

# WORKING WITHOUT A BOSS IN DHAKA? AFFECTIVE LABOR, RATINGS, AND TEMPORALITIES IN DIGITAL PLATFORMS

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## Abstract

Abul Bashar—a ride-hailing driver from Dhaka—commented, “Uber allowed me to be my boss. Even if I drive throughout the day, no one has the right to rush or demand anything of me.” Despite such perception of flexibility, analyzing narratives of platform workers gathered in August 2020 and February 2021, in this article, it is argued that platform workers endure more stress providing their services than non-platform workers, such as driving for a private employer, because customer preferences change with every new trip. Additionally, they must work longer hours to be eligible for bonuses, and in any disputes, the platforms consider “passengers/customers are always right.” The article also reveals how digital platforms (ride-hailing or delivery) establish a coercive mechanism through their passengers’/customers’ rating system. Thereby, the article debunks the myth of democratization of work and revolutionizing the transportation/service system, identifying the affective regimes of work—that produce no material and durable goods but immaterial goods, such as comfort and ease for the customers—in digital platforms at Dhaka. Moreover, emphasis on affective labor and incentives results in disjunctive temporalities linked with family life and social routines, engendering modes of embodiment that constitute digital platform workers. Finally, the article argues that the affective regime generates forms of alienation and sociality that are co-implicated rather than opposing each other.

**Keywords:** Affective labor, Bangladesh, digital platform, ride-hailing, ratings, temporalities

## Introduction

The platform economy, gig economy, sharing economy, etc., have grown popular today. Many web-based businesses have built the groundwork for the sharing economy. While firms like Uber and Airbnb have gone worldwide, home-grown digital platforms such as Pathao, Obhai, Sheba.xyz, Shohoz, and others have acquired traction in Bangladesh and serve as a conduit between consumers and workers (who are skilled, have the necessary tools, and are willing to work as freelancers). Workers can choose their work hours and length on these digital

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platforms. Ride-hailing and delivery services are thriving areas in the platform economy and have arguably revolutionized the transportation/service system (Tarek & Amit, 2019; Kamal & Ahsan, 2018). In this regard, a promotional video of Pathao titled “Responsibilities of a Rider” starts with a welcome note, “Hello Pathao heroes of Bangladesh” (Pathao, 2017a).

The video then explains why the Pathao riders are the heroes? —The heroes come forward to help those in need without being asked to do so. The Pathao riders have come forward to solve one of the biggest problems of Bangladeshi cities—traffic congestion. It states how the average speed on our city roads has decreased in the past years, reducing 3.2 million business hours daily. As the Pathao riders rescue people from this crisis, they are the heroes. However, heroes have some responsibilities, so the duties of a Pathao rider include Making sure to reach the passenger safely to their destination, so riders must not exceed the speed limit. If the passenger requests to go faster, the rider should explain, “Time is valuable, but the value of life is more than time.” During any ride, the riders should wear shoes or cades. The rider should check the brakes, fuel, and data daily and charge the mobile phone.

Most importantly, the video states: “Every day, at least once, think of what you would expect if you were the passenger.” The video ends with the claim that “Pathao has launched a movement to eliminate traffic congestion in Bangladesh. If we all try a little, we could advance our beloved country. Never let the heroism in you go. As indicated above, digital platforms have introduced certain forms of labor, sociality, mechanisms of control, and disjunctive temporalities that may inform our understanding of contemporary technology. Overall, the article will trace how affective labor is highly integrated into the ride-hailing platform service.

The following sections present an analytical note and data collection procedures, followed by an overview of the platform economy, its features, and how it promoted itself as a catalyst of change, encouraging affect in its services. Then, the article describes the digital platform features that attract workers to its work ecosystem—the use of sociocultural ethos about independence and the promise of a new identity and profit; followed by the analysis of workers’ testimonies on bonuses offered in the platforms, illustrating the nature of affective control. Comparing ride-hailing jobs with similar non-platform jobs, the article also identifies the issue of episodic affect and ratings of services as a mechanism of control. Finally, the article locates disjunctive temporalities encountered by the workers of digital platforms.

