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Platform cooperatives and the dilemmas of platform worker-member participation

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Abstract

Despite the surge of interest in platform cooperatives, we have a limited understanding of the dynamics of platform worker-member participation in these cooperatives. Drawing on interviews with 21 senior leaders and founders of platform worker cooperatives, we investigate the dynamics of platform worker-member participation, finding that these cooperatives experience some successes and many challenges. We then build theory about how four distinct features of platform worker cooperatives—the facilitation of multihoming, the physically untethered nature of work, the relatively high importance of scale as a strategic imperative, and the relatively low importance of initial platform worker-member investment—influence these participation dynamics. We find that the platform and worker cooperative organisational models are in tension with one another when brought together within a platform worker cooperative, leading to positive and negative effects on participation.

KEYWORDS
gig economy, multihoming, participation, platform cooperatives, platform economy, platform governance, platform work, scale, worker cooperatives

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been burgeoning interest in 'platform cooperatives' (Bunders et al., 2022). This interest is grounded in at least two closely related currents. The first is a growing set of concerns about the negative impacts of corporate platforms on workers and broader society, including an increased incidence of hazardous working conditions and low-quality work (Dunn, 2020), and the need for greater opportunities for voice and participation by these stakeholders to remedy these impacts (Wilkinson et al., 2022). The second is a growing interest in cooperative forms of organising in response to ongoing societal concerns, including the COVID-19 pandemic, unsustainable economic growth and widening income inequality (Billiet et al., 2021; Mannan and Pek, 2021). While there has been some research on whether platform cooperatives can ameliorate the negative impacts that corporate platforms have on workers and present a meaningful alternative to corporate platforms (Sandoval, 2020; Schor, 2021), the literature on whether platform cooperatives can foster member participation in decision-making processes is nascent.

The issue of democratic member participation goes to the heart of what makes a platform cooperative distinct from corporate platforms. We understand a platform cooperative as being 'an enterprise that operates *primarily* through digital platforms *for interaction* or the *exchange* of goods and/or services and is structured *in line with* the International Cooperative Alliance Statement on the Cooperative Identity' (Mayo, 2019, p. 20 emphasis added). In short, enterprises that have joint and democratic control and conform to the ICA Statement fall within this definition. This definition is helpful in distinguishing platform cooperatives from other cooperatives by placing the online platform at the centre of the enterprise's business model. *Digitally intermediating* interactions between members and members, as well as members and non-members, to exchange goods and services is a central part of their operations (Bunders et al., 2022; Kovalainen et al., 2019). In particular, the centrality of the online platform distinguishes our use of the term platform cooperatives from 'cooperative-run platforms', which refers to the many cooperatives that have begun deploying online platforms as a supplement to their long-standing business (Mannan and Pek, 2021). While there is considerable variety among platform cooperatives across different industries and with diverse membership classes, it is possible to distil types of platform cooperatives appearing across the globe with distinct features.

In this paper, we focus on a particular type of platform cooperative: the 'platform worker cooperative' (PWC). These are platform cooperatives in which platform workers comprise at least one class of membership. There are many forms of work involved in the operation of a platform cooperative, but like Kenney & Zysman (2019, p. 17) we distinguish between work that is 'within and generated by' platform cooperatives for the creation and maintenance of platforms from work that is 'on the platform ecosystem' serving the labour markets created by these platforms. This latter category is what we describe as 'platform workers' and thus excludes the programmers and other 'tech workers' that are sometimes members of multistakeholder platform cooperatives. The term platform worker is therefore premised on all work that is mediated by a digital labour platform, including both localised on-demand work and remote professional work.

Central to all cooperatives is the notion of democratic governance. Democratic governance is not only crucial for a cooperative's identity, it is also key to its resilience as a business (Billiet et al., 2021; Varman and Chakrabarti, 2004). Yet, while democratic decision-making is an important ideal for cooperatives, the *participation* that is required of members to achieve this

ideal is often lacking (Birchall, 1999). Membership, in and of itself, does not guarantee participation (Vieta et al., 2016), with there being evidence that cooperative democracy degenerates as the entity grows in size and complexity, enabling an unrepresentative oligarchy to dominate (e.g., Pek, 2021).

Accordingly, we have also seen a small but growing interest in understanding how democratic participation operates within platform cooperatives. Initial research on Fairbnb (Foramitti et al., 2020), a cooperative alternative to Airbnb, points to some of the difficulties platform cooperatives can face when it comes to their democratic governance. Yet, in comparison to traditional worker cooperatives, our knowledge of these dynamics is in its infancy. Researchers have therefore called for more focused research on this broader topic (Schneider, 2018). Based on what we know about platforms to date, including the possibilities of users being able to simultaneously register for, and sequentially use, multiple platforms (i.e., multihoming) (Gawer, 2021) and the financial impetus that venture capital investment gives to platform companies to grow in size and scope (Srnicek, 2017), we expect that the dynamics of platform worker-member participation in PWCs will differ from traditional worker cooperatives. In the latter, members generally work for, or through, one organisation, and the cooperative may be concerned about scaling in size due to difficulties in maintaining active member participation (e.g., Cornforth, 1995; Spicer, 2022). Indeed, prior work provides some hints about this connection, such as Foramitti et al. (2020) finding about the tension between practising democracy and the core group of founders needing to take speedy, pragmatic decisions while scaling Fairbnb. Yet, we lack a comprehensive understanding of the distinguishing features of PWCs and how they might influence the dynamics of platform worker-member participation.

