

Transparent Informality: The Ma(s) king of Professionals in Childcare Service Platforms

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journals.sagepub.com/home/crs**Davide Arcidiacono** 

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Abstract

The advent of digital care platforms has been observed to give rise to a new regime of visibility, which facilitates the standardization of informal work while maintaining its precarious conditions. While these apparently opposing processes are often viewed as a trade-off between professionalization and informalization, this paper aims to shed light on their mutual interdependence. The article analyzes the case of Babysits, a global digital platform offering childcare services, focusing on the Italian context. Through in-depth interviews with platform workers and managers, the study shows that while the platform encourages workers to present themselves as professionals, it does not facilitate the formalization of their working conditions. In fact, the visibility of workers is decoupled from the construction of actual pathways of professionalization. Overall, the article confirms that, despite the construction of a 'client-oriented professional discourse', digital care platforms remain embedded in the informal market and contribute to its expansion beyond traditional proximity networks.

Keywords

platform work, digital labor platforms, informal economy, care work, professionalization, professionalism, domestic work, economic sociology

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Introduction

The platformization of work is blurring the boundaries between formality and informality in contemporary labor markets (Surie and Huws, 2023). In historically informal contexts, such as the care labor market, digital platforms have introduced new forms of visibility (Mateescu and Ticona, 2022; Weber et al., 2021), while simultaneously giving rise to new informal dynamics and precarious working conditions (Floros, 2024). On the one hand, it has been observed that digital platforms contribute to the ‘individualisation of risk’ for care workers (Macdonald, 2021) and to the enforcement of informality through the casualization of work. On the other hand, digital platforms may facilitate the visualization and standardization of informal work by homogenizing the representation of accumulated professional experience and by providing specific tools for measuring professional reputation (Fetterolf, 2022). These apparently opposing processes have been typically regarded as a trade-off between professionalization and informalization. While part of the literature emphasizes how the connective possibilities of digital platforms open up unprecedented market opportunities for ‘professions at the margins’ (Butler et al., 2012), others highlight how they can perpetuate extractive dynamics in new market sectors that have historically been characterized by informality (Peterlongo, 2023). This article aims to examine the mutual interdependence of these processes and to demonstrate how this constitutes a defining characteristic of the platform model. To this end, we will analyze the case of Babysits, a digital labor platform that facilitates the encounter between babysitters and parents. Our argument is that the connective possibilities and symbolic resources made available by platforms like Babysits have revived the ‘appeal to professionalism’ first noted by sociologist Valérie Fournier (1999) at the end of the 20th century in occupational domains that were not traditionally considered to be professions in a stricter sense. In her conceptualization, professionalism was not intended as an occupational value acknowledged to a limited number of professional groups (Freidson, 2001): it was, rather, a *discursive strategy* implemented by managers with the aim of disciplining workers’ conduct. According to Fournier (1999), this logic was based on two core features: the ‘cult of the customers’ and the discursive articulation of skills into ‘professional competencies’. Our thesis is that the first feature is now encoded in the socio-technical characteristics of the platforms, and particularly in their reputation system, while the second feature is enhanced by the platforms’ particular regime of visibility, which enables the visibilization and discursive articulation of generic skills into professional competencies. As we will show in this paper, however, this ‘appeal to professionalism’ is not accompanied by an organizational effort aimed at building professional skills or fostering the construction of a real professional community. Rather, it primarily seeks to reinforce client trust in order to boost economic transactions, without resulting in the actual formalization of employment relations. We will refer to this strategy as the construction of a *client-oriented professional discourse*: an organizational regime that is primarily oriented toward enhancing the reputation of the platform as a reliable digital marketplace.

The paper proceeds as follows: the subsequent two sections address the issues of informality and professionalism, respectively, situating them within the broader academic debate on the platformization of work. The objectives and methods of our research are then presented, followed by a discussion of the main results of the case study. The article concludes with some remarks about the interplay between informality and professionalism in platform work.

Informality in the Platform Economy

The process of platformization in a servitized economy works in continuity with the deep-rooted process of transformation of neo-liberal capitalism, yet it gives rise to a particular ambiguity. On

the one hand, platforms tend to create different regimes of visibility of work in historically informal markets (Gruszka and Bohm, 2020; Mateescu and Ticona, 2022; Weber et al., 2021); on the other hand, they produce new informalities and uncertainty regarding working conditions (MacDonald, 2021; Rani and Gabel, 2023). As observed by Arcidiacono and Farinella (2023), tertiarization and platformization are strongly intertwined, giving rise to a set of new strategies of systemic incorporation of the informal economy into the formal economy. These strategies are organized along three main lines.

The first main line of strategy is the expansion of service relations through the commodification of everyday life. Many scholars have already outlined how digital technologies make the human contribution to production increasingly polymorphic and pervasive, where every moment of life, as well as every social space, can be transformed into an occasion of value production/extraction (Cingolani, 2021; Gil Garcia, 2017; Terranova, 2000). Work becomes an activity that relies more on personal skills than on professional skills, which are developed not through codified training courses but through the accumulation and sale of biographical capital and vernacular competencies (Cingolani, 2021). In this scenario, digital platforms constitute a 'set of relations that constantly needs to be performed' (van Dijck, 2013: 26), so that it becomes more and more necessary for platform users to engage and empower their own emotional and relational skills, facilitating a more profound exchange between their personal and professional lives. Therefore, platforms do not only blur the boundaries between work and non-work but also create a persistent overlap between production and consumption, as well as between productive and reproductive work – *housewifisation* (Fraser, 2013).