### **Affective Labor in Digital Platforms and its Paradoxes: An Analytical Note**

It is imperative to clarify why the role of affective labor matters in understanding how digital platforms operate. Michael Hardt defines affective labor as work that produces “a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a

sense of connectedness or community” (1999: 96; see also Dyer-Witheford, 2001; Yanagisako, 2012; Lazzarato, 1996). Although affective labor has never been entirely outside of capitalist production, it is generally thought of as what one may call “immaterial labor.” As evident in the digital platform work, this form of labor has assumed a dominant position in the global capitalist economy. Hence, we find a different labor process. Conventionally, according to Karl Marx, “The elementary factors of the labor-process are 1, the personal activity of man, i.e., work itself, 2, the subject of that work, and 3, its instruments” (Marx, 2010 [1887]: 124). If we think of the labor process as the process where human labor is combined with capital to produce goods and services—in the digital platforms, the laborer must put in the effort—affective labor—that makes no material and durable goods but results in immaterial goods, such as comfort, ease, feelings, etc.,—as the Pathao promotional video (discussed above) asked its workers to act considering the passenger’s perspectives. Affective labor also becomes crucial because competing brands try to hold on to market share and a public image. Another important feature: In producing and reproducing affects, collective subjectivities, and sociality are made and are directly exploited by capital, as discussed below. Besides, workers’ affective labor is thoroughly enmeshed in temporalizing processes on multiple levels. Primarily, digital platforms promise a transition toward economic stability.

Additionally, target-oriented work sometimes disrupts their social life. Their daily life contacts and interactions with family members, relatives, neighbors, and friends—who usually have 9 a.m.–5 p.m. jobs or do not work the same hours as the platform workers—are severely minimized, leading to a somewhat “social death” (see Aneesh, 2006). The platform workers face an “impossible choice” (Alvarez et al., 2020) in navigating the precarious work arrangements through affective labor and getting higher ratings for their service as well as “time theft” (Sharma et al., 2022) working around the clock to fulfill quotas to be eligible for bonuses. Analyzing platform work holistically would reveal the paradox of the system; with new economic opportunities, there are new precarities.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

This qualitative research is aimed at making sense of and recognizing patterns among the workers’ statements to build up a meaningful picture of platform work in Bangladesh without compromising its richness, dimensionality, and phenomenological interpretation tied with human subjectivity. In locating the nature and dynamics of affective labor on digital platforms, this study uses data collected from ride-hailing and delivery platform workers over thirty days in August 2020 and February 2021. Since in qualitative research, the validity of data means “appropriateness” of the tools and processes (Leung 2015). Fifty platform

workers were interviewed—they worked for at least three months during data collection. Research participants were selected from four areas of Dhaka to reduce selection biases. In Panthapoth/Dhanmondi, Rampura, Kawran Bazar, and Jatrabari, bikers and auto-rickshaw drivers were approached for interviews at traffic intersections. Besides, ride-hailing apps were scanned to locate car drivers.

Additionally, ride-hailing and personal contacts (snowballing) were also used to contact car drivers and bikers. Contrarily, to interview the delivery personnel, restaurants in Gulshan, Dhanmondi, and Jatrabari were scouted—as they usually wait in the surrounding areas of restaurant hubs. Even though platform workers' narratives were collected through direct discussion, the article also draws on social media posts by the ride-hailing platforms, as well as exchanges with drivers and delivery people while traveling or ordering meals through the platforms during the previous years.

### **The Platform Economy and its Workers in Bangladesh: An Overview**

The digital platforms claim to empower consumers by giving access to services that were not otherwise available—commuters can easily find their desired transport (car, motorbike, and auto-rickshaw), doorstep pick-up, and fare estimation. The ride-hailing, food, and parcel delivery platforms also generated earning opportunities for thousands in different sectors. For instance, Pathao in 2019–2020 had more than five million registered users, including over 300,000 drivers or bikers, food and parcel delivery agents, over 25,000 e-commerce traders, and over 5,000 restaurants (Elius & Ahmed, 2020). While serving potential workers and customers—the digital platforms promote affective labor in their business model.

