


The neoliberal self in the digital platform era: between autonomy and precarity

El yo neoliberal en la era de las plataformas digitales: entre autonomía y precariedad

O eu neoliberal na era das plataformas digitais: Entre autonomia e precariedade

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ABSTRACT | This study provides a comprehensive analysis of how digital platforms such as Uber, Glovo, and Airbnb influence labor dynamics through discourses that praise autonomy and flexibility. Using a qualitative methodology based on 73 in-depth interviews conducted with workers during the pandemic, the analysis reveals a clear contradiction between the independence promoted by these companies and the daily reality of workers: insecure jobs, intense algorithmic control, and a notable lack of social protection. The research conducts a critical analysis of corporate discourses and shows how they influence the construction of work identity and how workers reinterpret and reshape this logic to negotiate better conditions. Significant patterns of resistance and adaptation are identified that actively challenge the prevailing logic of individualization and self-exploitation. The concept of the neoliberal self is critically scrutinized and it is shown that its manifestation is neither uniform nor inevitable, but varies considerably depending on the socioeconomic context and the individual and collective strategies of workers. The study concludes that while platforms systematically hinder collective action, organic support networks and innovative organizing strategies are emerging that fundamentally challenge this model and open up crucial debates about new forms of resistance in today's digital economy.

KEYWORDS: platform work, algorithmic control, neoliberal subject, discourse analysis.

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RESUMEN | Este estudio ofrece un análisis exhaustivo de cómo las plataformas digitales como Uber, Glovo y Airbnb configuran las dinámicas laborales mediante discursos que ensalzan la autonomía y la flexibilidad. A partir de una metodología cualitativa –basada en 73 entrevistas en profundidad realizadas durante la pandemia a trabajadores–, el análisis muestra una marcada contradicción entre la independencia promovida por estas compañías y las realidades cotidianas de los trabajadores: precarización laboral, un control algorítmico intensivo y una notable falta de protección social. Se realiza un análisis crítico de los discursos corporativos, examinando cómo influyen en la construcción de la identidad laboral y cómo los trabajadores los reinterpretan y transforman para negociar mejores condiciones. Se identifican patrones significativos de resistencia y adaptación que desafían activamente la lógica dominante de la individualización y la autoexplotación, y se cuestiona de forma crítica el concepto del yo neoliberal, demostrando que su manifestación no es uniforme ni inevitable, sino que varía considerablemente según el contexto socioeconómico y las estrategias individuales y colectivas de los trabajadores. Se concluye que, aunque las plataformas obstaculizan sistemáticamente la acción colectiva, surgen redes de apoyo orgánico y estrategias organizativas innovadoras que cuestionan de raíz este modelo y abren debates cruciales sobre nuevas formas de resistencia en la economía digital contemporánea.

PALABRAS CLAVE: trabajo en plataformas, control algorítmico, yo neoliberal, análisis de discurso.

RESUMO | Este estudo apresenta uma análise exaustiva sobre como plataformas digitais como Uber, Glovo e Airbnb moldam as dinâmicas laborais através de discursos que exaltam a autonomia e a flexibilidade. A partir de uma metodologia qualitativa — baseada em 73 entrevistas detalhadas realizadas a trabalhadores durante a pandemia —, a análise evidencia uma contradição marcante entre a independência promovida por essas empresas e a realidade cotidiana dos trabalhadores: precariedade laboral, controle algorítmico intensivo e notável falta de proteção social. Realiza-se uma análise crítica dos discursos corporativos, mostrando como eles influenciam a construção da identidade laboral, assim como a forma pela qual os trabalhadores reinterpretam e transformam essas lógicas para negociar melhores condições. São identificados padrões significativos de resistência e adaptação que desafiam ativamente a lógica dominante da individualização e da autoexploração. O estudo questiona criticamente o conceito do eu neoliberal, demonstrando que a sua manifestação não é uniforme nem inevitável, variando consideravelmente em função do contexto socioeconômico e das estratégias individuais e coletivas dos trabalhadores. Conclui-se que, apesar das plataformas dificultarem sistematicamente a ação coletiva, emergem as redes de apoio orgânicas e estratégias organizacionais inovadoras que desafiam a raiz esse modelo, abrindo debates cruciais sobre novas formas de resistência na economia digital contemporânea.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: trabalho em plataformas, controle algorítmico, eu neoliberal, análise do discurso.

INTRODUCTION

Digital platforms have become key players in transforming labor dynamics, affecting not only working conditions but also how workers perceive and experience their connection to productive and consumer activity (Srnicsek, 2018). In *The Platform Society*, van Dijck and colleagues (2018) warn that this transformation involves a strong integration of infrastructure, markets, and governance with cultural practices, bringing risks that can undermine civic values and widen inequalities in wealth and power. As Cavalcanti Zanforlin and Grohmann (2022) note, companies such as Uber, Glovo, and Airbnb have constructed a narrative that highlights autonomy and flexibility as fundamental benefits. Their main slogan, “Be your own boss” (<https://glovoapp.com/en>), aims to convey an image of freedom and opportunities for micro-entrepreneurship (Purcell & Brook, 2020).

The central problem addressed in this study is not limited to the contradiction between business rhetoric and workers’ real experiences; it also seeks to problematize the concept of the neoliberal subject in the Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 2009). As Watts (2021) argues, not all workers have uniformly assimilated this economic rationality, as there are contradictions, negotiations, and forms of resistance in its adoption.

The main objective of this research, which falls within the field of communication due to both its object of study and methodological framework, is to analyze how the discourses of autonomy and flexibility promoted by digital companies are adopted or rejected by the platform workforce. To this end, the following specific objectives are proposed:

- OE1. Research how platform workers interpret, reproduce, and reconfigure these discourses in their daily practices.
- OE2. Identify the ideologies present in the workers' stories.
- OE3. Analyze the discursive dynamics that structure the construction.

Using a critical discourse analysis approach (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; van Dijk, 2005), and drawing on studies on platform capitalism, this paper examines how corporate narratives shape the perception of work and work identities.

State of the art

Platform work

Digital platform work has profoundly transformed the organization of employment, establishing itself as a disruptive model with economic, social, and cultural implications. According to Srnicsek (2018), these platforms emerged in response to the crisis of full employment and the restructuring of the welfare

state, shifting certain labor risks and costs onto workers. In this context, van Dijk and colleagues (2018) note that when a transportation company like Uber defines itself as a digital service, “it escapes the responsibility that comes with being an employer in the sector” and “evades social responsibility for paying collective contributions to cover social security or pensions” (p. 447). Underlying this tactic, they argue, “is an ideology in which individuals must fend for themselves” (p. 447).

A paradigmatic example appears in the employment section of Glovo’s website, a home-delivery company, which uses slogans such as “The ride of your life” or “Take the wheel and be the owner of your career” (<https://jobs.glovoapp.com/>). These corporate narratives reinforce values such as trust and autonomy while concealing the precariousness inherent in the model. Riesgo Gómez (2022) analyzes how digital reputation systems foster individualism and competition, making it difficult to build solidarity among workers. Similarly, Fernández-Trujillo Moares (2021) highlights how labor fragmentation limits collective organization, although union initiatives have emerged to counteract precariousness.

Platforms have also been analyzed as agents of social reconfiguration, promoting discourses of inclusion and labor diversity. However, Cavalcanti Zanforlin and Grohmann’s (2022) study, focusing on migrant workers in São Paulo, Brazil, shows that these mechanisms can reproduce structural inequalities, particularly affecting immigrants, women, and young people. Furthermore, the impact of platform work extends to less visible sectors, such as domestic and care work, where forms of precarization take on specific characteristics.

The narrative of autonomy and flexibility in the gig economy

Similarly to Glovo, the Uber Eats employment website states:

“Your job. Your choice” (<https://www.uber.com/es/en/deliver/>). The discourse of autonomy and flexibility promoted by digital platforms has been the subject of extensive critical analysis. According to Pangrazio et al. (2021), the gig economy is characterized by short-term, contract, or freelance employment. In their study, they examine how three Australian newspapers portrayed the gig economy between 2014 and 2019 as an inevitable phase in the evolving relationship between capital and labor.

Shibata (2020) explains how, in Japan, this narrative –framed as a response to work-life balance challenges– helps legitimize labor market deregulation and the expansion of the gig economy. However, this model conceals intensified forms of control and surveillance that significantly reduce workers' actual agency.

Flexibility, presented as a competitive advantage, results in fragmented work practices, as described by Demir (2024) in his concept of the gig economy. Tasks

are stripped of their intrinsic value and transformed into atomized, low-wage activities. This model reinforces a system in which occupational hazards are externalized, basic rights are removed, and informality is normalized under the rhetoric of entrepreneurship and autonomy.

Purcell and Brook (2020) offer a theoretical perspective by analyzing how the discourse of freedom on platforms shapes a contradictory consciousness among workers. This dominant narrative combines elements of coercion and consent, promoting a sense of autonomy that coexists with more intense forms of control. According to the authors, algorithmic control functions as a disciplinary mechanism that reinforces precarious labor structures while leading workers to internalize these conditions as inevitable or even desirable.

A critical analysis of these narratives also reveals their impact on workers' self-identity. As Ticona and Mateescu (2018) note, rating and reputation systems not only discipline behavior but also shape perceptions of personal and professional success. Reliance on these metrics reinforces a logic of self-improvement that blurs the boundaries between personal and work life, intensifying emotional and material exploitation.

However, some authors challenge this view, highlighting that while platform work may appear individualistic and lack a physical workplace, workers find ways to connect and organize to build power and resist, challenging the notion that they are unorganizable (Grohmann et al., 2023). Similarly, Bonini and Treré (2024) show how platform workers employ infrastructural strategies of everyday resistance, such as using private chats to share information, organizing coordinated rejection of requests, using multiple platforms simultaneously, or generating fake reviews to improve their reputation.

The concept of the neoliberal subject and its implications

The concept of the neoliberal subject has been widely used to describe how neoliberalism shapes the individual as a self-entrepreneurial subject whose identity aligns with values of self-sufficiency, adaptability, and self-exploitation (Brown, 2003; Marazzi, 2014; Williams, 2014; Reveley, 2016). For example, Türken and colleagues (2015) argue that the discourse of self-help and personal improvement serves as a key ideological device reinforcing neoliberal logic. Through narratives of individual empowerment, these discourses shift responsibility for success or failure exclusively onto the individual, making structural inequalities invisible.

In platform work, this rhetoric legitimizes precarization by presenting job instability as an opportunity for personal and professional growth. Riesgo Gómez (2022) shows how digital reputation systems foster strategic individualism and

discourage solidarity. Competition among workers, fueled by ratings and metrics, limits collective organization and reinforces fragmentation. Similarly, Shibata (2020) argues that the labor autonomy promoted by platforms is a fictitious freedom that functions as a control mechanism. Although formally independent, workers are subject to algorithmic restrictions that determine their access to job opportunities.

This type of algorithmic control (Houghton, 2019) reinforces self-exploitation by inducing workers to self-regulate to maximize performance and avoid sanctions. Chandler and Reid (2016) introduce the concept of neoliberal resilience as an adaptive mechanism that shifts responsibility for precariousness onto workers themselves. According to these authors, resilience does not strengthen autonomy; rather, it shapes individuals who accept uncertainty as an inevitable condition of work. On digital platforms, this discourse is reinforced by promoting the idea that success depends solely on an individual's ability to adapt to uncertain and volatile conditions. Thus, resilience acts as an ideological tool that legitimizes social vulnerability and the lack of job security.

However, this approach has been criticized for its overly generalized use, which reduces its analytical value. Aihwa Ong (2006) proposes the concept of precarious citizenships to show that neoliberalism does not operate uniformly, but is applied selectively according to political, economic, and social contexts. In platform work, this idea allows for analysis of how some workers internalize entrepreneurial logics, while others resist or negotiate them based on their material conditions and expectations. Similarly, Watts (2021) warns that assuming a homogeneous neoliberal subjectivity ignores the contradictions, resistances, and reinterpretations that workers themselves develop. Neoliberal subjectification is not a uniform process, but intersects with broader structures of inequality, generating variations in how individuals internalize or challenge this model.

METHODOLOGY

In this study –part of a larger research project (Scolari et al., 2024) based on short-term ethnography (Pink & Morgan, 2013)– a qualitative methodological design was adopted, suitable for exploring the discursive dynamics and construction of subjectivity (Fairclough, 1992) among workers in the platform economy. The corpus consists of 73 individual interviews with 48 workers (29 men and 19 women, aged 21 to 51) from various platforms and sectors (distribution, catering, logistics, temporary rental, care, and cleaning), conducted online or in person during the pandemic, between November 2020 and July 2022, in Madrid and Barcelona, with some interviews in the Balearic Islands, Valladolid, and Guadalajara. The participants were from Spain (18), France (1), Italy (1), Romania (1), Venezuela

(12), Chile (3), Mexico (3), Argentina (2), Peru (2), Cuba (1), Honduras (1), Egypt (1), Senegal (1), and Pakistan (1).

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, allowing for both direct responses to questions and the spontaneous flow of discourse, which facilitated in-depth and contextualized analysis. Purposive non-probability sampling was used, complemented by snowball sampling to identify previously unknown participants. One respondent was interviewed five times, five were interviewed three times, six were interviewed twice, and the rest once. All interviewees were adults and gave informed consent. Their identities were protected by pseudonyms, following EU privacy protocols. The platforms studied included Glovo, Just Eat, Getir, Cabify, Rover, Topnanny, and Airbnb.

Although diverse, the critical discourse analysis (CDA) methodologies of Wodak and Fairclough (1997) and van Dijk (2005) converge in their aim to analyze language in relation to power, ideology, and social inequality. The analysis was based on the transcription and general coding of the interviews using nVivo, after which general and specific analytical categories were defined. Three people participated in the analysis, with prior agreement on consistency in individual analyses. While the data analysis included categories from van Dijk's (2005) internal dimension (which examines enunciation, the use of personal pronouns, forms of self-reference, and metaphors used to describe working conditions and emotional states), this article focuses on categories from the external dimension, centering on ideological markers that reveal the power relations and dynamics of subjectivation inherent to platform capitalism.

RESULTS

Analysis of the discursive corpus composed of interviews with digital platform workers identified key trends in the configuration of work under this model, focusing on categories such as autonomy, flexibility, gender, immigration, and resilience. While the testimonies reveal assumptions of corporate discourse, they also expose significant contradictions and tensions marked by economic uncertainty, algorithmic dependence, and the fragmentation of labor ties.

Narratives of autonomy and flexibility

Workers often reproduce corporate discourses, emphasizing the platforms' ability to legitimize their practices through persuasive narratives. One interviewee remarked, "I thought: what's better than being outside, being your own boss, controlling your work hours, and living on a bike?" (Oriol, Barcelona, Glovo). This testimony shows how the discourse of autonomy functions not only as an initial

attraction but is also internalized as a form of personal validation, even when actual working conditions contradict these expectations. However, workers also strategically reinterpret these discourses to justify their work decisions or adapt to the system's demands.

I had been out of work for a year and a half, so since I couldn't find any other job, I decided to do something I enjoy –riding a bike– and earn money doing it at the same time (Gloria, Barcelona, Just Eat).

But come on, we're also free to activate and deactivate ourselves. We can be connected all day if we want (July, Valladolid. Glovo, before the Rider Law¹).

The expression “since I couldn't find any other job” illustrates how the gig economy becomes a last resort when alternative employment is unavailable. The platform narrative resonates strongly when the interviewee repeats the slogan “doing something I enjoy”, using the rhetoric of enjoyment and freedom. In the second quote, the worker describes freedom as the ability to be connected all day, which actually reflects a form of self-exploitation. The use of the word “free” contrasts sharply with the reality of a system that incentivizes constant availability as the only way to secure sufficient income.

In the interviews, several people mention that they accept this idea because they do not see viable alternatives within the labor market. The freedom, flexibility, and autonomy of being your own boss coexist with precariousness and the lack of traditional labor protections. One of the interviewees expressed it this way:

I'm am free; I prefer it. If I want, I work five hours today, four tomorrow, and eight the day after. Nobody tells me what to do; I don't have a fixed schedule, and I do not have to be there no matter what. I understand that it has its advantages – you get paid vacations and all that – but here, you pay for them yourself if you have the money. If not, well, man, you have a lot of expenses; if not, you don't, you know? (Rosa, Valladolid, Glovo).

This contradiction shows that managerial discourse is not internalized uncritically; rather, it is often rationalized or used pragmatically to justify accepting precarious work.

Another significant aspect is the adoption of corporate language by some interviewees, especially those in middle management positions on the platforms.

1. The Rider Law, which took effect on August 12, 2021, establishes a presumption of employment status for delivery workers on digital platforms, thereby requiring companies to hire them as employees.

For example, a Glovo manager (Nicolás, Barcelona) described how the platform seeks to generate "growth synergies" between restaurants and the company, reproducing the official narrative without questioning it. This appropriation of corporate language reinforces the narrative of individual success and simultaneously obscures the exploitative dynamics inherent in the model.

Other testimonies show that some workers are aware of and critical of the linguistic strategies used by the platforms:

At the startup level, it's is considered a unicorn, a company that has achieved significant turnover and is highly valued. From a business perspective, it is impressive, but they have adopted a very Americanized corporate culture, you know? And there's this whole greenwashing thing (...). Now they call Human Resources "People" or something similar (Julián, Madrid. Cabify).

The worker notes the use of terms like unicorn and the adoption of a "very Americanized corporate culture", specifically highlighting neologisms such as greenwashing or the image wash this entails.

The fieldwork reveals tensions between the narrative of autonomy and the workers' actual experiences, particularly concerning the collective. The neoliberal self-narrative encourages fragmentation, which limits opportunities for collective organization. As one interviewee stated: "Everyone does their own thing; it's not a community, it's an individual, very individual job" (Ramiro, Madrid, Amazon delivery driver). This fragmentation not only makes it difficult to build bonds of solidarity but also reinforces the competitive dynamics that perpetuate workers' dependence on the platforms.

Honestly, I would still be with Glovo, but the conditions regarding self-employment status and social security here don't really match the actual work we were doing at that time (Oriol, Barcelona. Glovo).

In fact, I was happy when it rained because I knew I would make more money (...). It's double the work, because you're often just standing around or wandering around like an idiot (Francisco, Barcelona. Glovo and Just Eat. After the Rider Law).

These quotes reveal an interesting paradox in platform work after the Rider Law was passed: while the law aims to protect workers' rights, in some cases it has created conditions that make work less profitable for them. Workers express a conflict between their personal preferences and the economic reality of the new conditions, especially regarding the burdens of the self-employment regime, the loss of agency, and frustration with protections that, in their experience, have generated inefficiency.

Discursive tensions: perceived freedom versus precarious reality

Numerous testimonies show that the promise of freedom, essential to the corporate narrative, is diluted in everyday practice. Interviewees emphasize that their ability to make decisions about schedules, work areas, or the number of tasks is constrained by the algorithms that organize the platforms' dynamics. This technological dependence redefines the boundaries of autonomy, as one worker at a Just Eat subcontractor explains: "The app is what counts every minute we're online, our entire schedule" (Gloria, Barcelona). This recurring observation reinforces the idea that the supposed freedom is merely a veiled control structure, designed to optimize productivity without direct responsibility from the companies.

At times, work flexibility and individual time management contrast with the actual work experience, which is shaped by the task assignment system, area coordinators, ongoing performance evaluations, and the implicit requirement of constant availability to ensure access to work. "Riders start at 12 noon at the earliest. There are some days when the captains arrive when it opens, because they have to prepare the phones, recharge the vehicles, do several things, okay, help the area coordinators" (Claudio, Barcelona. Just Eat. Before the Rider Law). Testimonials also indicate that competition leads workers to accept unfavorable conditions to avoid missing out on future opportunities. This reflects a fundamental paradox: the initial perception of flexibility transforms into a constant race to meet the invisible demands of the system.

It's such a competitive and voracious market and it's based on metrics, not people. Each of those riders is simply a number (Rubén, Barcelona. Rider fleet broker. Before the Rider Law).

Some testimonies describe extreme situations in which workers must extend their days or adapt to punishing schedules to secure a minimum income. "I know drivers who keep a plastic container in their car because they don't even have time to urinate. They have to urinate in a plastic container" (Mohamed, Madrid, Cabify). This testimony reveals a dehumanizing consequence of algorithmic control and the pressure to maintain high productivity. "And be careful, this is like an unwritten rule. It's assumed that you know you're not going to work just 40 hours; you're going to work much more, because otherwise you won't have enough time, you won't have enough time" (Julián, Madrid, Cabify).

Finally, the fieldwork shows that these discursive tensions affect not only working conditions but also workers' subjectivities. The constant need to adapt and compete prevents workers from questioning structures of exploitation and instead reinforces them as inevitable. "You become a slave, and that is what we were. We were like slaves to hours, to time, to things. You do not have to connect;

you have to hunt for these hours, otherwise you will not work". (Mercedes, Palma de Mallorca, Glovo). Although not all interviewees articulate this tension explicitly, their experiences suggest that precariousness is assumed to be an inherent characteristic of the model, raising questions about how these narratives influence the possibilities for resistance.

Impacts of gender and immigration on identity construction

The analysis of these discourses shows that gender and migrant status are key factors in shaping labor identities within the digital platform model. These categories consistently influence workers' experiences, defining roles and labor relations that reinforce structural inequalities. "At the moment, I'm working with a platform called Clintu, and sometimes with the Confío platform, which also started as a platform for workers without documents, but now they've... sort of professionalized it" (María, Barcelona, Clintu and Confío). This statement illustrates how digital platforms have absorbed migrant workers in precarious situations, normalizing informal working conditions. Although in theory these platforms have become more professional, in practice this has not necessarily led to better labor conditions and rights, but rather to a formalization of exploitation under new market rules.

Some care and home platform workers are subject to arbitrary bargaining by families over the hourly rate.

Then they're a mess because, for example, right now I'm taking care of someone who dropped my rate from 17 to 14 because it was several days and for other reasons I don't know. Now, I'm not in a position to say no. Honestly, at this point, I was just like, 'Yes, yes, whatever, bye'. I had also just arrived here and did not know what was going on with the bills and everything, but I did not care because I had to do something (María Luisa, Valladolid, Topnanny).

This case illustrates how the supposed freedom of negotiation becomes a disadvantage for workers, who are pressured to accept increasingly precarious conditions. The phrase "I'm not in a position to say no" reveals how the rhetoric of flexibility and autonomy masks a reality in which workers have little real bargaining power, especially when they are in situations of economic or migratory vulnerability. The internalization of this precariousness is evident in how the worker justifies accepting worse conditions as inevitable, reflecting how the discourse of individual entrepreneurship normalizes the degradation of working conditions.

They shut down my app, and it was very difficult to get it back online (...). Not because I did a poor job, but because the customer didn't want to request the service again (...). On the platform, clients don't commit to an employee; very few do (María, Barcelona, Clintu, and Confío).

This testimony reveals another form of precarization and algorithmic control: the total dependence on customer ratings and requests. The platform deactivates the worker not due to a poor performance, but simply because clients did not request her again, demonstrating how the system prioritizes customer discretion over the worker's job security.

Well, it's the typical situation of being in a limbo where you have no security, no benefits, and no rights to anything. You are supposedly offering a service to people who will be your clients, but in reality, that's not the case because the relationship is not equal (Gracia, Barcelona, Topnanny and Rover).

This statement highlights another critical aspect of precariousness in platform work: the fundamental asymmetry in the employment relationship. The worker describes her situation as a limbo marked by a complete lack of security, benefits, or labor rights.

The intersection of gender and immigration creates a double vulnerability for migrant women, who are relegated to lower-paying jobs with higher levels of exploitation. "Why do you think they prefer Filipino women? