. Angela balances being a “semi-professional photographer” with her university lecturing. She enjoys that Stocksy allows her to monetize previously neglected work but was wary about investing in photoshoots. To her, the gamble is not worth the risk: “I try not to invest too much into shoots because also I wonder whether or not it will repay.” Theo, a tasker and a recent college graduate who is weighing whether to go to graduate school, turns down anything that requires him to drive or go into the city. Most of his tasks are from the first-come-first-served option on the app, rather than direct hires. He also dislikes competing with other taskers, despite his strategy for setting hourly rates: “I generally try to put my rates around average. I do that because I don’t consider myself a professional in these services... I don’t think it would make sense to really charge that much more than other people.” Anna is a 28-year-old South-Asian, who hosts on Airbnb on rare occasions, with typical monthly earnings of \$150. Describing how she set her prices, she describes an interaction with a prospective guest: “I think we just said, oh, \$100 bucks [a night] sounds right, and we just went for it... they said, well, if we’re staying for two nights, can we just do \$150, and we were like, yeah, sure.”

For some people in this category, attachment to the platforms is tenuous. On Stocksy, this lack of commitment translates to a lack of engagement with the cooperative aspects of the platform. Christina, introduced above, puts it best: “I don’t interact with the people too much... I know a lot of fellow photographers are also on the site. So in turn I follow them. I check their stuff out. It’s a very, very small interaction.”

6. Platform behaviors

An obvious question raised by our findings is whether platforms will continue to tolerate diverse earnings strategies. Given that platform investors and operators generally prioritize growth and then profitability, will they continue to accommodate providers who do not maximize? If they do, it lends credibility to the view that they represent a new kind of hybrid firm. To find out how platforms adapt to provider strategies and to what extent they modify these behaviors, we draw on our interview data, personal experiences with the platforms, and archived website data from our three cases. None of the platforms has eliminated lower-performing earners, however, all three have made some policy changes that either nudge providers towards more lucrative earning strategies.

TaskRabbit’s model has evolved in a way that privileges *homines economici*. Its original setup was a bidding system in which clients posted a task and interested taskers responded by quoting a rate. Clients then chose among those bids. Taskers had agency in this system and it did not privilege any of the three earner groups. Moreover, clients and taskers could discuss prices and details, even outside of the platform. Although highly-reviewed taskers benefited from the bidding system, less experienced taskers could still use their profiles and private communications to advocate and establish rapport with clients. In 2014, the company overhauled this system in order to increase the volume of transactions. The new app lists task categories and blocks off-platform communications and negotiations. Pricing also went from per task to hourly. Though taskers set their own hourly wage rates, the platform suggests ranges. Taskers are free to decline requests, but this lowers their acceptance rating and results in lower algorithmic priority. The new system also added a “quick assign” feature in which the algorithm suggests matches. For appropriately matched tasks, quick assign saves time for taskers and clients, but it caters to *economici* and *instrumentales* at the expense of *sociales*, who no longer have access to their established clientele. In addition, the system began to prioritize “Elite Taskers”, a designation which required completing a significant number of monthly tasks and being in the top five percent of earners on the platform. This created a large advantage for *economici*. Further signs of tasker professionalization and nudges toward optimizing behavior include new features of the app such as a dashboard titled “Your Performance,” which highlighted areas that “Needs Improvement,” such as measures of “Task Acceptance,” “Task Completion,” and “Response Rate.”⁴

Stocksy has also made efforts to monetize the work of its contributors, although in different ways from TaskRabbit. When it was founded, Stocksy recruited well-established photographers to join the platform. More recently, it is expanding its membership to increase and diversify the image collection. The staff prioritizes selecting members who mesh well with the existing brand and elevate its aesthetic. In order to minimize competition among members, the staff tries to find “niche” photographers who can add to the collection without cutting into existing members’

profits. While staff attempts to accommodate individual situations, there was a recent vote to institute a cut-off for inactive members. The co-op staff holds weekly editorial meetings and selects pictures to promote in the curated feeds, highlighting more marketable work. Archived data from the website suggests that management has steered the co-op towards more artistic or alternative works, to develop its market niche. In order to protect Stocksy's brand, staff regularly reject submissions that fail to meet the collection's standards. On the site, photographers have their assets and followers listed—metrics that serve as proxies for the quality or popularity of their work, similar to ratings on TaskRabbit and Airbnb. Photographers are incentivized to add large numbers of photos to the archive. However, management still tolerates low activity, presumably because low earners do not incur a cost for other co-op members. When photographers experience high rejection rates or low sales, staff reach out to provide guidance and brainstorm solutions. Because Stocksy is a co-op, there are community-wide forums to voice issues, celebrate successes, and discuss the future of the platform. *Homines economici* reach out to other earners to encourage profit-maximizing and increase shared payouts. When these discussions become heated, staff may step in and “put a pin in them” to de-escalate tensions.

Airbnb has also made changes that are relevant to earner behaviors. In 2015, the platform introduced “smart pricing,” an optional tool that automatically set rates in order to boost occupancy and earnings. The tool draws on more than 70 different variables to predict “shifts in the market,” such as e.g. adjusting for seasonal pricing.⁵ The platform also introduced an instant booking feature that lets guests book accommodations without waiting for host approval, not unlike TaskRabbit's quick assign feature. Airbnb also started promoting a new insurance policy, thereby reducing guest screening and the need for rapport-building. Reviews have become more detailed and now include six categories (location, cleanliness, etc.). The online system promises confirmation within 24 hours and measures host response rates to encourage this. Hosts who fail to reply within 24 hours have their response rates reduced, and the pending reservation request will be automatically declined. Failure to reply also affects a listing's search placement. The response policy also covers replies to messages during a stay, e.g. guest requests for information and help. While bookings can be cancelled, hosts now incur penalty fees for doing so. The company also sanctions hosts who fail to meet review standards. One of our participants—a *homo socialis* who reduces rates to lower guest expectations—received a warning from Airbnb that cited her ratings of four or less stars. Responsive and highly rated hosts can now earn the title of “Superhost”, which prioritizes their listings. Airbnb is taking an increasingly interventionist approach as a mediator of exchange: sending frequent email reminders to hosts, prompting responsiveness to bookings, offering tips for increasing earnings, and sanctioning hosts who fail to meet standards. They have even introduced fines. Hosts who wish to be favorably placed in search results now need to read the platform's fine print and be diligent in their hosting behavior, a *modus operandi* that suits *homines economici*.

However, notwithstanding the push towards professional standards on Airbnb, there is no meaningful discrimination against low activity hosts. One can still be a Superhost with infrequent bookings. While designing the smart pricing tool, the company interviewed both hosts who depend on their Airbnb income and supplemental earners to gauge pricing needs in relation to income goals. Airbnb's tolerance of differing hosting needs is notable, because it means that *homines sociales*, the largest group in our Airbnb sample, can continue to choose guests based on personal preferences so long as responsiveness and ratings remain high. On the other hand, the push towards professional hosting standards may be altering guests' expectations. Many of our participants

complained that compared to early adopters, recent guests are less interested in social connection, and the platform's actions may be exacerbating this trend. We also find that Airbnb's more stringent demands are less compatible with a *homo instrumentalis* approach. However, automatic pricing and instant booking features do support this group's hands-off approach to hosting.

Surveying platform actions over the first decade, we find that platform earners are managed from afar, sometimes with a firm hand, but more often in subtle ways that sustain autonomy. For instance, Airbnb tells hosts how to increase their margins by using its pricing and booking tools, rather than helping them use the platform's affordances for sociability. These efforts arguably nudge participants towards adopting a double-entry-bookkeeping perspective on hosting, but do not mandate it. Opportunities for maximizing are further enhanced by a growing list of auxiliary services associated with platforms. These include taskers subcontracting out work, Airbnb hosts hiring professional cleaners, or Stocksy artists employing assistants. The *sociales* and *instrumentales* in our sample might resist pushes towards maximizing behavior especially on Stocksy and Airbnb, where occasional participation is still acceptable.

Of course, there are also larger, external factors which are affecting platform changes, such as regulatory policies and competition from other companies. On-demand services have seen increased pressure from labor activists and politicians to classify workers as employees, in order to grant them essential rights that independent contractors lack, such as a minimum wage and unemployment benefits. This is not an immediate threat to any of our platforms, but is already changing conditions for platform work. However, competitive pressures and market conditions are relevant to all three of our study sites. TaskRabbit faces strong competition from other on-demand labor sites, and has moved away from deliveries, at least in part due to the emergence of major courier and food delivery apps. Though Stocksy's "boutique" aesthetic initially set the co-op apart from Getty and Alamy, those industry giants have begun to imitate the Stocksy brand. In an attempt to counter these moves and gain economies of scale, Stocksy partnered with Adobe Stock in 2017. Stocksy has increased membership in order to meet the demands of an expanding clientele. However, this has resulted in unintended competition among Stocksy photographers as more members flood into existing niches. Airbnb, by far the largest of our three platforms, grew in part because it resided for years in a gray area between work, subletting, and "sharing." This ambiguous classification helped market actors escape taxes on their income, making it more profitable and attractive, which in turn boosted the company's capacity for expansion. Moreover, the company's dominant position in the home-sharing market gave it ample time to experiment with how to operate a platform with a plurality of participant motivations. Increased regulatory pressure might change this. In 2019, Airbnb commenced automatic collection of State Sales Taxes and Local Occupancy Taxes in Massachusetts, where our participants reside, and similar initiatives have been implemented in other cities and states. The platform's success has also encouraged a number of challengers, now including Marriott International.

7. Conclusion

How can we theorize sharing platforms? We have argued for seeing them as hybrid entities that give earners more control over their actions than conventional firms, but also as controlling actors. We found that multiple approaches to earning—a *homo varians*—co-exist within a platform: *homo economicus*, *homo socialis*, and *homo instrumentalis*. We then asked whether the continued

presence of the latter two groups, who typically work and earn less, is sustainable for the companies. To answer that question, we reviewed policies and platform affordances which are relevant to these issues. We found that all three companies have instituted changes that nudge providers in the direction of a maximizing orientation, with TaskRabbit being the most aggressive in this regard. However, none of the three have made it impossible for lower-activity participants, or *homines sociales* and *instrumentales* to continue on the platforms. The platforms appear to be tolerating the diversity we have identified. This suggests that the hybrid designation, as theorized by Watkins and Stark, Kornberger et al, and Author, is robust to the presence of *homo varians*.

That said, there is some movement in the direction of promoting the *modus operandi* of *homo economicus*, via platform design, management practices, and the broader ecosystem of auxiliary services. Many of the market devices that modify behavior in our three cases—response rates, popularity metrics, elite status and curated ordering of entities for sale—are becoming standard in the gig sector, for instance on platforms for couriers and ride-hailing. A central question for further research is how *homines varians* respond to these converging trends, and in particular, what happens to those who feel that the sharing economy no longer works for their original goals. Do they assimilate, do they seek out alternative platforms, or do they give up on platform work altogether? And as these and related platforms grow into their second decade, will regulatory and market forces make it difficult for them to host the heterogeneous earners that we have found in the first decade?

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Appendix: Selected demographic characteristics of the sample

	Homo economicus	Homo instrumentalis	Homo socialis	Hybrid cases	Total
# of respondents	24	31	42	5	102
Mean age	33.5	31.8	30.6	31.8	31.7
Gender					
Female	6 (25.0%)	14 (45.2%)	24 (57.1%)	4 (80.0%)	48 (47.1%)
Male	18 (75.0%)	17 (54.8%)	17 (40.5%)	1 (20.0%)	53 (52.0%)
Other	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.4%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.0%)
Race					
Asian	2 (11.1%)	3 (12.5%)	5 (18.5%)	1 (25.0%)	11 (15.1%)
Black	2 (11.1%)	2 (8.3%)	1 (3.7%)	1 (25.0%)	6 (8.2%)
Hispanic	1 (5.6%)	3 (12.5%)	1 (3.7%)	1 (25.0%)	6 (8.2%)
White	12 (66.7%)	19 (79.2%)	22 (81.5%)	2 (50.0%)	55 (75.3%)
Other	3 (16.7%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (11.1%)	0 (0.0%)	6 (8.2%)
Educational attainment					
High school or less	1 (4.5%)	1 (3.4%)	2 (5.6%)	1 (20.0%)	5 (5.4%)
Some college	4 (18.2%)	4 (13.8%)	4 (11.1%)	1 (20.0%)	13 (14.1%)
College	14 (63.6%)	11 (37.9%)	21 (58.3%)	2 (40.0%)	48 (52.2%)
Graduate	3 (13.6%)	13 (44.8%)	9 (25.0%)	1 (20.0%)	26 (28.3%)
Household income					
\$0-25k	4 (19.0%)	9 (37.5%)	12 (41.4%)	1 (20.0%)	26 (32.9%)
\$25-50k	5 (23.8%)	9 (37.5%)	6 (20.7%)	2 (40.0%)	22 (27.8%)
\$50-75k	4 (19.0%)	3 (12.5%)	5 (17.2%)	1 (20.0%)	13 (16.5%)
\$75-125k	5	2	5	1	13

	(23.8%)	(8.3%)	(17.2%)	(20.0%)	(16.5%)
\$125-250k	3	1	1	0	5
	(14.3%)	(4.2%)	(3.4%)	(0.0%)	(6.3%)

Notes

¹ A second “permissive” aspect of platform work is that earners are permitted to work for competitor firms. An obvious question is why the companies permit these choices by workers, given that these permissions are not common in most conventional firms. We do not yet have research on this question, but it seems likely that an important reason is to provide on-demand labor supply, a key feature of platforms, elicited in part through surge pricing and other financial incentives. Another reason may be to conform better with regulations governing employment classification (Independent Contractor versus Employee Status) (Dubal 2017; Cherry 2016; Rogers 2016). However, while this concern may be governing the actions of a few smaller platforms, it seems not to be an overriding issue for some large ones, such as Uber, Lyft, and some delivery platforms. They have been violating classification legislation, such as California’s AB5, with impunity. This suggests that conforming to labor law has not been a guiding feature of their actions.

² While ideas such as target incomes were common among economists in the past, they have become less so recently. An influential paper on income targeting among NYC taxi drivers (Camerer et al. 1997) has been challenged by a recent Uber study which found that although some drivers started with an income target strategy, many transitioned to maximizing behaviors (Chen, Mislove, and Wilson (2015). Camerer et al did find that newer drivers were more likely to earn to targets.

³A few Airbnb earners were excluded from our sample because they had not operated on the platform long enough to establish an identifiable behavioral orientation.

⁴ <http://www.designbychrislam.com/taskrabbit-tasker-experience>.

⁵ <https://airbnb.design/smart-pricing-how-we-used-host-feedback-to-build-personalized-tools/>