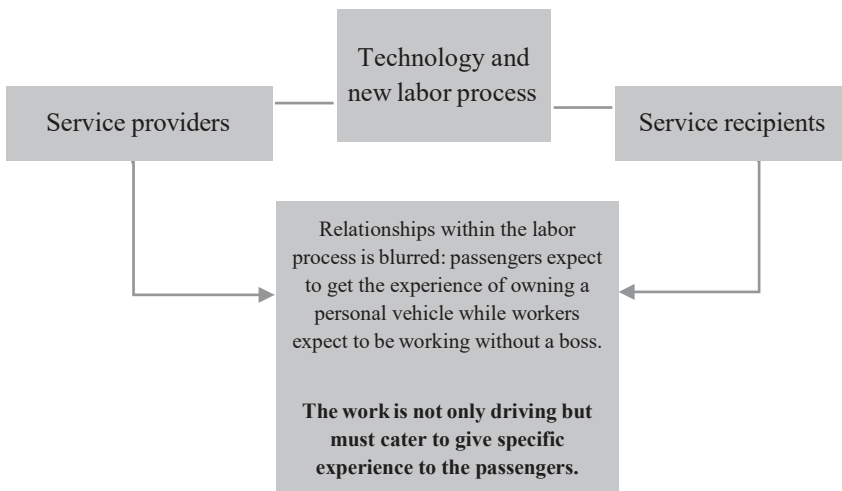
#### ***The Business Model***

The digital platforms function as a medium that connects customers and a group of freelance workers. For example, ride-hailing platforms allow people who own a bike or car to work as freelance taxis or rentals. They, via the platforms, are hired. The application enables a “sharing economy,” and all parties are benefited. However, from another perspective, platform companies continuously hire workers as “independent contractors”—to complete the services requested on their digital platforms. Those who provide services via digital platforms are not full-time employees. The workers on these platforms do not receive a fixed salary like employees on payroll; their pay depends on the number of completed tasks. Theoretically, the arrangement benefits the drivers and passengers. While workers enjoy the flexibility of choosing their work hours and are not required to come to work every weekday, their earnings are predictable. Passengers may request rides as needed without having to hire a driver and own a private vehicle. As the number

of workers (drivers) and customers keep signing up, the platforms turn into an effective system of transaction: on the one hand, catering to the needs of the customers (those who seek services and those who seek work) and generating profit for the platform, on the other hand. Since the platforms do not recruit workers/employees but instead hire independent contractors—They can avoid adhering to employment and labor laws (Collier, Dubal & Carter, 2017; Bajwa et al., 2018).

Overall, as shown in the discussion above and Figure 1, new technology has resulted in new arrangements for work. We can see a dramatic reorganization of the work itself, making affective labor significant. Affective labor has become a vital component within this working relationship of digital platform work.

**Figure 1: Technology and the New Labor Process**



### ***Promotion of Affective Labor***

The drivers of the ride-hailing platforms are not expected only to drive but must connect with their customers with courteousness and care. A promotional video published by Pathao starts with a scene where a woman who has returned from abroad after a few years is waiting for her ride (Pathao, 2018). A man—the Pathao car driver, gets out of the car and, after exchanging greetings, requests the woman to sit back and takes the luggage to the back of the bonnet. The trip starts, and they converse a little. In the background music, it is stated, “Whenever you need to go anywhere, we are here,” and “We can change.” While traveling, the woman orders food from the Pathao app, and the driver receives the food on her behalf. After a while, when they reached their destination, it was night. The driver again helps

with the luggage, and when the woman opens her purse to take out money to pay, the driver says, “No, no, please, you are my guest; let today’s ride be a gift.” The woman says, “Thank you,” and the driver leaves, saying, “Welcome.” In the background, a voice states, “With time, the city has transformed, but people have not changed a bit.”

Nonetheless, the woman pays digitally via the Pathao app, and the driver gets a payment notification. The last scene shows the driver (Zahid) distributing books to underprivileged children in a school. In the voice-over, we hear, “With thousands of such young men, the country is progressing, new dreams are built, and the future of a new generation is secured. This journey of development should continue on the safest platform. Pathao, moving Bangladesh.” This video generates a professional identity for workers and how they should treat the passengers. Thus, it also shows the experiences a passenger could expect while requesting a ride via Pathao.

The training videos of ride-hailing platforms promote particular features that the drivers must uphold, and the platforms have diverse mechanisms to ensure those (e.g., Pathao, 2017b; 2017c). For example, if the drivers do not accept trip requests or request the passengers to cancel the trip (if the driver does not want to go to some destinations) and the passenger complains about it, the drivers get a warning from the platform for giving an unpleasant experience which might lead to reduced trip requests via the platform. For such complaints, drivers get a warning/notice that if they continue asking passengers to cancel trip requests, they will not get any trip calls in the future, or their accounts may be suspended. Furthermore, drivers are asked to complete all the trips to ensure a better passenger experience on the platform. If they do not want to drive, they should use the “stop request” feature, they are told. Nonetheless, many drivers said that while they want to go home from the other part of the city, they sometimes need to cancel trips that would take them in different directions (this feature [of control] in the app is discussed later). In all the training content, Pathao promotes that “A person’s real character is revealed by how one behaves. A person can become admirable by talking nicely, displaying good behavior, and appearing decent. So, we expect you will present nice and decent behavior to every passenger of yours” (Pathao, 2017d).

