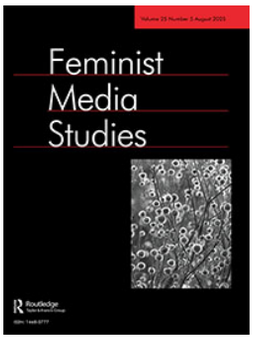

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# The interface gaze: on the (sexual) objectification of domestic workers in the gig economy

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# The interface gaze: on the (sexual) objectification of domestic workers in the gig economy

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**ABSTRACT**

In contemporary capitalist societies, domestic work is increasingly externalised and marketized, allowing profit-oriented gig-economy platforms to emerge as new actors in this field. Considering that such digital marketplaces shape the interactions and relationships between clients and workers, it is crucial to examine the experiences of household workers in relation to the norms, beliefs and ideas embedded in the functionalities and design of the platform. This is particularly relevant concerning the historically prevalent (sexual) objectification of domestic cleaners. Therefore, the present paper presents 15 problem-centred interviews with female domestic cleaners working in the gig-economy in Vienna. The results are complemented by applying the walkthrough method and discursive interface analysis on the website of Betreut.at, one of Austria's largest platforms for domestic services. Our study shows that the interviewees' experiences reflect the culturally embedded objectification of domestic workers. Recurrent themes identified include clients' practices related to lookism and the prioritization of attractiveness, unwanted dating requests, and sexual harassment, all of which are, to some degree, shaped by the platform's technological design. Additionally, the platform's website interface lacks essential safety features, exacerbating the vulnerability of household cleaners, who are at high risk of sexual abuse.

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Domestic work; platform work; objectification; walkthrough; discursive interface analysis

## Introduction

In modern capitalist societies, domestic cleaning is increasingly being outsourced to the market sphere. The increasing number of middle-class women entering the formal labour market, the rising intensity of wage labour, and the persisting gender-stereotyped division of household chores contribute to a domestic labour gap that is predominantly filled by marginalised migrant women, who provide household services under exploitative conditions (Nancy Fraser 2017). In recent years, gig economy actors are progressively becoming an integral part of the organisation and commercialization of household work. To this date, however, studies in the field of the platform economy primarily focus on male-dominated

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service sectors, such as ride-hailing or food delivery (e.g., Julie Yujie Chen and Ping Sun 2020; Sarah Mosseri 2020; Alex Rosenblat and Luke Stark 2016; Arianna Tassinari and Vincenzo Maccarrone 2020), whereas gig-based cleaning services have received comparatively little attention. Considering that domestic work is predominantly provided by women, this imbalance reflects an institutional gender bias (Margherita Di Cicco and Elief Vandevenne 2023; Julia Ticona and Alexandra Mateescu 2018).

While emerging studies in this field embark on examining working conditions of cleaners in the gig economy (e.g., Lisa Bor 2021; Stefanie Gerold, Katarzyna Gruszka, Anna Pillinger and Hendrik Theine 2022; Marisol Keller 2022; Katarzyna Gruszka and Madeleine Böhm 2020), research that systematically scrutinises the design and functions of domestic platform websites remains scarce. Yet, developing an understanding of the technology that connects labourers with clients is crucial, as the affordances of digital platforms shape the interaction between domestic workers and customers to a great extent (Julia Ticona, Alexandra Mateescu and Alex Rosenblat 2018). Since the virtual architecture of the platform websites has the potential to exacerbate existing inequalities (Arianne Renan Barzilay 2019), there is a need for research on how the affordances of such digital marketplaces curate the experiences of platform-based domestic workers. This is particularly relevant, as the workforce predominantly consists of female migrant workers engaged in the informal labour market—a marginalised and vulnerable group which lacks social protection and occupational safety and faces a heightened risk of sexual abuse.

Using the platform Betreut.at ("takencareof.at") as a case study, this research examines how experiences of domestic cleaners in the gig economy are framed by the design architecture of the platform's website, focusing on their experiences with (sexual) objectification. Betreut.at was founded in 2013 as a subsidiary company of the international corporation Care.com Europe GmbH with headquarters in Berlin. It is one of the largest digital labour platforms in the domestic field in Austria and mediates housekeeping services, childcare, au-pair, tutoring, elderly care and pet sitting. Our objectives are threefold: 1) to document working realities of domestic cleaners registered on the platform Betreut.at by analysing 15 problem-centred interviews (Andreas Witzel and Herwig Reiter 2012) with a particular focus on themes of (sexual) objectification that emerged from the data, 2) to examine the technological affordances of the website of the platform Betreut.at with regard to objectification by applying the walkthrough method (Ben Light, Jean Burgess and Stefanie Duguay 2016) and 3) to discuss how the workers' experiences are shaped by platform's affordances.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: First, we provide an overview of the domestic work sector, with a focus on the gig economy. Second, a conceptual framework elaborating on the relation between platform affordances and objectification is presented, followed by the details of the methods and data used. In a next step, the analysis of the website of the platform Betreut.at is illustrated. Subsequently, we describe the experiences of platform-based domestic cleaners with (sexual) objectification based on the following themes identified in the data: lookism and the prioritisation of attractiveness; unwanted dating requests; sexual harassment and related security concerns. Finally, we discuss how the platform architecture is reflected in the experiences of workers and conclude with a short summary.

## Platforming vulnerability: domestic labour in the gig economy

Throughout history, domestic labour has been closely linked to servitude, marked by exploitative conditions. To this day, household cleaners continue to represent a particularly vulnerable group since they face additional inequalities due to intersecting identity markers, such as gender, migratory experience, ascribed ethnicity, and socioeconomic background. Furthermore, they work in private, isolated and unprotected spaces lacking social control, represent a linguistically fragmented workforce and predominantly operate on the informal labour market, which further increases their vulnerability (Maria da Conceiçao Figueiredo, Fátima Suleman and Maria do Carmo Botelho 2018; Maria Luisa Gallotti 2009; Marisol Keller and Karin Schwiter 2021). Estimates by the International Labour Organization (2021) suggest that globally around 80% of domestic services are undeclared, implying that workers have no effective access to social and labour protection. This renders the domestic sphere a site of employment organised along various axes of inequality and power which requires a continuous negotiation of social boundaries between public and private sphere, working and personal lives, and socio-categorical divides (Pei-Chia Lan 2014), making the home an "intensely political" space (Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling 2022).

Prevailing cultural images, ideas and beliefs regarding domestic cleaners perpetuate these unequal conditions. In general, household work is systematically devalued and associated with unremunerated duties that are traditionally provided by women, leading to its dismissal as a legitimate form of employment (Jean François Mayer 2021). However, the socio-historic devaluation of domestic workers is not only reflected in precarious and predominantly informal working conditions but also in the enduring fetishisation, eroticisation and objectification of "cleaning ladies" and "maids" in mainstream films and pornography culture (Lucy Delap 2011; Peter Wade 2013). Alongside the multifaceted hierarchical labour relation (Débora Gorbán and Ania Tizziani 2014), this renders household workers particularly susceptible to sexual harassment and abuse (Mayer 2021). Violence and harassment against labourers working in private households, in fact, is a "systematic phenomenon that is deeply embedded in the patterns of society" (International Labour Organization 2021, 176), and is frequently used to exercise power within the client–worker relation. Therefore, household activities, such as cleaning, represent a terrain of women's agency and struggle (Silvia Federici 2020).

In recent years, profit-oriented gig economy platforms have increasingly entered the largely precarious field of domestic work. Such platforms serve as virtual marketplaces by providing digital interfaces to connect household workers with those searching for a particular service. Although gig economy companies may convey the impression of acting as a neutral participant formalizing the worker–client relationship, the technological architecture of their websites promotes certain actions while restraining others, and therefore actively constructs, shapes and influences the interaction between the two parties (Barzilay 2019; Tarleton Gillespie 2010; Esther Weltevrede and Erik Borra 2016). Gig economy actors can thus be understood as "organizing cores" aiming to generate profit by providing digitally mediated "social action spaces", structuring economic and social realities (Ulrich

Dolata and Jan-Felix Schrape 2023). Consequently, there is a need to explore how platforms contribute to modes of (sexual) objectification, especially in domestic work, where long-standing gendered and racialised structures remain influential.

## Conceptual framework: objectification through platform affordances

Considering that prevailing cultural ideas and societal norms are enshrined in the technological design of digital interfaces, platforms carry the potential to reproduce or even exacerbate existing inequalities and patterns of discrimination (Barzilay 2019; Abigail Hunt and Emma Samman 2020; Becca Schwartz and Gina Neff 2019). Particularly within the field of domestic work, digitally mediated marketplaces can contribute to sustaining the historical exploitation inherent in racially and feminised service work (Niels Van Doorn 2017), and deepen normative gender roles and power relations (Di Cicco and Vandevenne 2023). In this context, several empirical studies in the field of platform-mediated household services highlight that power balances between clients and domestic workers might aggravate, since the interface of digital marketplaces frequently entails one-sided rating mechanisms, provides asymmetric information to the detriment of labourers and fosters the fungibility of workers (Bor 2021; Frances Flanagan 2019; Katarzyna Gruszka, Anna Pillinger, Stefanie Gerold and Hendrik Theine 2022; Aayush Rathi and Ambika Tandon 2021; Paula Rodríguez-Modroño, Astrid Agenjo-Calderón and Purificación López-Igual 2022; Laura Wiesböck, Julia Radlherr and Mai Linh Angelique Vo 2023).

Such power hierarchies contribute significantly to the structural conditions that facilitate sexual assaults by men (Catharine A MacKinnon 1979; Vincent J Roscigno 2019), a deeply rooted form of male violence against women in patriarchal societies. In this regard, research consistently shows that domestic workers face high risks of experiencing sexual harassment (da Conceiçao Figueiredo, Suleman, and Do Carmo Botelho 2018; Maria Papadakaki, Nikoleta Ratsika, Lina Pelekidou, Brigitte Halbmayr, Christiana Kouta, Katrin Lainpelto, Miran Solinc et al. 2021). These conditions underscore the importance of examining how platform design features shape both users' representations and the forms of agency available to them through the interface. An example of this can be seen in the way female Tinder-users have to engage in "safety work" – a set of online and offline strategies applied to navigate potentially threatening and unsafe situations and encounters (Rosalie Gillett 2023).

In relation to that, the reliance of platforms on features commonly found in the design of dating apps, such as strong focus on profile pictures or binary selection options, frequently replicates existing stereotypes ascribed to females (Francesca Comunello, Lorenza Parisi and Francesca Ieracitano 2020). By algorithmically ranking and promoting profiles based on factors such as appearance and user engagement, platforms embed and reproduce existing beauty standards and social hierarchies—often along gendered, racialised, and classed lines. Such design mirrors the male gaze (Laura Mulvey 1975), where women are framed primarily as objects to be looked at, judged, or selected based on appearance. Objectification, as Martha C Nussbaum (1995) argues, takes place when a person is denied the ability to make decisions or act autonomously, thus stripping individuals of their agency and reducing them to mere objects to be used, consumed or owned, without regard for their integrity. Rae Langton (2009) expanded Nussbaum's

framework by adding the dimensions of reduction to the body, reduction to appearance, and silencing.

Since interfaces rarely include tools that allow users to resist, subvert, or reflect on how they are being viewed, such limited agency over self-representation can contribute to objectifying dynamics. This further embeds gendered power relations, where female workers are rendered vulnerable, not only by platform capitalism and the neo-commodification of their labour (Petar Marčeta 2021) but also by platform's design choices that can encourage the commodification of their bodies.

Taken together, platform affordances can both perpetuate and operationalise workers' objectification. Against this background, the aim of this paper is to examine the relationship between the affordances of gig-economy platforms for feminised domestic labour and the experiences of workers with regard to (sexually) objectifying dynamics.

## Data and methods

This study employs a concurrent qualitative multimethod design (Judith Schoonenboom and R Burke Johnson 2017) comprising problem-centered interviews (Witzel and Reiter 2012) and the walkthrough method (Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2016).

In the first step, 15 problem-centred interviews (Andreas Witzel 2000) were conducted with female platform-based cleaners working in private households in Vienna with a focus on labourers in the informal sector. The interview technique has been selected to generate insights about "problems" and challenges from the perspective of interview partners. The data was collected between July and December 2022. Interviewees were selected by purposive sampling (Michael Quinn Patton 2014; Rebecca S Robinson 2014) based on heterogeneity in terms of age, citizenship and the platform provider used. To reach respondents, the project team registered on the two household service platforms Betreut.at ("takencareof.at") and Haushaltshilfe24 ("householdhelp24"), and directly messaged cleaners with the request for an anonymous interview. While this paper focuses on the reflection of beliefs, norms and ideas embedded on the website Betreut.at, it also partly draws on interviews with domestic cleaners registered (additionally) on Haushaltshilfe24 to expand the pool of participants. Considering that the platforms operate in a similar manner with regard to both their subscription-based business model and profile design logic, we consider them to be comparable. All interviews followed a semi-structured logic. We prepared an interview guideline, which was structured along thematic modules and compiled questions on their professional biography, overall working conditions, financial situation, experiences with clients and the platform, as well as social networks and support systems. Although the interviews were thematically organised, the mode of inquiry was open, implying that the setting of relevance and structuring of the conversation was left to the interviewee.

After the transcription of interview recordings, the data was analysed following qualitative content analysis (Margrit Schreier 2012), applying a deductive-inductive approach. Using the MAXQDA software, thematic codes were developed to compare relevant themes according to our conceptual framework across interviews and relate them to each other. In order to validate the results and ensure the creation of a shared understanding of the findings, the codes were built and discussed collectively among all research team members.

**Table 1.** Sample.

| Name | Age | Place of Birth | Citizenship | Highest Education | Hourly Wage* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Marta | 60 | Austria | Austria | University | 12 € |
| Valeria | 56 | Hungary | Hungary | Secondary School | 15 € |
| Karla | 23 | Poland | Poland | University* | Any |
| Anna | 33 | Hungary | Hungary | Compulsory School | 10 € |
| Kamila | 42 | Bosnia | Croatia | High School | 30 € |
| Liana | 28 | Albania | Austria | Secondary School | 12 € |
| Katarina | 32 | Austria | Austria | High School | 17 € |
| Anastasia | 27 | Georgia | Georgia | University | 17 € |
| Gorana | 32 | Bosnia | Bosnia | Secondary School | 15 € |
| Dilara | 44 | Austria | Austria | Secondary School | 20 € |
| Darja | 27 | Ukraine | Ukraine | University* | 15 € |
| Fatima | 52 | Russia | Russia | Secondary School | 15 € |
| Nika | 27 | Georgia | Georgia | University | 15 € |
| Jelena | 28 | Serbia | Austria | Secondary School | 15 € |
| Caecilia | 38 | Armenia | Greece | Secondary School | 10 € |

Regarding our sample (see Table 1), participants are aged between 27 and 60 years. Most interviewees were born in Eastern Europe or the Balkans, while a fifth of the respondents was born in Austria and a third holds Austrian citizenship. The hourly wage indicated on the platforms ranges from "any" to between 10 and 30 euros. With regard to the employment form, five of the interviewees work exclusively on the informal market, while six persons combine informal and formal arrangements. The remaining four participants carry out registered work, either in the form of regular employment or self-employment.

It is important to note that our positionality as white Austrian female researchers comes with particular social and institutional privileges, especially in contrast to the multiply marginalised workers under study. While the Central European region is predominantly white, racialised hierarchies still persist—often directed toward migrants from Eastern Europe, who may be constructed as "other" while also sharing whiteness. In this context, racialization is less about visible markers associated with racialized identities and more about geopolitical positioning, class, and perceived cultural proximity or distance. We recognise how these positional differences may shape rapport and interpretation throughout the research process. We thus adopt a reflexive stance that continuously interrogates our own role in the production of knowledge. At the same time, shared gender—while not eliminating power differentials—can foster a degree of mutual understanding and reduce the social distance that might otherwise inhibit disclosure. In this context, we draw on research in feminist methodology, which has long emphasised that participants are more likely to open up about intimate, stigmatised, or traumatic experiences when they feel a baseline of safety, empathy, and nonjudgmental listening—conditions that can be more readily facilitated in women-to-women interview settings (Ann Oakley 2016; Shulamit Reinharz and Lynn Davidman 1992).

In order to understand how the experiences of the interviewees are situated within the functionalities of the platform, we analysed the website Betreut.at by applying the walkthrough method (Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2016). The method allows to directly engage with the digital interface "to examine its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences" (Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2016, 882). The aim is not only to render design

choices salient and therefore available for critical analysis but also to discern their larger societal and cultural implications (Moritz Meister and Thomas Slunecko 2021). Originally designed for the examination of software applications, the usage of the method has been extended to websites (e.g., Gruszka et al. 2022).

In the first step, the research team explored the "environment of expected use" (Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2016, 889–891), which includes background research on the vision, the operating business model and the governance of the digital platform. Betreut.at follows a subscription-based business model[1] and generates profit exclusively from membership fees that both parties—service seekers and household labourers—have to pay in order to use its functions. This stands in contrast to commission-based labour platforms, which create revenues through shares of each service transaction (Willem Pieter De Groen, Zachary Kilhoffer, Leonie Westhoff, Doina Postica and Farzaneh Shamsfakhr 2021). Accordingly, the platform operators are less strategically or financially incentivized to moderate or document the booking, the wage-setting, or the payment process. This implies that the extent to which gigs have occurred remains non-transparent, which carries significant security risks for domestic cleaners, who work in private spaces without social control. In fact, the platform under study solely operates as a digital marketplace establishing contact between domestic service seekers and providers, without taking any employer responsibility. The terms and conditions of the employment relationship are entirely left to the client and the worker. Platforms such as Betreut.at are thus digital spaces where household activities are mediated and which "impact the hiring process through sorting, ranking, and rendering visible large pools of workers" (Ticona, Mateescu, and Rosenblat 2018).

In the second step, we conducted the "technical walkthrough" (Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2016, 891–895). For this purpose, we registered as both client and cleaner on the platform and documented every step of the registration process in the form of screenshots, detailing all actions users can take. During the procedure, ethnographic observations were written down in the form of field notes (Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, T. L. Taylor Celia Pearce and E. Marcus George 2013). The first round of data collection was carried out in August and October 2022. Considering that the design of websites is not a stabilised artefact (Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2016, 896), an additional walkthrough was conducted in November 2023, which revealed that the set-up had remained unaltered.

The collected data were interpreted using Mel Stanfill's discursive interface analysis (2014). This approach lies on the premise that digital interfaces are not neutral but shaped by social contexts. It suggests that by fostering and constraining certain actions and practices, the design arrangements of a website entail normative claims and assumptions about what users want and need. With this method, beliefs and norms built into a website are analysed by examining its "affordances", which generally refers to the "range of functions and constraints that an object provides for, and places upon, structurally situated subjects" (Jenny Davis and James Chouinard 2016, 241). The concept of affordances originates in the field of ecological psychology and has been primarily related to environmental properties that offer people cues of action (James Gibson 1979). More recently, it has been extended to technological and platform affordances, highlighting that the socio-technological environment orchestrates the relations between platform

users (e.g., Tobias Frey 2023; Schwartz and Neff 2019). In this regard, the discursive interface analysis and its focus on technological affordances provides a useful tool to deepen the analysis of the data gathered by walkthrough method. Considering our conceptual framework and the scope of this paper, selected steps of the walkthrough that are pertinent to our particular research interest are presented in detail.

## Dating-app-like choice architecture and gamified disposability

When entering the homepage of Betreut.at. clients are asked to indicate their name, postal code and e-mail address, specify the service they are seeking, and their expectations of the worker (e.g., bringing their own cleaning supplies, offering contactless cleaning services, providing proof of criminal records). After the registration process, the website situates the user in a dating-resembling context by drawing on design elements common to dating apps, such as Tinder, through functional, cognitive and sensory affordances (see Figure 1).

The visual appearance of domestic workers is prioritised in the form of profile pictures and paired with information about their name—indicated as first name and first letter of the surname, age, location—indicated as residential district in Vienna –, years of experience as well as the mean evaluation of client ratings, if available. While the presented picture of the platform worker takes up approximately three-quarters of the display, relevant information on the conditions of their service, such as the hourly wage or the times at which they are available for work, are not provided. Furthermore, the indication

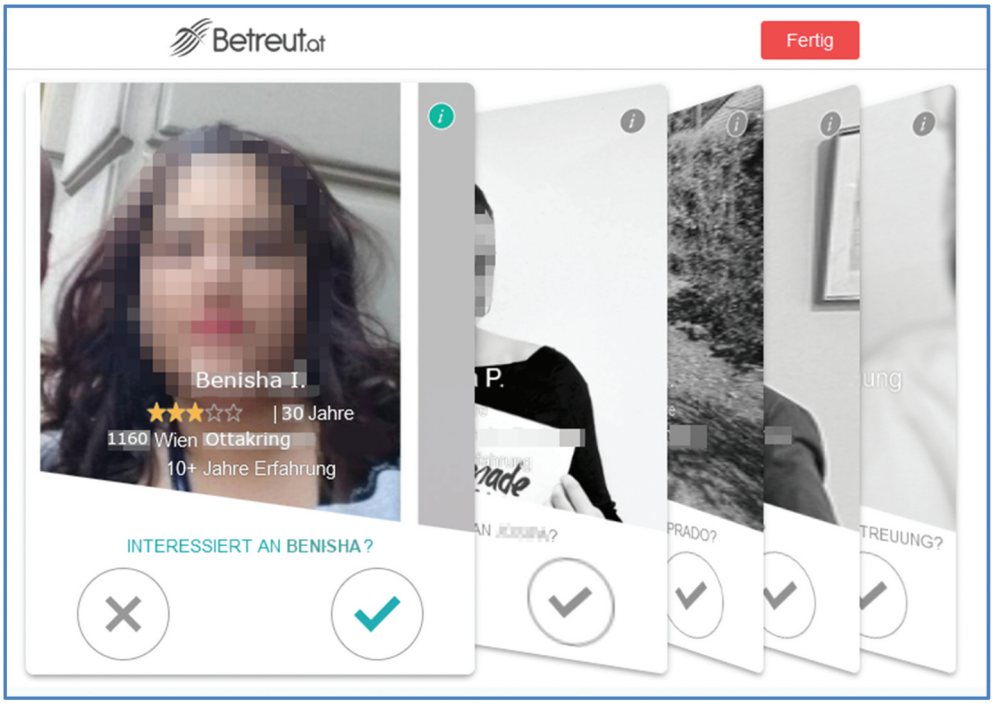


**Figure 1.** Selection process from client's perspective. Source: Screenshot Betreut.at; October 20, 2022.

of the district they reside in—rather than in which districts they are willing to work—corresponds to geospatial information frequently indicated in the context of dating apps. Beneath the picture and the textual information, clients are asked whether they are interested in the respective person ("*Interested in 'first name?'*"). Thus, the primary focus of the interface at this stage is the individual person, suggesting that they themselves are (being made) available, rather than their service and domestic skills. In fact, through this particular interface, it does not become evident that the presented workers are offering household services, except for the information referring to years of experience.

Not only the sensorial and cognitive but also the functional design choices contribute to the resemblance to the set-up of dating apps. Users are provided a binary selection, where they are invited to click the right button—marked with a turquoise checkmark—to indicate interest in the profile or the left button—marked with a grey X—to signal disinterest. After clicking on one of the buttons, the respective profile vanishes and the subsequent profile of the presented deck of pictures appears. As soon as the deck of five "cards" ends, another deck of five different profiles pops up, allowing users to run through 10 different decks. Similar to the design of the dating-app Tinder, the platform Betreut.at creates the impression of being able to choose among an infinite number of profiles.

Once users pre-selected profiles of platform cleaners, they are guided to the interface on the left-hand side in Figure 2.[2]

Similar to the previous interface, it becomes evident that the visual presentation of household labourers takes up the largest space and is thus prioritised. Furthermore, a white heart in the left upper corner of the platform worker's profile picture is depicted, which, by clicking on it, successively turns red and saves the respective service provider among their favourites. Next to the profile picture, additional criteria guiding the selection

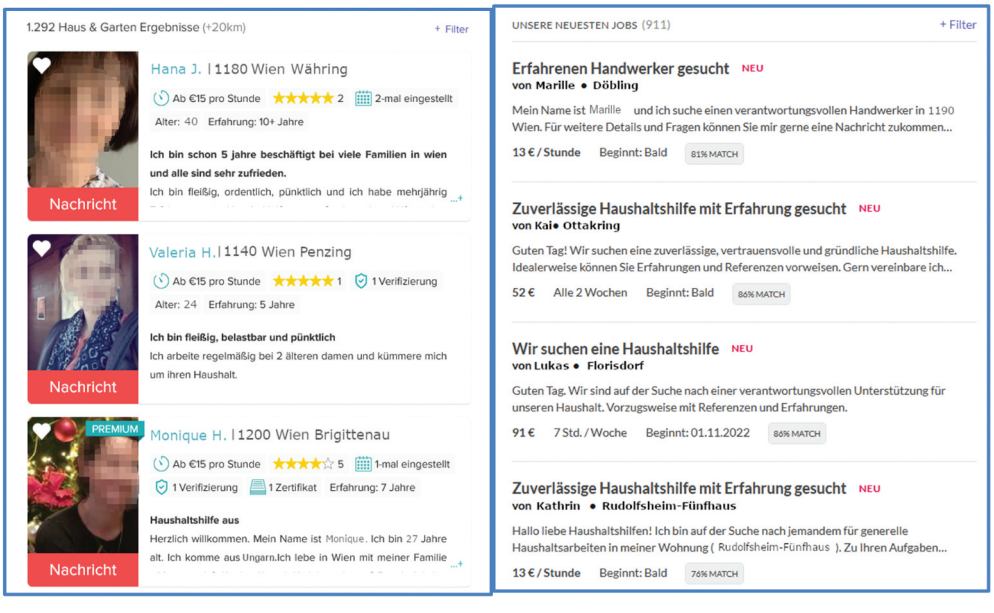


**Figure 2.** Client's perspective compared with platform worker's perspective. Source: Screenshot Betreut.at; October 20, 2022.

of workers are listed, including the name and geospatial information of the worker as well as their age and years of experience. In addition, information about the hourly wage is provided as a relevant category for the first time at this stage. Furthermore, trust-signalling parameters, such as ratings received by previous clients, verifications or the number of times labourers have been hired before, are presented to clients. Finally, a preview of the worker's personal description is portrayed.

By comparing the client's interface (left part of Figure 2) with the platform worker's interface (right part of Figure 2), considerable differences can be observed. While clients are provided a user-friendly overview of domestic workers including icons, pictures and colour accentuations, platform workers are presented a text-laden list of gig advertisements. In fact, the interface for household labourers does not entail any information about potential customers except for their name, location; all other details, such as the expected wage, the preferred date for the respective gig and a preview of the job description, pertain to the gig itself. Trust-enhancing criteria such as profile pictures, ratings and verifications are not available on the surface provided to platform workers.

What is particularly striking is that once workers have sent a message to users registered as a client, they can be rated by them, even if no service transaction occurred. Workers themselves, on the other hand, are not offered the functional affordances to assess experiences made with clients. They can solely respond to ratings from customers on their own profile.[3]

## Navigating objectification in platform-mediated domestic work

The interviews highlight the ways in which objectification is embedded in the everyday working realities of platform-based domestic cleaners under study. The following passages reflect that the workers are aware of ***lookist practices*** (Chris Warhurst, Diane van den Broek, Richard Hall and Dennis Nickson 2009) and the requirement to present themselves digitally in an appealing manner to increase their chances of receiving (gig) requests:

> I received many messages and people wrote me „you are very likeable"or „you are very beautiful". And so, I thought that it [receiving many job requests] was because of my picture. And now I deleted the picture and I receive no messages at all [. . .] Yes, and often men wrote me that they want to pay more than 15 euros and then I knew they didn't text me because of work purposes, but because they want something else. (Nika)

> Sometimes men write to me that I'm pretty, or that I'm too pretty to clean [. . .] Sometimes some of them say „We'll take her because she's well-groomed", you know, that's how they assess it, right? (Karla)

> Unfortunately, there are also people who are looking for pictures and not for a cleaning lady. (Anna)

In addition, female domestic cleaners in our sample report regularly receiving ***unwanted dating requests*** by male clients intending to find intimate or erotic encounters rather than a domestic worker providing specific household services:

> Someone wrote to me „I live by myself – can you come over? Maybe we can have a drink or so?". Then I answered that the purpose of this platform is not to find someone for drinks and that I am here to find work [. . .] this became completely normal in this world, yes. Sad, but that's the way it is. (Kamila)

> There were many messages like „I already found a cleaning lady, but I am looking for a girlfriend or a wife, to spend time with in the evening." (Darja)

In general, this widespread objectification contributes to sustaining and reinforcing sexual violence against women (Sophie Beaumont, Anj Millo Barton, Jan Jordan and Sarah Monod de Froideville 2021). This is also reflected in the experiences of female home cleaners in our sample, who are regularly exposed to requests for sexual favours, objectifying gazes, inappropriate comments, and non-consensual touches by clients:

> The man said: „Why don't you want to earn more money like that?"With cleaning you earn ten euros per hour. And he said: „Okay, I'll pay you fifteen but give me, like, this massage or something."[. . .] And he said: „Take this oil and do something. But not just massage, a little bit of massage, a little bit of play." (Darja)

> This man wanted to watch me the whole time. Whenever I was in the bedroom, he was also there, lying on the bed or in the living room just sitting there and starring. (Nika)

In the gig economy, experiences of sexual harassment are extended to the digital space in the form of direct messages on the platform as well as on private messenger channels, such as WhatsApp. Domestic cleaners under study report about clients sending requests to clean in tights, in underwear or naked. Moreover, they are confronted with masturbation content as well as demands for sending nudes or worn underwear:

> He started texting me about masturbation and things like that, so I blocked him immediately and wanted to do something with it, but generally I do not know what to do with someone like that. (Karla)

> There are people, who really take advantage of the fact that you need money, that you are dependent on these 10, 20 euros. And then they write something like if I maybe could clean naked. (Anna)

Overall, domestic workers in our sample indicate frequent experiences of being perceived as a sexual object or even a sex worker:

> There are also many, who are looking for something else than cleaning services. So, most of the time when you see, „Okay, can you come to me?"or „I am looking for a woman". My best friend [. . .] received a message, „I can pay you 200€ for a few hours."Well, it is for sex or something. And she replied, „I am not a prostitute, I am a cleaner." (Darja)

> He asked me if I could clean naked. I said, „no chance", but I was already on my way. I went to the meeting place because I thought, „okay, he cannot be serious about it". And then he came, we walked towards the house. And then he gave me 10 euros and said, „Thanks for coming, I'll pay you 10 euros for the time, but you are not my type after all." (Anna)

> One asked me if I'm, like, really cleaning or why [am I] there. And then I asked: „Yeah, I'm there because of that, I'm looking for [a] job. And what are you looking for?"He wrote: „Yes, I am looking for something else." (Nika)

In this context, the ***lack of security measures*** in the design of the website of Betreut.at is especially noteworthy. The domestic workers under study emphasise the insufficient supply of information by the platform interface:

> I wish that both platforms would also have reviews about employers [. . .] I think it is a little bit unfair if there are only reviews about cleaners, but not about employers. (Anastasia)

> Sometimes people do not have a picture for example [. . .] they want things, such as CV or your number, but you yourself don't know what is going on. (Caecilia)

Considering that domestic cleaners work in intimate, isolated and unprotected spaces without any social control, limited information about potential clients are particularly critical. Platform cleaners in our sample disclose that these circumstances are related to arising fears and anxieties before entering unfamiliar households of new clients:

> Whenever I have a new client – a male client, not a female client – then I am always afraid. [. . .] I don't know what will happen [. . .] and overall, it is unclear how it will be in the flat. (Karla)

> I am always afraid and expect something bad. Well, it is not bad, but I think dangerous. Sometimes I have a gut feeling [. . .] and then I know that this is not right. (Nika)

The interviewees point out that the platform architecture of Betreut.at does not provide any options to report incidences of harassment and abuse. While the functional design enables domestic workers to block clients individually, no features are integrated that allow for reporting offensive incidences or warning other workers about potentially harmful clients on the platform. For this reason, household labourers carry the responsibility to ensure their safety at the working place individually. Interviewees develop different strategies to protect themselves from violent or abusive clients. This includes attempts to receive detailed information about potential clients, sending the address of clients to friends or family members in case of emergencies or pretending to be married:

> The first time [entering a new household], I'm always afraid [. . .]. It happened before that I wrote down for my husband (laughs) - ridiculous, but I wrote down the address, everything, so he knows where I'm going. (Valeria)

> So [before going to new clients] I always feel like I'm working for the CIA (laughs) and cross-examine them. [. . .] As soon as something is strange, then, well sometimes I just feel too scared. (Anna)

> I always say that I have a boyfriend, or I have to lie that I have a husband. [. . .] It is a little bit like an insurance, and I think that maybe, yes, you could stop it [sexual harassment] this way. (Anastasia)

Altogether, the lack of protective measures provided by the platform is particularly noteworthy because Betreut.at follows a subscription-based model, where, in contrast to commission-based platforms, occurred gigs are not systematically recorded. This lack of documentation poses increased security risks in case of misconduct, especially for labourers who work informally in private spaces without social control.

## Discussion

When examining the household service mediating platform Betreut.at., the design choices evoke visual similarities to dating apps through the interface and emphasis on domestic workers' appearance, framing the service in ways that can resonate with notions of romantic or erotic engagement. Various features, such as the perceived ability to choose among an infinite number of profiles, the presentation of profiles as a deck of playing cards, the visual emphasis on the portrait, as well the binary selection option are common in the design of dating apps and are

equally employed in the architecture of the Betreut.at. By offering the possibility to mark platform workers with a heart-shaped symbol, the design choices further contribute to a dating-app-resembling logic, considering that the affordances of platforms like Tinder equally provide a heart as a symbol for users to indicate their romantic interest in another person (Gaby David and Carolina Cambre 2016). Another similarity lies in the economic logic of user retention. As Steffen Krüger and Ane Charlotte Spilde (2019) point out, the implicit goal of the prominent dating app Tinder is not for participants to find a romantic partner and leave the app, but rather to increase interaction and the number of users in the app's database. Platforms that operate on a membership-based business model, such as Betreut.at, also inherently incentivise user retention and are invested in keeping as many users registered as possible.

The design of the platform for domestic services, however, differs from the dating app Tinder in at least two substantial ways—both to the detriment of the workers. First, on Tinder, all users are provided the same interface. On Betreut.at, however, workers and clients are presented different views: While the interface of labourers resembles text-based advertisements on employment search sites, emphasising information on the job (see Figure 2), clients are presented a gamified (P. J Patella-Rey 2015), colour accentuated interface, resembling the dating app. Designed to prioritise visual cues, the gamified client interface streamlines the selection process while deepening the objectification of workers. The text-heavy, information-dense interface presented to workers, on the other hand, requires a higher degree of linguistic competence, digital literacy, and interpretive effort. Workers who are not native German speakers are thus placed at a disadvantage, which can perpetuate systemic inequality.

Second, Tinder users are offered the option to see how their profile is portrayed to other users on the platform. This does not apply to Betreut.at, where domestic workers remain unaware of how their own profiles are presented to clients. As workers on the platform have not agreed to being displayed in a dating app-resembling choice architecture, the interface constitutes a form of representation imposed on them without their informed consent. Not having access to their own profile presentations means lacking agency over how domestic workers are perceived by potential clients. By adopting an interface reminiscent of dating apps, the platform frames domestic service work through mechanisms of selection typically associated with romantic or erotic contexts, which can contribute to perceptions of cleaners being available for engagements extending beyond their professional roles. The chosen setup of the interface is particularly notable since domestic cleaners are already at great risk of facing harassment considering their marginalised status, dependence on income from informal work and the isolated nature of the working place. This undermines autonomy, reinforces power imbalances and workers' objectification, and can contribute to experiences of unwanted dating requests and sexual harassment, which the interviewees in our study experience to a great extent. Moreover, they encounter systemic barriers to report and counter abusive behaviour in various ways: in the digital context, due to the lack of platform affordances, and in offline-contexts, due to limited language proficiency, lack of knowledge of their rights, fear of legal institutions, or their informal employment status.

Related to that, information asymmetries and lacking security precautions in the functionalities of the platform neglect the protection of domestic workers, forcing them to adopt individualised safety measures. The fact that the interface solely provides trust-

signalling references to clients and exclusively requires domestic workers to prove their trustworthiness suggests that the platform prioritises clients' security. Such asymmetries in the provision of information and inequitable rating designs are commonly observed on platforms mediating household services (Bor 2021; Gerold et al. 2022; Gruszka et al. 2022) and do not only grant clients a high degree of immunity but also put pressure on gig economy labourers to fulfil and comply with expectations that go beyond the short-term domestic service (Wiesböck, Radlherr, and Linh Angelique Vo 2023).

Since the appearance of domestic workers is prioritised throughout the selection procedure, the design features promote the idea that the visual characteristics of household labourers represent a significant criterion for being contacted and/or hired. This, in turn, is linked to lookism, unwanted dating requests and sexual harassment experienced by platform cleaners in our sample and implies that marginalised female domestic cleaners are confronted with an additional form of discrimination based on their physical appearance. Through its design, the digital platform contributes to attractiveness becoming a central factor in determining employment opportunities (Keller and Schwiter 2021). This centrality of the visual portrayal of workers and the related lookist employment practices are rather exceptional in the unregulated low-wage sector (e.g., in contrast to agricultural labour or manufacturing) and entail new job requirements for cleaners, such as digital self-presentation skills and virtual identity management. Overall, the strong focus on names and portrait pictures can contribute to biased selection procedures and further increases the salience of the gender of workers (Naomi Schoenbaum 2016).

## Conclusion

This paper analyzes the experiences of household cleaners in the gig economy with (sexual) objectification and links it to the design, structure, and the functioning of the website Betreut.at—one of the largest platforms in the field of domestic services in Austria. Investigating the prevailing cultural ideas enshrined in the architecture of platforms is crucial, considering that the technological setup of platforms has the potential to reproduce and exacerbate existing inequalities. Particularly in the realm of domestic work, practices encouraged by digitally mediated marketplaces can perpetuate the historical exploitation inherent in racialised and feminised service work, further deepening normative gender and power relations.

Our study reveals that the functions and affordances of the platform emphasise the visual appearance of domestic workers, situate clients in a dating app resembling context and do not adequately ensure the safety and protection of labourers. The implications of these design choices are reflected in the experiences of the domestic cleaners in our study, which include lookist practices in the hiring process, clients who use the website for romantic or erotic encounters, exposure to sexual harassment as well as lacking security measures forcing workers to adopt individualised safety strategies.

It is beyond the scope of this study to determine linear effects of the website's design on the working realities of household labourers and to derive generalisable claims. This is important to note, especially since the features are embedded in a broader cultural imaginary that constructs domestic cleaners as available—not only for cleaning labour but for any kind of service within the territory of the private sphere, such as care, emotional, or sexual forms of service. Nevertheless, it becomes apparent that gig economy platforms

have substantial authority in shaping the relations between workers and clients. The domestic service intermediator Betreut.at can be seen as a productive force that reflects and potentially reinforces social hierarchies and (sexual) objectification via its website design. Taken altogether, this paper illustrates how norms and ideas promoted by digital for-profit actors mediating relationships in the domestic sector, and points to the centrality of design choices of gig economy platforms in co-shaping power relations in this field.

## Notes

1. On Betreut.at. users are offered a free basic membership with the option to upgrade to a paid premium version. Only by upgrading to a premium account, all functions, such as unlimited messaging, are enabled.
2. During the walkthrough, it became clear that the selection process in the previous step (Figure 2) serves to save profiles as favorites. However, it appears to not impact which platform workers are shown at this stage, as different profiles than the ones selected before are being portrayed.
3. This differs to gig economy companies like Uber, which enable workers and clients to rate the conduct and trustworthiness reciprocally. Clients may be removed from the app for inappropriate behavior, if their rating falls below a certain threshold, making it a double-sided evaluation and security system.

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