Payments on Digital Platforms: Resiliency, Interoperability, and Welfare

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Summary

Digital platforms, such as Alibaba and Amazon, operate an online marketplace to facilitate transactions. This paper studies a platform's business model choice between accepting cash and issuing tokens, as well as the implications for welfare, resiliency, and interoperability. A cash platform free rides on the existing payment infrastructure and profits from collecting transaction fees. A token platform earns seigniorage, albeit bearing the costs of setting up the system and holding reserves to mitigate the cyber risk. Tokens earn consumers a return, insulating transactions from the liquidity costs of using cash, but also expose them to the remaining cyber risk. The platform issues tokens if the interest rate is high, the platform scope is large, and the cyber risk is small. Unbacked floating tokens with zero transaction fees or interest-bearing stablecoins can implement the equilibrium business model, which is not necessarily socially optimal because the platform does not internalize its impacts on off-platform activities. Regulations such as a minimum reserve requirement can reduce welfare.