Platforms continue to introduce new guidelines to ensure that the user experience improves. The drivers get frequent messages from the platform urging them to smile while talking with the passengers. They are told to earn a better rating for their excellent behavior toward the passengers. They will have more chances of getting trip requests if their ratings are higher. While showing the message, the driver told me that some passengers are rude and do not deserve “good behavior.” Listening to this comment, another driver sarcastically said, “Ride-hailing drivers

should carry a bottle of oil; we do not know when it comes in handy.” If passengers complain about a driver’s bad behavior, they get warnings from the platform. As the platforms’ promotional videos and other priorities show, the ride-hailing platform adheres to and promotes a “personal conduct” regime for ride-hailing drivers. They are expected to smile, drive safely, share necessary information, help the customers with luggage and other requests, and even follow the cultural obligation of honoring guests and being altruistic for the country’s development. These have become directly imperative for the driver as the rating system of the platforms documents customers’ satisfaction, making “affective labor” an essential aspect of the daily routines of the ride-hailing industry.

### **What are the Attractions of Platform Work?**

What features lure laborers into platform work? The answer to this question must also acknowledge that the apparent attractions emerge from the overall socio-economic condition. Primarily, platform work appears accessible and becomes lucrative when alternative employment opportunities are limited. This situation reflects the neoliberal capitalistic mechanism that endangers the crisis of employment and precarity (see Harvey, 2004; 2014).

#### ***Perceived Flexibility: “No Figure of a Boss”***

Workers are attracted by the perceived flexibility of work hours and “no figure of a boss” in platform work. The platforms rely on a somewhat acephalous structure to establish the labor process. For example, Abul Bashir was a house driver for a private employer before starting to work for a ride-hailing platform. He explained why he chose to shift from his previous job: He had to work long hours, mostly of his employer’s choosing. Hence, he did not get a break when he wanted. He occasionally could not eat or pray in time because his boss had to go somewhere. “Uber allowed me to be my boss,” he said.

Furthermore, even if he had to travel all day, no one would pressure him to hurry up or demand anything. Similarly, an Uber biker, Islam Shaheen, stated: “In any other employment, a workday does not finish until the day’s goal is met, but here I am on my own. There is no sense of urgency [for others] here. I am free to choose my working hours.” A Pathao delivery person added, “Our employment is free of [unnecessary] stress. We arrive at work, pick up the package, and soon after we complete our deliveries, we may go after giving the cash to the office.” Thus, one could say that digital platforms use a standard narrative of “independence” that attracts people to the digital platform works.



### ***Quick Return from Investments***

A rapid return on a minimal investment is also an attractive feature of the platform work; an Uber bike rider indicated that if someone has to do even a small business, one must invest a lot for a considerably lesser profit. Profits may be made quickly with a minimal investment in a ride-hailing platform (for a similar argument, see Zwick & Spicer, 2019). Moreover, the platforms' ability to scout passengers significantly reduces waiting time for finding passengers. As a result, one does not need to roam around or wait in the "taxi stand" to get a passenger. Rafiqul Islam, an auto-rickshaw driver, remarked that during the last two years since he started to work on the Obhai platform, the most crucial advantage was the ease with which he found passengers. "We are often unable to wait [on the road] after dropping off a passenger owing to a shortage of parking space, but the app sends us a ride request as soon as we finish one," he described.

### ***Ease in Operation and "Inclusiveness"***

Many people took up platform work because of the COVID-19 shutdown. For instance, Ridoy Mahmud closed his business during the pandemic and started working for Foodpanda. He was informed about this opportunity via social media. He learned that anyone could start working if they owned an Android phone with internet connectivity and had access to a bicycle or motorcycle. Since he already had a phone, in the beginning, he spent 4,000 taka on buying a bicycle and eventually put 25,000 taka into purchasing a motorcycle. "Joining Foodpanda has saved me from being unemployed," he remarked. Moreover, the digital platforms provided income prospects for people in financial hardship, given that they had the needed tools (a car, motorbike, auto-rickshaw, bi-cycle, smart-phones, internet access, etc.) or could access funds to acquire them.

### **Work Hours and Bonuses in the Digital Platforms**

During discussions with the platform workers, they explained the modalities of platform work. Even though they found new work opportunities, they wanted more revenue sharing. Md. Abdullah, an Uber bike rider, remarked: "I signed up for the app expecting to make a lot of money. However, after I started, I discovered they were skimming 20–25 percent of my earnings. Even though I invested money and am responsible for all operating expenses." The bonus system of Uber described by another worker is as follows:

A rider who completes 13 trips between 8 a.m. and 12 p.m. on working days will get 700 taka as a bonus. If the rider completes another 15 trips between 12 p.m. and 9 p.m., he will receive an extra 600 taka every four days or three days every week. These goals differ depending on peak and off-peak hours.



Besides, in Pathao, drivers and bikers get weekly and daily “quest” targets. For instance, in the Pathao bike service, weekly ride quests from 21–27 November 2020 offered bonuses of 400 taka to 2,000 taka if they could complete 50 to 100 bike rides between 7 a.m. and 11:59 p.m. Similarly, in daily ride quests, they must complete 5, 10, or 15 trips to get a bonus of 100, 250, or 500 taka. For cars, they must complete 4, 8, or 12 trips for a bonus of 250, 600, or 1100 taka. In addition, workers receive rewards for referrals of new drivers/bikers on the platform. For instance, if any worker could refer their female friends and if they register and complete ten trips within 15 days, they both could get a bonus of 5,000 taka for bikes and 10,000 taka for cars. Existing drivers are requested to visit service points to refer friends as new drivers.

Moreover, for referring a male friend on the platform, drivers could get a bonus of 2,000 taka if the new drivers complete ten trips in 5 days after registration. This “bonus for referral” feature induces a particular kind of affective labor as existing drivers help recruit new drivers and do so by introducing the platform and its features to their friends and family. Besides, these platforms often announce bonuses for newly registered cars. One of the Uber drivers showed me an SMS he received in October 2020; it said, “By 24 October, if he can complete five trips, he will get 500 taka for a car and 250 taka for a bike. It urged him to become online and accept trips to increase his income. However, the bike or car must be newly registered. This offer is not valid for already registered vehicles.” With this, the platform could access people’s networks that they could not have gotten into with conventional promotion or marketing strategies. Additionally, one could say the platform work is organized to lure workers to work for extensive hours. Since longer working hours result in additional income or bonuses, these workers do not hesitate to work extra hours (see Nastiti, 2017).

Food delivery personnel can choose to work shifts of two-three hours [sometimes even longer] throughout the day. Their payment is calculated based on the number of deliveries they made. They may get up to 44 taka for a delivery. However, the workers must pay 2,500 taka as equipment charges when they begin working—it is deducted in installments every week for the first five weeks. Moreover, they are not entitled to any festival bonus like the employees on the payroll. The riders learn the basic payment system during the training: There is no other basic salary, but it operates through a distance-based payment system. However, their monthly earnings depend on their performance in the delivery ecosystem. The workers are divided into six levels, and they are put into higher tiers, and their payment rate increases if they perform better—in terms of acceptance rate, actual vs. planned work hours, work in special hours, and total work hours. Otherwise, they get down the performance ladder, and their income is reduced. To be included in a higher batch, they must accept all the requests, make prompt deliveries, and work during

the special hours (12 p.m. to 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. to 10 p.m.). A person starts from the sixth tier; thus, they earn 22–35 taka for an order.

### **Encountering the Affective Regime of Digital Platforms**

The affective regime in platform work requires the workers to follow specific behavioral patterns. However, the prescribed patterns place them in situations that hamper their psycho-social well-being and lead to economic losses. The interactions between the workers and customers reflect the dimensions of the affective regime, as shown below.

#### *Experience of Ride-hailing Workers*

Frequently, drivers or bikers face aggressive behaviors from passengers. Md. Abdullah recalled his experience working with Uber,

Although the platform calculates fares, many users only pay if the fee is within the anticipated cost on the app [during the request for the trip]. We cannot do anything if the fare is significantly lower than the predicted fare. However, most people refuse to pay the higher fee. Passengers may request a trip but fail to show up or return our calls after arriving at the pick-up point. In such circumstances, the [platform] company takes no action.

Passengers are often late, and drivers must wait at the pick-up location. Besides, passengers also ask them to detour during the ride to pick up someone else or buy something. Sometimes, passengers set pick-up locations or destinations without accessible roads and guide them to drive until they are stuck. In such cases, drivers lose working time and/or become late picking up the next passenger. Passengers react harshly if drivers decline to wait; on the contrary, the drivers may risk legal action for unlawful parking. During one interview, Md. Abu Taleb remarked, “If we make a complaint about such incidents [rude behavior or delays], platforms ignore us and sometimes even claim that they have found a solution that [usually] has no consequences [for the passenger].”

Further, platform workers revealed that they must comply with the passengers’ demands as they rate the services afterward. One Uber driver showed me a message he received from the platform that claimed complaints about his behavior with passengers. It read like this: As Uber is committed to ensuring a safe, respectful, and comfortable experience for both the drivers and passengers of the platform, it takes the matter seriously if something hampers its standard. They monitored this matter carefully, having warned him previously, they had to suspend his account permanently. They arrived at this conclusion after much

deliberation. Showing the message, he said, “The platforms always make one-sided decisions; they never consider drivers’ situation and never consider caring if the complaints are true.”

### *Experience of the Parcel and Food Delivery Workers*

Sometimes, customers do not want to receive the product or food when the delivery workers reach the location. Sometimes, after picking up food from a restaurant and arriving at the delivery location, they find that the customer is not receiving the phone calls or it is switched off. Ridoy Mahmud, who worked for Foodpanda, stated that when customers do not respond to their phone calls or accept meal delivery, they have no option but to pay the demurrage. “Every week, they deduct 200–250 taka from our payment as fines,” he lamented. Otherwise, they must go to the office and submit the undelivered food. In these cases, they are not entitled to any payment. Thus, the time and labor to travel to the restaurant, the delivery location, and finally to the area office is on the worker. Sometimes, a rider may get half of the food that was undelivered. Sometimes, customers request them to buy other items after picking up the food from restaurants. They must consider such customer requests, usually for small items from local shops or cigarettes.

Parcel delivery people face another unique problem: they cannot check the product. If the sender packs a wrong or faulty product, the delivery persons endure the consequences after delivering the wrong product to the customers. Customers usually open the package before/after handing over the payment because the goods delivery service typically follows the “cash on delivery” method. The customer’s dissatisfaction (anger) is directed at the delivery person if the order is incorrect. These workers, thus, are asked to assess the context and are advised to do prompt delivery and not interact with the customers for long.

### **The Tricks of Affective Labor: Episodic Affects and Ratings**

In the digital platforms, workers’ job performance was evaluated primarily based on customer satisfaction scores (see Mankekar & Gupta, 2017). Sometimes, I [while hailing rides] experienced that some drivers ask for good ratings, and while asking for it, they said, “I have already given you five stars; please give me five stars.” Rarely, the drivers also cancel rides if passengers’ ratings are low. One driver showed a conversation with a passenger whose trip request he canceled because his rating was low [2.7 out of 5]. The passenger responded, “What would you do with ratings? I need a ride; you can give me a ride and get your payment. You do not need to seek out the good or bad in me.” As the condition of the ride-hailing platform workers suggests, affective labor is learned. Workers’ work habits, daily routines, and speech patterns are reconstituted. In training sessions, drivers were taught how to navigate the app and, equally importantly, groom

themselves and provide the service. All involved in the ride-hailing must cultivate attention, kindness, attentiveness, empathy, and intimacy.

The flexibility in the work environment in terms of no direct supervision or apparent freedom of choice substantially generated new affective requirements for the workers. Table 1 depicts the significant changes ride-hailing platforms made by comparing the attributes of the platform and non-platform occupations (ride-hailing vs. traditional work as drivers for private employers) (see Hasan, M. T., 2021).

**Table 1: Features of Platform and Non-platform Jobs**

	<b>Platform jobs (ride-hailing)</b>	<b>Non-platform jobs (as drivers)</b>
Prerequisite for finding a job	The platform's online application	Individual or social capital and network
Work hours	12 hours ++--	12 hours +-
The flexibility of working hours	Somewhat flexible	Low
Short breaks during the workday	Low possibility: more work to earn more money	Moderate possibility
Weekly holiday	Workers may choose, but it reduces earnings	One day
Control over the route and destination	There is some control; however, it usually takes a few trips before they get a trip request toward the preferred destination	None, but predictable
Stress over providing service	High, customers have varied preferences	Less, the owner's preferences become predictable
Performance rating	Formalized	Informal

	<b>Platform jobs (ride-hailing)</b>	<b>Non-platform jobs (as drivers)</b>
Stakeholders to be engaged with	The platform, customers, and the vehicle owners (if not owned vehicle)	Mostly the owner or employer
Possibility of disputes	High	Low
Investment requirements	Must arrange and manage everything	None
Earnings	It depends on the work done	Fixed
Investment risks	Extremely high	None
Prospect for social support	None	Moderate to high

Platform workers are relatively more stressed than other options, e.g., driving for a private employer. With every new trip, the customers' needs and preferences change, raising the possibility of disputes. The drivers stressed that passengers usually claim they are asking for little consideration. However, the workers must respond to the little requests of every passenger. They must wait before and during a trip, sometimes amend the route or pick-up and/or drop-off locations, and/or drive into narrow, inaccessible roads. Cumulatively, they must face such requests almost daily with every passenger. Workers cannot ignore these requests, as passengers can rate the service after every trip. Thus, the rating system can be used as a technology of control governing the workers. On the contrary, the possibility of a dispute is comparatively low in non-platform jobs because the demands of their employers become predictable over time. Besides, the day-to-day operation does not translate into a driver's monetary loss—as the owner or employer bears the cost of vehicle maintenance, parking charges, fines for unlawful parking, etc.

Platform workers sometimes invest in buying vehicles to avoid paying a significant share of their earnings to the vehicle's owner. However, in traditional car driving jobs, owning the vehicles they drive is irrelevant. Even though platform workers invest, the income from platform work may vary significantly—if, for any reason, they cannot work long hours. On the contrary, traditionally, drivers mostly earn a fixed income. Furthermore, there is always a risk of investment loss. For

instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many indebted drivers spiraled further into debt as they could not continue returning their vehicle loans. Contrarily, traditional drivers, like everyone else, lost income or jobs; they did not face the aggravated risk of indebtedness like the platform workers. Firstly, because they did not invest in buying vehicles. Secondly, employers supported enduring the crisis. The platforms are set to create more precarious employment and illusions of economic and social freedom (Zwick & Spicer, 2019; Zwick, 2017). The following comment from a delivery worker brings to light the illusion of freedom that the platform's ecosystem creates:

The food delivery work has allowed me to survive, but it could be more beneficial. Workers face many problems. The foremost issue is that the area manager misbehaves. Furthermore, the delivery personnel have no support or insurance coverage. If we make a mistake, we will be punished. Sometimes, technical problems cause us to appear active when we are not. Hence, not delivering food (during that time) decreased our rating, and we were denied the bonus.

These situations and hardships of the platform workers reveal the contradictions inherent to the “sharing” economy in capitalism (Mason, 2015)—the exploitive and coercive practices in the platform industry are not as observable as it is in the traditional industries (Doorn, 2017; Booth, 2015). Additionally, the ranking of workers and rating of their services have become powerful social devices of coercion (Appadurai, 2011; Guyer, 2010). In this respect, all rating-based service sector work differs from working in a factory producing any material product. A driver explained the importance of earning a better rating from the passengers. He showed me a message he had received from Uber. It stated that he was permitted to take intercity trips that would allow him to earn more. However, to continue receiving intercity trips, he must complete 70 percent of trip requests in the next 14 days.

On top of that, he must have a customer rating of at least 4.8 (out of 5). Otherwise, intercity trip requests would be stopped for him. Uber also promotes that the drivers appear best before the customers, and if they get high ratings, it will give them more bonuses. Uber celebrated a so-called “quality week” in September 2021 with the motto, “We will not cancel trips; passengers will know I am the best driver.” Sometimes, if the drivers cancel trip requests, their trip completion rate is reduced, and their account is blocked for 1 to 3 days. One driver showed me an SMS he had received earlier; it said that his trip completion rate had been below 20 percent for the last five days, and if he could not improve the completion rate within one day, his account might be suspended. Hence, one could argue that workers on the platform must navigate a regime of temporality that refers to certain affective practices as productive.

### Disjunctive Temporalities

The digital platforms, with their work opportunities, attracted many workers with a promise of steady income and inclusiveness. The platforms indicated a shift from the oral contract-based arrangement for transport towards a more formalized arrangement where the destination and price of the trip were set before the passengers and drivers met. It also promised a stable life for the workers, a shift from uncertainty towards more stability and a new identity, as also promoted by stickers on the vehicles and, in some cases, uniforms. However, this temporal orientation from uncertainty towards stability was not the case; instead, drivers experienced disjunctive temporalities. For instance, During the first phase of the shutdown for COVID-19 in Dhaka starting on 26 March 2020, the platform drivers suddenly became helpless as their source of income was constricted. The shutdown became crucial as many people earned a living working for ride-hailing companies.

Moreover, during the pandemic, the platform services were initially limited to the parcel or food deliveries, barring many people from work and income. For instance, R. Ahmed shared his experience: Two years ago, he started to drive for the platform by renting a car. After driving the rented vehicle for six months, he took out a bank loan on interest to buy a motorbike. He could earn up to 50,000 taka per month using the ride-hailing platform. He usually worked from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. every day. Out of his earnings, he repaid the loan installments of 10,000 taka every month. With the rest of the money, he took care of his family. However, the COVID-19 shutdown made his life difficult (see Hasan, M. T., 2020).

“I am now without work, and my savings are almost gone. I am living a woeful life right now. I am depressed thinking about the installment payment for the bike and other things,” he told a journalist (Tipu, 2020). These ride-hailing workers borrowed money from friends and relatives to endure the shutdown days marginally. Few other comments reveal the extent of desperation faced by the platform workers during the COVID-19 shutdown. “Everyone [not in platform jobs] continued to receive their salary and other assistance or benefits during the shutdown period,” mentioned an Uber driver. He further said, “However, we received no help from anyone. Neither the company nor the government helped us in those days. Moreover, today, if we take passengers and ride in contact [own arrangement], we will be penalized [for creating their arrangement with clients and/or for breaking the COVID-19 directive not to ride a motorbike with a pillion].” Another Uber driver reported,

We received no assistance from the platforms throughout the shutdown. We had to take out a loan to get through these three months. Platforms now collect 25 percent of the earnings when the service is restored. They



keep reminding us to pay our dues. Our accounts could be suspended if we do not pay their share of the income. Furthermore, we must put more resources into upholding health standards. [In November 2021, Pathao reduced its commission for bike trips to 10 percent in peak hours (8 a.m. to 11 a.m. and 5 p.m. to 8 p.m.) and 15 percent in off-peak hours (see Hasan, M., 2021)].

Therefore, the digital platform's promise of bringing better days for workers has not materialized for many. Moreover, as previously mentioned, digital platforms promise not only point-to-point transport but also an experience of luxury and comfort. Based on the service, customers would rate the drivers. Additionally, the platforms give targets of different magnitudes that the drivers must complete in a stipulated time. Because of the rating system and targets of the platforms, drivers must work during the so-called peak hours, and to achieve their targeted number of trips within particular times, they must continuously work. Therefore, they had to work while their families slept and missed family events.

The platform workers (drivers and delivery persons) do not expect to work long-term for the platform. Instead, they aimed to save enough money to start a small business in a few years. Primarily, their experience during the pandemic turned into a bleak realization of the platform work process. A driver reflected, "If someone works for a company (government or non-government), they get service benefits when changing jobs or retiring. However, even though we will labor for many years in the platform economy, we would receive no retirement benefits." These platform workers' remarks remind us that any new work arrangement has the potential for "derangements" and "rearrangements" within its usual functioning patterns (Povinelli, 2014). The flexibility that seemed a plus has left them vulnerable to disruption (Berg & Johnston, 2019; Bailey, 2016). Hence, one may argue that the "democratization of work" has stripped many workers' rights.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The article reflects on how realms of affect are given shape by technology and imbued with the contemporary labor process. The affective labor of workers and their evaluation is mediated by information technology. It is asserted that the production and modulation of affects in the service sector mediated by digital platforms are crucial. The difference between digital platform (service) workers and other workers is not based on whether they are affective or not; instead, that affect has a different position in each production process. These digital work environments contrast the work of factory workers, agricultural laborers, and artisans and craftspeople. As explained in this article, the production of affects remains at the center of the production process and its end-product for digital platform workers. Although much affect may be involved in producing goods and

commodities, the labor is not about managing affect or aiming for “customer satisfaction”—throughout the laboring process.

Analyzing digital platform work in terms of affective labor enables us to reveal the out-of-sync temporalities spawned by the labor process and the work discipline they are subjected to. Moreover, conceptualizing the work of digital platform workers as affective labor foregrounds the intimacies engendered within the productive process not as epiphenomena but as intrinsic properties. In short, by analyzing the affective labor of platform workers, one may understand the process of institutionalizing the production of affects (Mankekar & Gupta, 2016). In brief, we must be attentive to how labor is affective in various cases—especially in labor contexts shaped by information technology. Thus, the article argues that the affective regime generates co-implicated alienation and intimacy. Further, it reveals how relations of affect are constructed through labor processes and allows us to consider the intricate relationship between affective labor and technology in contemporary times.

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