Second, the platform model provides a fixer for the productivity paradox. In the context of globalization, productivity growth is not accompanied by an increase in wages, but by an increasing polarization on the labor market. In this scenario, Baumol (1967) talked about the 'cost disease' problem, whereby the sectors that experience the greatest growth are those in which productivity increases the slowest. However, according to Baumol, the most dynamic sectors, like manufacturing, where productivity growth is driven by technological development, can lead to wage increases that would be transmitted even to labor-intensive and low dynamic services, where productivity remains constant or grows very slowly. Not only has productivity been declining in the last 30 years in most sectors, including manufacturing (Baccaro and D'Antoni, 2024), but it has also been noted that in the context of slow demand and the erosion of the Fordist pact, layoffs from dynamic sectors will crowd the stagnant sectors of the service economy with workers, leading to a reduction in wages (Baccaro et al., 2022). The consequent dualization of the labor market relies on the crucial role of contingent and intermittent workers both in dynamic and stagnant sectors as 'an antibiotic curing Baumol's cost disease' (Baccaro et al., 2022: 78). In this context, the platforms' organizational structures empower such dualism and the role of contingent workers in the labor market. In the new digital economy, the issue of productivity gaps and wage dynamics is addressed by containing labor costs, through informalization and displacement of work far beyond the Fordist pact. The platform economy represents in this sense a further 'cost disease' fixer through a systematic devaluation, disavowal, and invisibilization of (part of) the individual productive contribution. As argued by Rabelo and Mahalingam (2019), invisibility, especially in the service economy's dirty jobs, is a specific labor regime oriented to normalize informality through social interactions and ideological and socio-legal constraints. This type of regime aims to 'naturalize' informal work (especially when we talk about the relation between female work and care), allowing it to fall outside legal standards. The regime of invisibility of informal work also plays an important role in the platform economy in terms of containing the relation between productivity and wage dynamics: while, in the urban mobility sector, the increased visibility of unlicensed drivers through the app increases productivity, this is accompanied by a reduction in service fares to the minimum, as the

Uber case demonstrates (Horan, 2019). However, labor invisibility's role could be an ambivalent one. It can be considered not only as a means of devaluing workers' productive contribution but also as a strategy that may be pursued voluntarily by workers themselves (also through reciprocal and collective informal agreement all along the supply chain) in order to cope with inadequate regulation by state authority (Chandra, 2017). Visibility continues, therefore, to be an ambiguous issue in the new digital environment: platforms increase the visibility of informal work even though this does not represent a way to regularize it, but rather a strategy of appropriation of informal market spaces and value extraction (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). Within digital space, visibility and accountability have a complex relationship: in an increasingly hybrid working domain of interaction, where offline and online practices are strictly intertwined, anything not strictly visible within the platform could stay invisible and remain unaccountable, even in terms of rewards. In this sense, platforms adapt specific tactics of invisibilization through the taskification or re-signification of work. These tactics expand the area of informality in a plurality of invisible working practices, such as in the form of *unpaid labor*, *ghost work*, or *free social labor*. The concept of unpaid labor refers to the removal of portions of working time and several related working activities from the area of paid activities (Lehdonvirta et al., 2023; Pulignano et al., 2023). Ghost work refers to micro-working tasks that remain largely invisible and dispersed in global (and digital) value chains (Gray and Suri, 2019; Morgan et al., 2023). *Free social labor* (Casilli, 2021) refers to a model of engagement not recognized as 'work' by any of the users who participate in the production process. However, in the relation between visibility and accountability, being visible means also being recognizable in the digital labor market. This becomes crucial when workers start to structure certain forms of collective action, as shown by the experience of *Turkopticon*, the counter-platform created by Amazon Mechanical Turk workers to give visibility to their condition and claim better regulation and working conditions (Irani and Silberman, 2013).

The third main line of strategy refers to algorithmic management as a control tool. The shift to a service economy, characterized by the high intensity of *living labor* (Fisher and Hoegberg, 2013), through the overlap between life and working time and spaces, also implies the loss of standardization and predictability, accompanied by an increase in control. Containing the uncertainty and discretion related to the service relationship becomes a crucial issue – one that could be addressed through the introduction of digital technologies. Informalized and deconstructed service work is rescheduled and re-arranged within the algorithmic management principles (Stark and Pais, 2020) to make tasks, duties, and activities easily identifiable and monitorable. In this vein, algorithmic control has been noted to be 'more encompassing, instantaneous, interactive, opaque, and disintermediating than the historical regimes of control that employers have used over the past two centuries' (Kellogg et al., 2020: 386).