In light of these gaps in our understanding, our paper focuses on the following research question: *How do the distinguishing features of PWCs influence the dynamics of platform worker-member participation?* To answer this question, we adopt an emergent qualitative research design to study the experiences and perceptions of 21 senior leaders and/or founders of PWCs with a focus on theory building. We distil four distinguishing features of these cooperatives that we identified through our analysis and engagement with prior research: the facilitation of multihoming, the physically untethered nature of work, the relatively high importance of scale as a strategic imperative, and the relatively low importance of initial platform worker-member investment. We then build theory about how these features can influence the dynamics of platform worker-member participation in both positive and negative ways.

In doing so, we make two main contributions. First, we contribute to research on organisational theory by showing how and why two organisational forms—the platform and the worker cooperative—are in tension with one another when merged within a PWC. Recent cooperative governance literature observes that the tension between the commercial and associational components of a cooperative can be synergistic and complementary (Michaud and Audebrand, 2022; Novkovic et al., 2022), but the realities of the platform economy make these benefits difficult to realise. Second, we contribute to research on participation in worker cooperatives more broadly by identifying how these four distinguishing features we identified encourage and inhibit participation in worker cooperatives. There are several ways in which these features negatively affect participation, but there are also ways in which they reduce barriers to, and disparities in, communication. This provides some hope that PWCs can recover the democratic member control that is a defining feature of all cooperatives. Moreover, some of their novel governance practices can be implemented by large worker cooperatives outside of the platform economy and therefore have much wider implications.

METHODS

We adopted an emergent qualitative research design given our focus on building theory about the effects of PWCs' distinguishing features on platform worker-member participation and the nascent state of prior research on this topic (Bluhm et al., 2011). We gathered data through semi-structured interviews with leaders and/or founders of PWCs. Our focus was on theoretical generalisation, which is concerned with identifying explanations for the connections among concepts, rather than empirical generalisation (Tsang, 2014).

Participants and recruitment

This paper reports on 26 interviews with 21 leaders and founders of 21 PWCs (1 interviewee per cooperative) from a broader research project focused on the governance of platform cooperatives. To be eligible for inclusion in this paper, an individual had to be a leader and/or founder of an organisation that met four criteria: a digital platform was central to the enterprise's operations and business model, platform workers were one of the member groups, there was a commitment to establishing democratic member control, and the organisation was operational at the time of the interview. We opted to interview senior leaders and/or founders, given their more comprehensive knowledge of these early-stage organisations and their dynamics and circumstances. To recruit participants, we posted a recruitment note to a platform cooperative mailing list, contacted individuals from eligible organisations who were already in our networks or, when not, contacted eligible organisations directly seeking to interview a qualified individual. Some interviewees were also leaders and founders of affiliated 'shared-services' entities, organisations that provide support to the primary PWCs.

Table 1 provides an overview of the 21 participants and details about the PWCs with which they are involved. Our interviewees span organisations across a wide range of sectors, from food delivery to software development. The organisations are also at a variety of growth stages with several still experimenting with their governance processes and system. Of note, while 14 of our participants are from PWCs that develop their smartphone applications or website internally, 7 rely on externally developed software. This external software is developed by a secondary entity, such as an association of cooperatives, for the benefit of its member entities. Involvement in such associations not only provides access to certain 'shared-services' (Mannan, 2022), such as the joint development of a platform but also embeds primary entities within a larger governance system. As we explore further in our findings, this can have further knock-on effects on the platform worker-member participation in the primary entities as it makes them dependent on another organisation for its operations, which may constrain decision-making on some topics.

Data gathering and analysis

We developed an interview protocol for this study that evolved periodically as we focused our attention on emerging themes during our parallel data analysis. The majority of our questions focused on participants' perceptions regarding the cooperative they are involved with, covering topics including background and history, formal governance structures, formal and informal efforts to involve members in decision-making and challenges and successes to date.

TABLE 1 Participant overview.

Interviewee role	Organisational pseudonym	Estimated total number of members (years in brackets)	Membership categories (at the time of interview)	Industry	Platform (internal or external to primary entity)
Founder	DeliveryCoop	4 (2022)	Riders	Delivery	External—Shared services cooperative
Founder	MoveCoop	12 (2022)	Riders	Delivery; bike repair	External
Senior leader	TunesCoop	430 (2022)	Founder, tech worker, music-maker, listener	Music streaming	Internal
Founder	WebCoop	102 (2022)	Web developers	Web development	Internal
Founder	TransportCoop	4500 (2022)	Riders, tech workers, investors, drivers, community supporters (persons and organisations)	Ride-hailing; delivery	External—Social franchisor
Founder	MusicCoop	846 (2022)	Artists, tech workers, community	Music	Internal
Founder	GraphicCoop	8 (2022)	Translation and graphic design	Graphic design, translation, facilitation	External
Founder	NewsCoop	50 (2022)	Writers, readers	Media	Internal
Senior leader	CleanCoop	57 (2019)	Cleaners	Cleaning	External—Shared-services cooperative
Founder	CourierCoop	12 (2021)	Riders	Delivery	External—Shared-services cooperative
Senior leader	HailCoop	34,500 (2022)	Drivers, riders	Ride-hailing	External—Shared-services corporation
Founder	HealthCoop	298 (2021)	Healthcare workers, users, non-user investors	Healthcare	Internal

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Interviewee role	Organisational pseudonym	Estimated total number of members (years in brackets)	Membership categories (at the time of interview)	Industry	Platform (internal or external to primary entity)
Senior leader	ArtCoop	1912 (2022)	Artists, employees and advisors/board members	Stock photography	Internal
Founder	MediaCoop	148 (2021)	Media workers, readers	Media	Internal
Founder	ResearchCoop	5 (2022)	Researchers	Research	Internal
Founder	RecyclingCoop	4500 (2022)	Not members per se, but waste pickers	Waste collection	Internal
Founder	MealCoop	20 (2022)	Founders, users, riders, community supporters (both organisations and individuals)	Delivery	External—Shared-services cooperative
Founder	RideHailCoop	6000 (2022)	Drivers	Ride-hailing	Internal
Founder	DispatchCoop	20 (2020)	Restaurants, consumers, drivers, employees	Delivery	Internal
Founder	BikeCoop	3 (2021)	Founders, riders (may include more member categories later)	Delivery	External—Shared-services cooperative
Founder	TeachCoop	320 (2022)	Teachers, users, investor members	Education	Internal

Note: Sources for these figures are: Business filings, business presentations, the cooperative's website and web forums, online governance platforms, their corporate social media accounts, and news media about these cooperatives.

In addition, we asked participants a more general question about their perceptions of the distinguishing features of PWCs vis-à-vis traditional worker cooperatives. Sixteen of our participants were interviewed once, and five participants engaged in detailed follow-up interviews focused on our emerging themes. We conducted all interviews virtually due to the geographic dispersion of our participants and COVID-19-related research protocols. All interviews were audio recorded with the consent of participants and subsequently professionally transcribed.

Our data analysis process was iterative and evolved through multiple stages that included engagement with relevant research (Locke et al., 2022) on topics like cooperative governance, platform work, and platform cooperatives. We began by engaging in structural coding (Saldaña, 2009), whereby we grouped the data based on the core themes we touched on in the interviews (e.g., perceived distinguishing features of PWCs) to facilitate our subsequent analysis. We then undertook concept coding (Saldaña, 2009), whereby we assigned a short phrase to capture the broader meaning of particular fragments from the interviews. Through a recurrent process of comparing codes with each other throughout our analysis, we eventually combined closely related codes to create broader analytic categories, such as *constrained participation on some issues*. At this point, we began engaging with the literature to explore connections between these categories and the extant literature (Locke et al., 2022). Early on in the project, we explored connections between our findings and Spear et al. (2009) framework of governance challenges in social enterprises. Based on further engagement with research on the importance of participation in the platform economy and cooperatives, we decided to focus on one of these challenges: managing member participation. We re-coded data related to the other governance challenges to identify any additional data on member participation. We then focused on creating robust conceptualisations of the distinguishing features of PWCs, a process that entailed significant engagement with the limited and often fragmented research on this topic to refine our definitions. Finally, we coded for any potential relationships between the distinguishing features of PWCs and the dynamics of platform worker-member participation we identified.

As three of our follow-up interviews were held after we completed our initial theoretical framework, we incorporated elements of member review (Locke and Ramakrishna Velamuri, 2009), whereby we shared our initial framework of the distinguishing features of PWCs to solicit participants' feedback. The feedback from these conversations helped validate and clarify our interpretations of the distinguishing features. In particular, it helped crystallise our definition of platform worker cooperatives, as we came to see the centrality of the mediating function of the platform to the business model as an inherent part of all platform cooperatives.

FINDINGS

We present our findings in two steps. First, we provide an overview of our analysis about the dynamics of platform worker-member participation in PWCs. We then turn to discuss our theory development about how the distinguishing features of PWCs influence these dynamics.

Platform worker-member participation in PWCs

In a broad sense, fostering participation among platform worker-members (as well as with other members) is a priority for PWCs as it helps ensure responsiveness to concerns about

working conditions, as well as social and environmental issues. The opportunity for members to participate in important governance decisions can serve as a key advantage and attraction of platform cooperatives in comparison to corporate platforms. Our participants pointed to specific contributions including helping infuse a broader array of voices into decision-making, notably those that had traditionally been marginalised, improving the quality of decision-making, and fostering members′ skill and capacity development. For example, when it comes to giving voice to more marginalised groups, a senior leader from CleanCoop discussed that 'being able to foster that sense of voice among workers that experience a lot of exploitation and marginalisation and oppression, it′s really important'.

Practices to foster member participation among platform worker-members

PWCs put many practices in place to foster platform worker-member participation *among* platform worker-members and *between* platform worker-members and the board of directors. These include the opportunity for members to call or email, socialise, vote, serve as a representative, communicate through virtual communities, and attend meetings and working groups. Our analysis points to the final two categories being particularly prominent and prevalent.

Our participants reported that, in terms of virtual communities within their cooperatives, much interaction with, and participation of, members took place through commercial communications platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, Slack, Telegram, Facebook) and in-house platforms such as members-only sections of websites and apps. These virtual communities allowed members to make suggestions, ask questions, and socialise. According to a senior leader of ArtCoop:

> We have a really comprehensive coop portal that′s built into the site so once you become a coop member you get access to our forums, you get access to our member news which is updated often, we post like six times a month on very detailed things that the coop members may need, whether it′s changes to editing standards or every month we push out really detailed financial reports.

The deliberations in these communities had an impact on business operations. As a founder of RecyclingCoop put it:

> [The platform worker-members] come with this demand [on WhatsApp] and [...] we have people on the team that are running these groups so when they have something interesting they share it in another WhatsApp group and we take to our weekly meetings, 'Oh we need to change that' and then it changes the whole communication.

Most of the cooperatives our participants were involved with had a variety of opportunities for members to attend one-off meetings and join working groups on specific tasks, in addition to attending mandatory meetings required by cooperative law where applicable. A founder of MealCoop put it this way: 'The sort of idea is that we will have little working groups made up of probably the person on the board that is involved in that area of work and anyone with expertise or interest or whatever wanting to be involved of the membership'. During the time of

our study, which overlapped with the COVID-19 pandemic, many of these gatherings took place virtually.

Successes and challenges of platform worker-member participation

Our analysis suggests that PWCs can engender platform worker-member participation with varying degrees of success. In terms of successful participation, some participants reported that their cooperative was able to sustain an acceptable level of platform worker-member participation. A founder of MusicCoop captured it this way: 'There's been a good amount of engagement and people, you know, call me and say "these are the features I care about, I think we should prioritise these." [...] so I wouldn't say I'm disappointed with a lack of input.' Some participants also perceived that the participation channels their cooperatives had put in place facilitated the participation of a broader array of platform worker-members. Holding meetings virtually enabled members to participate from home or while working, with a senior leader of CleanCoop observing that platform worker-members are: 'very clear about that, like "I'm so sorry, today I'm working, you're in my ears, I'm here and I will stop working to add my comments." [...] It's just easier'.

At the same time, we also identified three categories of challenges pertaining to platform worker-member participation: member apathy, unequal levels of participation and constrained participation on specific issues. These challenges tended to outnumber the successes participants perceived. First, in terms of *member apathy*, many platform worker-members did not take advantage of the participation opportunities offered to them in their organisations or, at least, did so below the expectations of their cooperative—particularly in the formal forums for member participation. One senior leader from TunesCoop described how participation at general meetings was very low:

> I would say that in [the] last year there was a real ebb, we were near death. There wasn't a lot of people—when you send out the e-mail saying there's a meeting, not a lot of people showed up.

A senior leader from ArtCoop described relatively low engagement in the cooperative's resolution process despite it meeting the threshold for a quorum: 'So currently there is a little bit of a kind of lack of excitement or engagement around resolutions [...] we hit quorum and we're able to move it along [...] [but] the last vote we had we had just under 20% engagement in voting. So obviously we want to do much better than that considering our quorum is 10'.

The second category of challenges is *unequal levels of participation*, which refers to variability in the extent to which different groups of platform worker-members within a given PWC make use of participation opportunities. This takes the form of different degrees of contribution to the cooperative's affairs, as in the case of MoveCoop: 'Because in a collective there's always people leading and people, let's say, following [...] the fact that having people not doing much but expecting to have the same kind of responsibility and decision-making it sometimes leads to frustration'. Some founders and leaders also noted differences in participation based on digital literacy and access to technology, as in RecyclingCoop: 'if we send [queries] to all of them, normally the only percentage that will answer is the one that know more how to use the app'.

The third category is *constrained participation on some issues*, whereby platform worker-members are unable to participate in decision-making about some types of issues relevant to their cooperative. One type of constrained participation stems from a deference to the affordances of an underlying technology when making decisions about their platform. A leader of HailCoop put it this way: 'Right now the decisions around what goes into the product as well as the governance of that are driven primarily by the technological limitations and possibilities of the technology that we're working with, Ethereum and the sort of related Ethereum 2.0 type technologies'. Another type we identified is when a subset of representatives or leaders makes decisions without allowing platform worker-members to voice their perspectives. One of the founders of HealthCoop reflected: 'I think we're still in that start-up phase now where things are a bit chaotic so certain decisions get to the membership and then certain decisions are delegated to the board and we just have to get on with it'.

The role of distinguishing features of PWCs

Based on our analysis, we argue that four features distinguish and differentiate PWCs from traditional worker cooperatives. In defining and describing these features, we integrate prior research that has touched on these features, identified through later stages of our data analysis. We discuss each of these and their contributions to the successes and challenges of fostering active platform worker-member participation.

Facilitation of multihoming

The first distinguishing feature is PWCs' *facilitation of multihoming*, whereby platform worker-members can simultaneously register for, and sequentially use, multiple platforms or other modes of working. This characteristic has received minimal scholarly attention in the context of PWCs, despite it being recognised as an important factor in platforms generally achieving network effects and scaling (Gawer, 2021). As one of the founders of NewsCoop described the cooperative's general approach to platform worker-members, 'you don't commit to going to a space, you don't commit to contributing any money, you don't commit to sort of it being a full-time work for you, so I think that it is a sort of much looser, easier to join and easier to exit sort of arrangement'. Multihoming is facilitated because, as with other platform businesses (Kovalainen et al., 2019), full-time work in a platform cooperative is uncommon and several participants in our study reported being tolerant of multihoming, as they perceive the benefits of platform workers earning an additional income.

Traditional worker cooperatives also have part-time worker-members. One recent study of US worker cooperatives noted that 69% of members of US worker cooperatives work part-time (Schlacter and Prushinskaya, 2021). Traditional worker cooperatives permit part-time work due to the unavailability of sufficient work for all members or due to the personal circumstances of a member that require them to work part-time. In contrast to traditional worker cooperatives in industrial factories or supermarkets that *allow*, but do not *facilitate* multihoming, multihoming is often seen as an intrinsic and accepted characteristic of PWCs. As one of the founders of TransportCoop observed, 'the fact that the workers can do [...] multiple work, or different work or professions, is typical to [the] sharing economy'. This is also true outside of ride-hailing, as one of the founders of DeliveryCoop shared that he does 'some of geospatial cartography work

alongside the work I do with [DeliveryCoop]. Another one of our members does graphic work design'. Generating multiple forms of income permits the platform workers to earn a sustainable income, which the cooperative cannot guarantee. Even in the PWCs where the members primarily worked for the cooperative (e.g., MoveCoop, GraphicCoop), non-member workers who were on track to becoming members of the cooperative were permitted to work elsewhere.

Some of our participants also observe benefits to the cooperative itself from the facilitation of multihoming. In a competitive sector like ride-hailing, multihoming can allow the cooperative to draw from a ready supply of qualified platform workers looking for work opportunities and consequently shorten wait periods for consumers, thereby leading to more transactions being completed. As one of the founders of DispatchCoop mentioned 'it's not an issue that people are multi-homing, it's actually a third-mover advantage because we don't have to pay all the acquisition cost to get somebody out on the road. You just have to bring in that incremental trip and make money on the incremental trip'. As a consequence, PWCs operating in the 'on-demand' economy such as food delivery and ride-hailing tolerate their members being simultaneously logged onto both cooperative-run and corporate platforms when searching for work. Multihoming also makes it affordable for a PWC to impose a lengthy probation period on potential members, thereby allowing the existing members to get to know a candidate better and assess their compatibility and ability to provide good quality work. For instance, in GraphicCoop, candidates are 'expected to go through six to nine months of dating, of mentoring' and the probation period is 'designed so they can still be freelancing for the capitalist marketplace and put in a few hours and then eventually it evens out, so they can live like the crappy jobs translating or designing for Phillips' (Founder, GraphicCoop).

While multihoming is facilitated for pragmatic reasons, the *degree* to which it is facilitated appears to turn on the ideological predisposition of the cooperative. Some actively facilitate it as they see it from a business perspective of ensuring 'positive net economics' where 'driver and rider acquisition costs' are properly managed (Founder, DispatchCoop), while others only grudgingly do so as they see their mission being 'to dismantle the gig economy' and 'supporting the gig economy by multi-homing, taking your guaranteed wage and then topping it up to support our competitors would be misaligned' with this mission (Founder, BikeCoop).

We identified two main ways in which the facilitation of multihoming can affect platform worker-member participation. First, the opportunity to work on multiple platforms simultaneously means that some platform worker-members may take on work with other organisations, reducing their time and incentive to participate in cooperative decision-making. One of the founders of NewsCoop captured the dynamic this way: 'I could definitely see that happening. That people are not so committed to the specific cooperatives that they participate in and that sort of reduces their incentives to participate in governance'. Second, the possibility of multihoming can lead to PWCs reducing or limiting options for platform worker-members to access certain information and participate in decision-making. A founder of MusicCoop described how the organisation cut back on meetings given platform worker-members involvement in other organisations: 'we've dialled back the amount of meetings and you know we're all remote, most people have full-time jobs so we just have to be really respectful and efficient with our time and communication basically'. In terms of limiting access to some digital participation channels, a leader of MediaCoop described how the organisation chose to limit access to some channels out of concern that platform worker-members might be working with other media groups: 'We have a Slack account where we do most of our interactions for the

[coop] communications on stories and stuff. There are journalists on there that are also working with other media groups so not all the channels are open'.

Physically untethered nature of work

The second distinguishing feature is that, compared with most traditional worker cooperatives, in PWCs platform worker-members are *untethered from a fixed, physical workplace*. Given that PWCs are in the business of intermediation, their business model enables 'one-person microproviders' to carry out their activities outside of the PWC's physical, fixed establishments (Lehdonvirta et al., 2019), as consumers do not need to go to one of these establishments to procure a good or service. This is in contrast with many traditional worker cooperatives, such as worker-owned stores and funeral homes, which require physical presence within a set establishment belonging to the cooperative (Cornforth, 1995; Soetens and Huybrechts, 2023). It is only a subset of worker cooperatives, typically operating in the service (e.g., doula, homecare and taxi cooperatives) and cultural (e.g., artist) industries, that have worker-members which are largely untethered from a fixed, physical workplace. In contrast, such untetheredness is common across all PWCs, irrespective of industry.

In the words of a founder of ResearchCoop, 'as a digital coop, your members can come from anywhere. So you have to deal with all these possible differences, you don't have something that necessarily links everyone together'. In geographically dispersed PWCs, this means that many platform worker-members rarely, if ever, get the chance to meet each other in person. In some more geographically localised PWCs, such as delivery or cleaning cooperatives serving a particular region, platform worker-members also primarily work in isolation from each other but may, when possible, convene with each other in a physical space to socialise. One of the founders of MoveCoop notes how it was the PWC itself that provided this physical space for platform worker-members to meet: 'You know, you go to the office and you chat a bit with the dispatcher, you sit on the couch, you smoke a cigarette, and then you start working'.

Enabling untethered work from a fixed, physical workplace influences platform worker-member participation in PWCs in two main ways. First, this feature drives the use of virtual platforms for communication and participation that can contribute both positively and negatively to platform worker-member participation. On the one hand, the use of these technologies can make it easier for platform worker-members to participate in decision-making. A founder of NewsCoop reflected on how virtual participation methods lowered barriers to participating in governance processes: 'So, all of the sudden you realise your votes, or your participation, is worth something very easily and it's a very low barrier because you're doing it through the app as well'. These reduced barriers made it easier for worker-members who traditionally faced barriers to attending in-person events due to their busy schedules to still participate in cooperative decision-making. Cooperatives can use the affordances of technology to develop innovative ways of involving platform worker-members, like participatory budgeting and member resolutions. As an example of the latter, a senior leader from ArtCoop described the cooperative's resolution process: 'you submit your resolution online, it automatically triggers the system, triggers e-mails, triggers voting, triggers all of the different steps in the system [...] You don't have to be in a physical space at a physical time to participate in our governance'.

On the other hand, this use of virtual technologies can also inhibit participation. Some platform worker-members may not have sufficient resources to use the governance tools available. The founder of RecyclingCoop described how many of its worker-members did not

have sufficient phone memory to store the app they used for participation. Some technologies for virtual coordination are too advanced for some worker-members, limiting their participation and potentially making it more unequal. The participants that were involved with cooperatives that worked virtually and developed their own technologies (e.g., WebCoop, HailCoop), described how these cooperatives used blockchain-based applications (e.g., DAOStack), IPFS-based decentralised voting systems (e.g., Snapshot), Loomio, or other complex tools for member participation. These were seen as too advanced for some platform worker-members, as described by one of the founders of TunesCoop: 'If one doesn't have those skill levels that also causes a challenge for the degree of participation and engagement and practice that a collective or cooperative community might be able to express and articulate'.

Second, the fact that platform worker-members work at a distance from each other can make it difficult for them to develop mutual affective trust, solidarity, and a feeling of group belonging through the cultivation of shared interests and values (Bernstein, 1976). A founder of RideHailCoop reflected on the difference between a traditional worker cooperative: '[in] the traditional coop you go and you meet the people in person and maybe you know the family because they're in the neighbourhood. But in a platform coop you have someone from nowhere and it's a part of you. So maybe this is a challenge how to build the trust'. A founder of TransportCoop echoes this sentiment and Bernstein's (1976) view that members should have a face-to-face system to air and settle grievances: 'Because drivers don't work from a single location, because they work whenever they want and can, there's no space for communication, for knowledge sharing, for them to have a reference point to say, "hey we're a hundred and twenty-four drivers, we're pissed"'. Given this, some PWCs focus on developing new routines and practices to build connection among members. For example, the founder of ResearchCoop described the cooperative's focus on 'just having more rhythms, more community building activities, and then just making sure that people can come together on these things'. Yet, the reality of physically untethered work, particularly when platform worker-members work across multiple time zones, is likely to pose challenges to these efforts.

Relatively high importance of scale as a strategic imperative

A third distinguishing feature is the *relatively high importance that PWCs place scale as a strategic imperative*. By this, we mean that, as a type of platform business, they have a predisposition towards expanding in terms of members and the territories in which they operate. Corporate platforms often see scaling operations wide and fast as necessary to establish themselves ahead of potential competitors in markets where a small difference in quality, speed, and so forth can lead to a disproportionate increase in user numbers, market share and revenue (Büge and Ozcan, 2021). This is in contrast with traditional worker cooperatives, which, while potentially having good reasons to scale (e.g., increasing competitiveness with investor-owned firms, long-term survival, and demonstrating viability as an alternative to investor-owned firms), may be torn about such a decision out of concern for retaining member participation and embeddedness in a local context (Cornforth, 1995; Spicer, 2022). A senior leader from CleanCoop perceived a 'need to show and demonstrate that this [PWC] can grow and be expanded everywhere tomorrow'. Scaling is critical to remain competitive given the importance of generating direct and indirect network effects to the success of platforms (Gawer, 2021). In this vein, a founder of TransportCoop argued that 'it is very difficult to grow organically when you don't have riders and drivers'.

While most of the participants reported that the cooperatives they were involved with aspired to scale quickly out of a desire to have sufficient users on each side of their platform and to be financially sustainable, others wanted to scale in a 'safe and slow way' to avoid becoming 'overwhelmed with growth' (Founder, MoveCoop). One approach to achieving this, as demonstrated in the case of some PWCs in the delivery industry, is to remain rooted in a particular municipality but coordinate with other organisations to develop software through a shared-services entity, thereby securing some of the financial and technological benefits of economies of scale. This is in keeping with earlier thinking in the cooperative movement that scaling should happen in a network structure or in a federation with other aligned cooperatives (Menzani and Zamagni, 2010). Even in such cases, there was a recognition that scaling within the geographic region in which cooperatives operate is necessary for their continued financial survival and to increase their returns to platform worker-members. The founder of BikeCoop captured this dynamic this way: 'scaling to one hundred riders is not because [of a] fixation with growth and taking over the world [...] that's just what it's going to take with the very low margins on each delivery to make the whole enterprise sustainable'.

The primary way this distinguishing feature affects worker-member participation is by influencing cooperatives' prioritisation of member participation relative to other objectives. Fostering platform worker-member participation can be more time and resource-intensive than many early-stage PWCs can afford. A founder of DispatchCoop reflected that: 'It takes money to run a very solid election and it takes team time and so it's like look, I'd love to have a full-time member engagement and governance person, can I afford that person? Absolutely not'. The pressure PWCs face to grow and scale can result in them expending less time and fewer resources to implement practices to foster platform worker-member participation. A founder of TransportCoop highlighted this tension well, noting that 'I don't like to say that, but we manage the business as if it was a startup', and later following up that 'our focus wasn't the democratic decision-making process even though I mean we did a general assembly, we did what is required by the law of coop [...] but we haven't done more'.

For PWCs operating in particularly competitive markets, the importance placed on scaling as a strategic imperative could also lead to unequal levels of participation if the operations were structured such that not all platform worker-members could participate in the same meetings. The founder from TransportCoop highlighted how the need to consistently keep their service available made it difficult to include all platform worker-members in general assemblies: 'we're up and running twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. There's no downtime so doing general assemblies is tricky because we always need drivers on the road'. Relatedly, an emphasis on scaling could lead to more geographic dispersion among members, which, as discussed earlier, can make it difficult to build trust, solidarity and shared connection among members, particularly across different time zones.

Relatively low importance of initial platform worker-member investment

The fourth distinguishing characteristic is the relatively low importance PWCs place on initial platform worker-member investment. There is less of an expectation for platform worker-members in PWCs to be initial investors than in many traditional worker cooperatives where the membership fee is used to establish commitment and help finance the cooperative (ICA Group, 2020). While the start-up investment of an industrial worker cooperative is relatively higher than a service worker cooperative, Artz and Kim (2011, p. 3) contend that 'it is not unusual for 40%

or more of start-up funds to come from members themselves'. In contrast, platform worker-members often lack the resources to make substantial monetary contributions to their cooperative. Many of our participants noted that financial contributions from platform worker-members in their cooperatives were non-existent or negligible. Depending on the type of platform, the emphasis is instead on the quality of work or quantity of work transactions. Our findings suggest that in more high-skilled PWCs there is often a premium placed on finding the right members to fulfil technical functions and fit with cooperative values, whereas in more low-skilled ones, there was more of an emphasis on the quantity of members and/or frequency of transactions. PWCs can meet their often varied investment needs through other means. In particular, primary cooperatives can leverage technologies from shared-services platforms to reduce their costs. This cost–benefit was captured by the founder of DeliveryCoop, an organisation using a shared-services entity's API, fleet management and food-tech software: 'I think with [the shared-services entity] we're in a very advantageous position [...] There's no expectation to pay anything on the development of the platform. But if you had to pay for the development of the platform, the costs would be huge'.

Placing relatively low importance on initial platform worker-member investment can affect platform worker-member participation in two ways. First, contributing fewer resources can result in worker-members having less of an incentive to participate in decision-making. A founder of TeachCoop captured this dynamic well, arguing how limited investment may lead to the entry of members who are not motivated in participating: 'the low barrier to entry is something that is, in general, in any organisation, is going to decrease overall buy-in because you're not selecting the most motivated people per se'. A founder of NewsCoop highlighted that making a lower investment can result in less of a perceived stake in participating and, in the terms of Michaud and Audebrand (2022) 'free-ride' on the participation of other members: 'maybe they don't feel that they are so intensely participating, they don't really feel that they have a big stake so they're like ok, let the other members [decide]'.

Second, in cases of cooperatives that use software developed by secondary entities owned and governed by the cooperatives themselves (i.e., shared-services entities) to reduce costs, this may inadvertently lead to constrained platform worker-member participation on some specific topics. As with corporate platforms that constrain what third parties can do when using their platform (Watkins and Stark, 2018), shared-services entities impose some rules on using their technology and may reserve the final decision-making authority in making changes to the software. In MoveCoop, a shared-services entity introduced requirements regarding the minimum number of platform worker-members for cooperatives using its technology, requiring that at least half of the platform workers of a cooperative in a given year be members. As a result, '[some] feel a little bit like [they] are forced into doing things that they don't want to'. Shared-services entities may also limit decision-making control over some technology-related decisions (Mannan, 2022). For example, a founder of TransportCoop described how 'it's kind of a compromise with the ownership structure so the IP of the tech is owned by [shared-services entity] and this is how we can approach traditional venture capital saying that we have a backup plan in case our business gets bankrupt, we have a tech we can sell'.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In light of the emergence and growth of PWCs, we sought to examine how their distinguishing features vis-à-vis traditional worker cooperatives affect the dynamics of member participation. We found that, as with traditional worker cooperatives, PWCs prioritise platform

worker-member participation to various extents and implement a wide range of practices to enable it. While these practices help PWCs achieve some successes when it comes to platform worker-member participation, we found that, more often than not, these cooperatives face the challenges of member apathy, unequal levels of participation, and constrained participation on some issues. We subsequently built theory about how four distinguishing features of PWCs play enabling and constraining roles when it comes to platform worker-member participation.

Our paper makes two contributions. First, we demonstrate how the organisational characteristics of ideal-type worker cooperatives are in tension with platforms as organisational models as the two elements of a PWC—the platform organisation and the worker cooperative organisational model—effectively 'pull' in different directions. Novkovic et al. (2022) have argued that the dual nature of cooperatives are reflected at different levels—at an individual motivational level, an organisational level and a community impact level—and our contribution helps us better understand the tensions that arise at the organisational level. At the core of this tension is the issue of where organisational boundaries are drawn. With investor-owned platforms, given that corporate entities are relatively flexible in terms of governance structure and purpose, organisational boundary decisions are made to serve the interests of the platform business model. There are limited constraints on this, such as ensuring financial returns to investors. In contrast, worker cooperatives have to serve the interests of members and, in several jurisdictions, have to also comply with the principles in the ICA Statement. As such, the interests of a worker cooperative and the interests of a platform may lead to different decisions on where organisational boundaries are drawn, thereby generating tensions when these two organisational models are fused in a PWC.

Unpacking this further, it has been argued that corporate platforms are like Möbius strips, co-opting assets from other businesses, the state, and users to the extent that distinguishing assets that are external or internal to the firm becomes almost meaningless (Watkins and Stark, 2018). Yet, for all worker cooperatives, the distinction between inside and outside—transactions with members versus transactions with non-members—is vital, if worker cooperatives are to continue to be for the benefit of members (Pönkä, 2018). Corporate platforms strive to achieve indirect network effects by increasing and decreasing the supply of platform workers so that consumers have a ready supply of workers to choose from (Gawer 2021), and while platform cooperatives also need to generate indirect network effects, the conditions on obtaining membership of a cooperative and the interest in ensuring platform worker-members' have a sufficient income makes it difficult to dynamically adjust the platform worker-member side of the platform. Moreover, while investor-owned, 'asset-light' platforms may wish for platform workers to absorb most of the costs and risks of service provision (Pichault and McKeown, 2019), PWCs operating in the same sector face a dilemma between not offloading business risks onto members and still trying to be competitive with their well-resourced competitors. In short, the relatively tight organisational boundaries of a worker cooperative do not correspond well to the amorphous and ever-expanding boundaries of a platform organisation (Kovalainen et al., 2019), thereby inherently generating tension between two core components of a PWC. While earlier literature described the organisational level tensions faced by cooperatives due to their dual social and financial goals (Novkovic et al., 2022), we build and refine their theoretical framework by adding greater nuance and insight from a particular context on how the use of certain technologies and particular business models shape these financial goals and thereby accentuate the tensions between these goals. This tension can have significant effects on participation in a PWC.

This brings us to our second contribution. Our paper contributes to our understanding of member participation in worker cooperatives more broadly. The interest of our sample of founders and senior leaders in platform worker-member participation is grounded in, and parallels that of, the interests of founders and senior leaders of participation in traditional worker cooperatives. Member participation is not only crucial to the successful practice of democracy in cooperatives (Michaud and Audebrand, 2022) but also has myriad social and instrumental benefits for cooperatives (Cheney et al., 2014). Yet, we know from prior work that it is challenging to in practice foster participation in worker cooperatives, particularly as they grow (Pek, 2021). Our paper contributes to this body of research by elaborating on how specific organisational features affect participation. For instance, the facilitation of multihoming may result in worker cooperatives closing off access to certain information selectively to avoid competitors accessing it. Similarly, untethering work from a fixed workplace may enable more people to become available for membership, but the lack of geographic proximity can inhibit the development of shared values and attitudes that are pivotal for implementing successful worker participation (Bernstein, 1976). These challenges of participation may ultimately affect workers' experience of working for, or through, a worker cooperative. While we primarily found evidence of these distinguishing features inhibiting participation, we also found that untetheredness from a fixed, physical workplace can increase participation by motivating worker cooperatives to develop and/or implement innovative virtual communication tools that can reduce barriers to communication and rectify previous disparities in participation.

Thus, while fostering platform worker-member participation in PWCs is likely to be challenging, there is hope that PWCs can 'recover' democratic participation once they acknowledge the threats to participation that exist due to the isomorphic pressures of the platform economy and begin to leverage new technologies and practices to improve participation. In light of this, we hope that our study serves as an impetus for more focused research and experimentation on participation in this unique context. Given that we studied the perceptions of senior leaders and/or founders and gathered data primarily at one point in time in their organisations' history, future research could adopt longitudinal designs and include a broader array of perspectives like those of platform worker-members. Holistically addressing the challenges of participation will allow for the dual social and financial goals of these PWCs to not act at counter-purposes, but instead help achieve beneficial complementarities, including ensuring human dignity at work. Additionally, we hope that researchers and practitioners studying traditional worker cooperatives consider experimenting with and investigating many of the virtual communication and participation practices our PWCs use, such as online resolution processes, as a means of reducing risks of degeneration (Varman and Chakrabarti, 2004).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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