The structural relationship between formal and informal labor in the platform economy has been widely explored with regard to the imbalances between the Global North and the Global South (Cieslik et al., 2022; Sersia and Singh, 2020; Surie, 2017), highlighting both their mutual integrations and the relevance of power dimension within the value chains. In this sense, some scholars have argued that the proliferation of digital labor platforms is pushing labor markets in the Global North toward informality, increasing the individualization of risks. In the Global South, meanwhile, the reverse process could be observed, with a shifting from informality to more visible and recognizable forms of work (Weber et al., 2021). For instance, in a comparative study between India and the United Kingdom, Bertolini et al. (2023) pointed out how platforms operate with similar strategies and structures that are intrinsically opaque and without a clear line of binary demarcation between formality and informality. Both in the Global North (UK) and in the Global South (India), part of the work continues to be barely visible, communications between workers and with the platform are often ineffective and the plurality of repertoires of actions remains difficult to standardize.

The following section introduces another distinctive feature of the way platforms reorganize informal labor markets: the construction of a professional discourse.

Professionalism in the Platform Economy

For a considerable period of time, the concept of *profession* has been used by sociologists to categorize a limited array of occupations characterized by specific attributes that confer a higher social and symbolic status (Wilensky, 1964). This conception was initially contested by neo-Weberian scholars (Larson, 1977), who emphasized the historically contingent nature of professions and, therefore, framed professionalism as a provisional outcome of the struggles occurring both between and within occupational groups striving for control over particular market segments (Maestripieri, 2016). A subsequent conceptual shift was inspired by the so-called ‘organisational turn in the study of professionalism’ (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2008), which drew attention to the increasing integration of professions within organizations and its implications for the autonomy of professional groups. While both perspectives have expanded the scope of the sociological study of professions, they have maintained a primary focus on the analysis of the social forces that engender the higher autonomy, status, and authority of certain occupational groups (Freidson, 2001). A more radical departure from this conceptual framework can be attributed to the work of sociologist Valérie Fournier (1999). Fournier’s research has diverged from an examination of the determinants of the elevated social status of specific professions or the influence of external social and organizational pressures on their autonomy. Instead, she seeks to understand the factors contributing to the increasing ‘appeal to professionalism’ in organizational contexts not traditionally categorized as *professional*.

In this context, professionalism is conceptualized as a strategic response to the characteristics of Late Capitalism, which are marked by the rise of flexible and post-bureaucratic organizational structures. By recognizing the dual meaning of professionalism ‘as concept and as reality’ (Hughes, 1971: 370), Fournier conceived professionalism not only as an aspirational occupational value but also as an ideological discourse employed at the managerial level to shape worker behaviors and identity, in conjunction with other conventional mechanisms of organizational control. Thus, professionalism is understood as a *discourse* in a Foucauldian sense, a disciplinary mechanism guiding workers to conform to expected standards of conduct and to adopt ‘appropriate work identities’ (Evetts, 2006). Fournier (1999) asserts that: ‘the appeal to professionalism in new occupational domains serves to regulate autonomous conduct in the name of oneself (for who wants to be “unprofessional”?) and in the name of the client’ (pp. 293–294). Essentially, professionalism operates as a ‘software of control’ (Fournier, 1999: 296) that regulates the degree of autonomy granted to workers in post-bureaucratic work contexts by translating corporate values into specific behavioral codes. As previously noted in the Introduction, this process is based on two main motifs: the ‘cult of the customers’ and the discursive articulation of employees’ skills into ‘professional competencies’.

The understanding of professionalism as a disciplinary logic offers valuable insights into the dynamics of organizational control within digital platforms, which epitomize flexible contemporary organizational structures (Stark and Pais, 2020). While Fournier’s research focused on the vocabulary used by managers and on the competency framework adopted for the evaluation of workers, we contend that, in the context of digital platforms, an ‘appeal to professionalism’ is encoded within their socio-technical systems. More specifically, the ‘cult of customer’ is inscribed in the reputation mechanisms that enable customers to assess workers’ performances directly, with a significant influence on their work opportunities (Healy and Pekarek, 2023). The articulation of skills into ‘professional competencies’ is enabled by the particular regime of visibility set

by digital platforms (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018), which encourages users to present themselves in a *professional way*.

To date, research on digital platforms has primarily conceptualized them as vehicles of professionalization or de-professionalization. For instance, the few studies examining the impact of digital platforms on established professional groups have revealed a significant shift from traditional credentialism to digital reputation as a primary source of legitimacy and power for professionals, leading to a concomitant decline in their status (Arcidiacono et al., 2023). Concurrently, digital platforms have been observed to create a market for new occupations, such as social influencers (Poutanen and Kovalinen, 2023), food-delivery workers (Bonifacio, 2023), and short-term renters (Bosma, 2022), creating distinctive pathways of professionalization that, as noted by Bosma (2022), are ‘tied to [their] business model’ (p. 599). In this regard, the research by Raval and Pal (2019) and by Anwar et al. (2020) on Indian beauty workers illustrates how the construction of expectations of professionalism around their work serves as a strategy to produce entrepreneurial subjects. In a different context, Bonifacio (2023) noted that the upward professionalization of food-delivery workers reflects the heterogeneous nature of the workforce characteristic of the platform model (Schor et al., 2023), resulting in the reproduction of pre-existing inequalities. What clearly emerges from these studies is that the expectations and discourses of professionalism conveyed by platforms are fundamentally decoupled from formal pathways of professionalization – in terms of training, formalization, and community building. Drawing on these insights, in the next sections, professionalism will be conceptualized as a discursive device strategically constructed by platforms in order to direct workers’ practices toward certain normative standards. Thus, we will explore how this logic sustains the platform’s business model and how it is experienced by different types of workers, based on their motivations and sociocultural backgrounds.

Research Design

In this paper, we analyze the case of Babysits, a location-based digital platform that functions as an intermediary for babysitting services. Before analyzing the characteristics of this platform, it is first necessary to provide some background information on the demand and supply of babysitting services in Italy.

Childcare in Italy represents a striking example of the fragmented and stratified nature of the Italian welfare system, as part of a broader Southern European model, where informal networks – in particular family structures – play a pivotal role in compensating for the shortcomings of the formal welfare system (Ascoli and Pavolini, 2015; Ferrera, 1996).

In particular, the care of children up to the age of 3 is primarily the responsibility of their families. In 2023, the coverage levels of potential demand for the service reached an Italian average of 16.4% with large regional variations, from 4.1% in Calabria to 28.7% in Emilia Romagna (Consiglio Nazionale dell’Economia e del Lavoro (CNEL), 2024). Despite recent progress, linked to investments financed through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, this rate remains below the European Union’s Barcelona target, which aims for a 33% coverage rate. Moreover, as care and education services often do not cover the whole day, there is a clear demand from families for private care at home. The support provided by the Italian state and regional authorities to families who hire babysitters is inadequate to fully address the needs of working families. The financial assistance, such as tax deductions or vouchers, often falls short of the actual costs of childcare; temporary measures, like the ‘Bonus Babysitter’ introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, have since been discontinued or scaled back; the availability and adequacy of support can vary significantly depending on the region or municipality; furthermore, the process of accessing these benefits can be complex and many families are unaware of the supports available to them.

The most relevant issue in the analysis of the working conditions of babysitters is the prevalence of irregular work. In the absence of official statistics pertaining exclusively to babysitters, one must refer to the broader category of domestic work. Babysitters operating under a regular employment contract are covered by domestic work collective agreements (*Contratto Collettivo Nazionale del Lavoro Domestico*). According to DOMINA (Osservatorio Nazionale DOMINA sul Lavoro Domestico, 2023), one of the National Domestic Work Employers Associations involved in collective bargaining, there are 1.85 million domestic workers in Italy overall, of which 48.2% are regularly employed and 51.8% are irregular.

A recent review of official statistical sources on domestic work (Russo et al., 2023) provides the main data on babysitters in Italy. In 2022, approximately 5% of Italian workers were employed in the domestic sector, with babysitters representing 0.3%. They are almost exclusively women (95% compared to 90% for cleaners and 88% for other domestic care workers). The average age is 39, which is significantly lower than the average age of domestic workers (48). The average number of hours worked per week is 28, compared to 18 for cleaners and over 40 for carers. The average hourly earnings for babysitters are €8.30, which is lower than the average for cleaners (€9.00) but higher than the average for other domestic care workers (€7.50). In the period between 2012 and 2022, the average monthly salary of babysitters was €667, net of any deduction, which is slightly higher than that of cleaners (€620) and lower than that of other domestic care workers, who work longer hours (€875). It is also considerably lower than the average salary of non-domestic workers (€1,345).

Babysits was founded in the Netherlands in 2008 and, in 2024, is active in 82 countries worldwide. Our research focused on the Italian context, where the platform has been operating since 2017, with a quite homogeneous territorial distribution of workers. According to the data provided by the platform, at the end of 2022, the six municipalities with the highest number of babysitters had only 26% of active accounts – Rome (11%), Milan (8%), Turin (5%), Naples (1%), Florence (1%), and Palermo (1%).

Babysits presents the typical structure of the most well-known digital labor platforms: low barriers to entry, a digital interface that intermediates the encounter between parents and babysitters and enables their mutual evaluation through a peer-to-peer reputation system. Babysitters are not hired by the platform. During registration, it is explicitly stated that the platform is not responsible for what occurs during the work service, nor does it impose any formal rules of conduct. Moreover, the platform does not directly carry out the matching between labor supply and demand. Parents can refine their search for babysitters through a filtering system that includes several parameters: the worker's location, the type of service needed (Babysitter, Nanny, Childminder), hourly availability, the worker's rating, and other indicators of professional experience (e.g. experience with children with special needs). Similarly, babysitters can search for and contact parents on the platform. As is the case with most digital labor platforms, the visibility of both users in the platform's search engine is stratified according to their reputation, based on reviews and other parameters.

The platform's business model is based on two main sources of revenue. The first is a premium subscription for parents, which is a prerequisite for communicating with babysitters via the platform chat. The subscription fee is €10.99 per month. The second source of revenue concerns the use of a booking system provided by the platform, which allows parents and babysitters to set the working conditions, specifying the date, duration, and price of the service. The booking request is sent by the parent to the babysitter, who can accept or reject it. Once the booking is confirmed, the payment is made via the platform within 8 days following the appointment. Babysitters are charged a fee of 8% for transactions completed through the platform. However, the booking system, as well as other digital tools provided by the platform to organize the interactions between users, such as reviews, is not widely used. As will be discussed in the following sections, while these tools encode

Table 1. The Sociodemographic Information of the Interviewed Babysitters.

Interviewee number	Gender	Age	Nationality	City	Main occupation
1	F	57	Italian	Grosseto	Childcare worker
2	F	27	Argentine	Rome	Childcare worker
3	F	24	Italian	Padua	Master student
4	F	33	Italian	Modena	Childcare worker
5	F	26	Spanish	Bologna	Master student
6	F	24	Italian	Rome	Bachelor student
7	F	24	Italian	Rome	Master student
8	F	42	Italian	Naples	Childcare worker
9	F	21	Italian	Pavia	Bachelor student
10	F	22	Italian	Rome	Bachelor student
11	F	22	Italian	Milan	Bachelor student
12	F	23	Italian	Rome	Master student
13	F	19	Italian	Venice	Master student
14	F	20	Moroccan	Rome	Childcare worker

a specific discourse of professionalism (Fournier, 1999), their weak enforcement tends to reproduce informal dynamics of work typical of this sector. In order to explore how both aspects coexist and interplay, we combined different qualitative methods. To reconstruct the configuration of users in the technological infrastructure (Woolgar, 1990), we relied on a detailed analysis of the platform interface based on the walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018), a well-established methodological approach in the study of apps and software that focuses on how platforms' socio-technical features organize user actions and social interactions.

In order to explore the ways in which these tools are actually employed in practice, we conducted 3 interviews with the platform's managers and 14 interviews with babysitters. Moreover, we had access to the data collected by the platform regarding user experience, including the number of reviews and completed bookings. In accordance with the management, the babysitters were contacted by the researchers via the platform chat, using a premium profile specifically created for the scope of the research. In order to be included in the sample of interviewees, the babysitters were required to have completed at least one job through the platform. In the construction of the sample, we sought to include a diverse range of workers in terms of age and professional backgrounds, based on the information available on their profiles. Those who agreed to participate in the study were compensated with a €10 Amazon voucher, which was delivered upon completion of the interview. The interviews focused on the participants' subjective experiences with the platform, from the registration phase to their interactions with parents. The duration of the interviews ranged from 50 minutes to 1 hour and 20 minutes. The following table presents a summary of the sociodemographic information of the interviewed babysitters. To protect the anonymity of the interviewees, their names have been omitted. The excerpts from worker interviews presented in the following sections are identified by the corresponding interview number (see Table 1).

Results

This section presents the main research results and is divided into three areas. In the first sub-section, we analyze how the self-presentation of babysitters is mediated and standardized by the platform. The second examines the role of customers in the control of the work process, focusing on

the logic underlying the reputational mechanisms. In the third section, the relationships between clients and babysitters in the definition of working conditions are analyzed.

‘Present Yourself as a Professional’

In the registration phase, babysitters are asked to provide a detailed description of their professional profile. According to the Babysits Marketing Manager, the visibility of the information provided by the platform plays an important role in increasing the social recognition of the babysitters’ work, reconfiguring its traditionally informal status:

The platform can help babysitting to be taken more seriously. First, the fact that you also see each other’s profiles and skills definitely helps to make it clear that *babysitting is a serious job*. Second, it also protects babysitters. So I would say that the platform makes this work serious and secure. (Babysits Marketing Manager)

In the construction of their professional profiles, babysitters are guided by the options configured in the platform architecture. First, babysitters are asked to select their skills from a set of predefined options – for example, languages spoken, experience with children with special needs, their material resources (e.g. owning a car), and any formal credentials (e.g. first aid certificate). Second, they can choose between the three professional categories mentioned above: Babysitters, Nannies, and Childminder. In this way, the platform conveys a standardization of workers’ profiles, identifying the most relevant competencies for being recognized as a *professional babysitter* and setting the boundaries between different professional sub-categories. The main scope of this standardization of competencies is to enable customers to ascertain the presence and the profile of babysitters in their desired geographical area, thereby encouraging them to subscribe to a premium account, which represents the main source of revenue for the platform. This reflects the implementation of what we call a *client-oriented professional discourse*, which means that the platform enables workers to present themselves in a professional way, while not actively pursuing strategies of professionalization. For example, the platform includes some informative content – for example, blog posts and articles – to elucidate the meaning of each professional category and the boundaries that distinguish them. However, it does not offer training initiatives for workers, nor does it verify the accuracy of their uploaded job titles and professional qualifications. Similarly, the platform does not provide resources for the development of a professional community – for example, there are no peer-to-peer communication channels – which is traditionally considered a fundamental step in the process of professionalization (Wilensky, 1964).

The absence of these organizational features is particularly crucial because care work, and babysitting in particular, has historically been characterized by a lack of institutionally recognized credentials (Abhervé and Dubois, 2008) and often involves workers with diverse needs and professional backgrounds. This platform, in particular, seems to be associated with two distinct worker profiles: young people, typically students, who see this work as a temporary occupation, and more adult people with prior experience in childcare assistance and a stronger professional identification. The differentiation of workers’ profiles suggests that the professionalization encouraged by the platform does not have a deterministic effect. Rather, it is enacted in different ways by each person based on their profile, their perceived identity, and their actual engagement with the affordances of the platform. For example, in the following interview excerpt, a worker with a higher level of professional experience demonstrates a greater capacity for distinguishing, and asserting the differences, between the roles of a Nanny and a Babysitter:

I know how to work, and not all parents are familiar with this kind of professionalism. [. . .] A few years ago, I used to call myself a babysitter, now I'm 100% a nanny. I do everything, the baby grows with me 360°. Whatever the mother asks me to do, I can. I create the routine for the baby. [. . .] Now I am 100% nanny. There is a big difference. The nanny has more experience, she can take care of the child when s/he is sick. But not all parents are aware of these differences. (Int. 8, F, 42, Naples, Childcare worker)

Conversely, it is not surprising that less experienced babysitters may find challenges in presenting themselves in a professional manner. This is particularly evident in the case of young people who have previously done this work within their pre-existing proximity networks, as in the following extract:

When I used to work as a babysitter in my little hometown, I was not asked for my competences. I was just asked to look after someone's child. Now, I pay more attention to describe myself, I write things that could attract people [. . .] Before, I wouldn't have sponsored myself as someone who knows a lot of languages, nor as a 'professional babysitter'. There was no need to do it. Instead, now I have to think about it. How would I describe myself to a stranger? (Int. 12, F, 23, Rome, Master student)

Babysitters who have limited experience may take advantage of the platform's mutual visibility features to improve their self-presentation skills – for instance, by comparing the job advertisements posted by customers and emulating their colleagues' descriptions. An illustrative example of this can be observed in the following excerpt:

In the beginning, I tried to understand what families were looking for. I realized that many parents were interested in people who could speak multiple languages. Therefore, since I speak a lot of languages, I stressed it in my profile, and I also specified that I already worked as a babysitter in the past. (Int. 3, F, 24, Padua, Master student)

The platform's visibility regime not only leads to a standardization of work-related skills but also creates a relative internal stratification within the workforce that is reflected in the price demanded by each babysitter. In justifying higher prices, many babysitters point to their previous professional background in childcare and educational activities, knowledge of foreign languages, and experience with children with special needs, highlighting the importance of these attributes in their relationship with parents:

The price depends on what I am asked to do. For instance, the family I work for in the afternoons has older children who require English language instruction. As a native English speaker, I am compensated for this skill. Although I do not charge for tutoring, it is still a valuable service that deserves remuneration. (Int. 10, F, 22, Rome, Bachelor student)

Furthermore, the platform enables babysitters to incorporate external reputation capital into their profiles via the *Reference* tool. Unlike reviews, which assess the performance of work provided through the platform, references are based on the evaluations made by parents with whom the babysitters have collaborated prior to joining Babysits:

In addition to reviews, Babysits also allows you to upload *references*, such as a letter from someone you have not worked with through the platform, but who speaks highly of you. This is another way of ensuring that the experience you are claiming is verified. (Int. 7, F, 24, Rome, Master student)

The 'Cult of Customers' Encoded in the Platform Architecture

According to Fournier (1999), a key assumption of the disciplinary logic of professionalism was the emergence of a 'customer orientation', emblematic of liberal professions, among the employees of

traditional organizations. In the context of digital labor platforms, the ‘cult of the consumer’ is incorporated into the techno-normative software of control, as part of the algorithmic management (Stark and Pais, 2020), that regulates worker visibility and their chances of participation. As with other digital labor platforms, in the case of Babysits, too, reviews play a central role and serve a dual function. On the one hand, they aim to replicate the mechanism of trust based on word of mouth that typically governs the relationship between babysitters and parents. As evidenced by the following interview excerpt, reviews serve as a valuable resource for both parents and babysitters, providing insights into the nature of job advertisements and profiles:

Reviews are very helpful to get an idea of the people you are going to encounter. A family looking for a babysitter would rather go to one with a positive review than one with none [. . .] If I read several negative reviews from different people, I may assume that the problem is probably not the babysitter, but the family. (Int. 12, F, 23, Rome, Master student)

In a broader sense, the role of trust mediator played by the reputation system serves to enhance the reputation of the platform as a marketplace for quality professional services. The presentation of workers with favorable reviews is an effective strategy for attracting and retaining parents, who constitute the primary source of revenue for the platform through their premium subscriptions. This is also clearly elucidated by the Babysits Marketing Manager:

A profile with a high number of stars is indicative of a high level of competence. Conversely, a lack of ratings may be indicative of a lack of experience or a lack of engagement with the platform. The platform facilitates the formation of trust and relationships that may not otherwise be established. (Babysits Marketing Manager)

On the other hand, customer reviews function as mechanisms of organizational control, as they contribute to forming the rating that determines the babysitters’ reputation and visibility. In Babysits, the reputation system set up by the platform is epitomized by the so-called *Supersitter* program, which, in a similar way to other platforms such as Airbnb, assigns workers a distinctive reputation badge based on the following criteria:

1. Having a rating of at least 4.5 out of 5;
2. Responding to more than 90% of messages received within 24 hours;
3. Using the platform’s internal booking service.

The rating tool designates platform clients as ‘de facto managerial agents’ (Healy and Pekarek, 2023), delegating to them the responsibility of verifying the accuracy of the skills and information uploaded by babysitters in their profile. This new managerial role assigned to clients intensifies the relational and emotional labor practiced by platform workers (Gandini, 2019), who try to please clients and persuade them to leave positive reviews, as evidenced by the following excerpt:

I once worked with a family who were on holiday in Rome for the weekend [. . .] After they left, on Sunday evening, I wrote to them: ‘I hope the trip went well, I wanted to ask if you would be willing to leave me a review. I had a very good experience with you, and I hope you had the same. So I would appreciate if you would like to leave me a message . . . I’ll send you the link’. And in this case, it worked, they left me a review. (Int. 10, F, 22, Rome, Bachelor student)

It is important to acknowledge, however, that both organizational functions pursued by reviews – enablers of trust and performance control – are disempowered by their limited use. In 2022, according to the data collected by the platform, only 215 reviews were posted (157 by babysitters and 58

by parents) in relation to 1571 bookings completed and 36,905 conversations initiated between users. The limited use of this tool is related to the ease with which users leave the platform, often establishing long-term working relationships that make their return unlikely. As will be explained in the following subsection, user exit from the platform partly depends on the platform architecture (Woolgar, 1990).

A Transparent Informality

The matching of labor supply and demand takes place via the chat available on the platform. Babysits employs text recognition systems to detect the exchange of contact information between parties. However, in contrast to other platforms, such as Airbnb, they are not designed to prohibit users from exchanging contact information via chat, but rather to delay this exchange as long as possible. Indeed, as explained by the Marketing Manager in the next excerpt, contact information can be exchanged via chat after parents and babysitters have interacted at least twice:

We know that at some point, when they meet physically, people will share their phone numbers or e-mails, to schedule an appointment [. . .] For this reason, we have decided to make your contacts visible after you have exchanged at least two messages. We believe this will increase the transparency of the platform and make it a safer environment. (Babysits Marketing Manager)

In this light, user exit from the platform represents a course of action configured in the technological system, which transforms the platform into a mere marketplace for job advertisements. As one interviewee explains,

The platform is only used as a means to contact parents. After I have talked with you on WhatsApp, I have called you, I have seen you, the platform disappears. You don't even see it anymore. I mean, you just forget about it. (Int. 11, D, 22, Milan, Bachelor student)

In addition to the technological features of the platform, the specific nature of babysitting work also contributes to facilitating these practices. While the interactions between other platform workers – for example, cab drivers or food-delivery riders – is usually fragmented and occasional, the relationship between babysitters and parents can often evolve into a long-term working relationship that can be easily detached from the platform's intermediation. As reported by the platform's Marketing Manager,

If parents get along well with the chosen babysitter, it happens that they never return to the platform and continue their working relationship externally. In contrast, they are more likely to stay on the platform if they have had a bad time or if they only use it for emergency situations. [. . .] For families, it is often a one-shot use: I come in, I find it, I don't come back. (Babysits Marketing Manager)

Once more, the efficacy of the platform tools depends on the manner in which they are put into practice by users. According to the Marketing Manager, Babysits customers can be classified into two main profiles. The first includes individuals seeking a long-term babysitter who, once they have found one, are unlikely to continue using the platform. The second category includes those who require babysitters for special occasions or emergencies, who are more likely to continue using the platform in the future. As mentioned above, the demand for occasional services is met by the presence of second earners who supplement their primary activity with this work. However, regardless of these differences, it is important to stress that both the fragmented composition of the workforce and the multiplicity of needs in the labor demand reinforce the fissured nature of

platform work, thereby discouraging the demand for more formalized working arrangements. Moreover, the specific technological characteristics of the platform also exert a profound influence on the perpetuation of informal mechanisms. This is particularly clear if we consider the dynamics of price setting. As with the profile description, the platform does not impose a fixed price; rather, it merely shows the average price demanded or offered by other users operating in the same area. The *Booking* function made available by the platform permits the settlement of working conditions through the definition of the date, duration, and price of the service, ensuring that babysitters will receive the agreed-upon remuneration within 80 days of the appointment date. In this way, the *Booking* tool formally turns Babysits into a guarantor of the working conditions agreed on by the parties, compared to the informal dynamics that traditionally characterize domestic care work. This point is well illustrated in the following two extracts:

I feel safer using the platform [. . .] because I'm usually dealing with people I've never met before, so I trust them more. [. . .] Also, to make sure that there are no problems with appointment times or prices. All in all, it's a safer and more controlled system. (Int. 13, F, 19, Venice, Master student)

With the booking system, clients can't call you in the morning and tell you: 'look, you have to be here in an hour'. Because you have a booking visible on the platform [. . .] You have your calendar of appointments, you accept them, you reject them, you don't have to stand there anxiously saying: oh my God, this guy might call me in a minute to say he needs help with the baby. (Int. 6, F, 24, Rome, Bachelor student)

It is again important to note, however, that the *Booking* tool is also relatively simple to circumvent and that both babysitters and parents have an economic interest in doing so, to avoid being charged a commission fee. This is corroborated by the data provided by the platform, which indicates that only 1571 bookings were recorded in 2022, out of a total of 36,905 conversations initiated. As observed, once the working relationship becomes recurrent, both workers and parents have reduced interest in continuing to use the platform and are more likely to exit. In this manner, as economic transactions take place outside the platform's *Booking* system, the guarantor role of the platform is effectively nullified, while it continues to function as a digital marketplace for the matching of labor supply and demand in a regime of *transparent informality*.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to understand how professionalism and informality interplay in the way digital platforms organize socio-economic interactions. Focusing on the Babysits case, we analyzed the technological configuration of users in the platform and how its socio-technical features prefigure the practices and meanings associated with this work. The visibility of professional profiles, the standardization of skills within a pre-established set of options, and the classification of babysitting work into three different sub-categories – Babysitter, Nanny, and Childminder – have been interpreted as an organizational effort aimed at building the professional image of a job that is characterized by a low degree of formalization. In accordance with Langley et al. (2019), the design of professional labels in the digital architecture can be seen as a form of 'configurational boundary work'. This refers to the construction of a discursive frame by an actor operating outside the professional field – the platform – with the intention of 'strategically influencing the way others construct social problems and potential solutions' (Langley et al., 2019: 42). However, the insertion of professional labels in the platform interface is clearly insufficient to create real pathways of professionalization in a historically informal sector such as childcare. While the platform prompts workers to present themselves as professionals and to meet a

normative standard based on a reputation system, it does not invest the same effort into verifying or reinforcing their competencies. We have defined this strategy as the construction of a *client-oriented professional discourse*, to highlight that the symbolic resources made available to workers for the creation of their professional profiles serve primarily to enhance client trust and to persuade them to sign up for a premium account, which is the platform's main source of revenue. In this light, as already noted by Bosma (2022) in relation to Airbnb, this strategy is 'tied to [the platform] business model' (p. 599) and is not linked with the construction of an actual path of professionalization. The visibility of babysitters and their professional reputation serve primarily to build the platform reputation as a marketplace of quality professional services. From this, it also follows that the platform prompts toward professionalization are enacted differently by workers according to their different motivations, goals, and professional backgrounds.

On the other hand, as already noted by the existing literature on platform care work (e.g. Ticona and Mateescu, 2018), the increased visibility of workers does not forbid the platform from continuing to take advantage of informality without governing babysitter contractualization. While some platform features are aimed at fostering the settlement of working conditions (e.g. governing payment inside the platform at the price agreed with the customer), weak lock-in mechanisms allow users to easily exit the platform in order to circumvent the fees charged by the platform on each transaction. Thus, outside the platform, informal work dynamics are likely to be reproduced. In this scenario, exit from the platform is not seen as a negative externality, but as a course of action incorporated in the technological design of the platform. This exemplifies the construction of a regime of 'transparent informality', in which the digital tools provided by the platform serve not to formalize the employment relationship, but to frame it within a 'discourse of professionalism' (Fournier, 1999) primarily based on the codification of skills. These findings align with those of Bertolini et al. (2023) concerning the lack of any actual standardization of the informal market, even in the context of digital platforms. The platform analyzed in this paper is imbricated in the informal relations that historically characterize this labor market and act as a 'cost disease fixer' (Arcidiacono and Farinella, 2023), by organizing the encounter between a heterogeneous and occasional labor supply and an equally volatile and flexible labor demand.

In conclusion, we argue that the construction of a client-oriented professional discourse, decoupled from an actual formalization of employment relations, results from the same platform logic. On the one hand, informality is incorporated in the weak enforcement of lock-in mechanisms and confirms the ambiguous institutionalization of platforms, which remains embedded in the traditional informal market and contributes to its extension. On the other hand, the professional discourse encoded in the platform's socio-technical system is not accompanied by an enrichment of competencies that could support the formalization of work, the formalization of working conditions, and the construction of a professional community. Our case confirms what has already been observed in the literature on platform care work (e.g. Mateescu and Ticona, 2022), according to which the greater transparency of workers guaranteed by the platform's visibility regime does not translate into increased worker protection. Therefore, it can be concluded that the platform uses digital traceability and transparency as a free alternative to labor regulation – for example, to ensure the safety and regular payment of babysitters. In a more general sense, the platform's connective affordances facilitate the expansion of the childcare labor market beyond the proximity networks within which it has historically been confined.


From this point of view, the context in which the platform is embedded is particularly relevant, in terms of the supply of both public and private childcare services. In this research, we interviewed Italian babysitters, without taking into account their territorial distribution. Further research could introduce this variable, in order to analyze its influence in the interplay between professionalism and informality. Similarly, the same approach could be adopted in the analysis of other care

professions characterized by high rates of informality, such as carers or cleaners, or for the comparative analysis of national welfare systems.

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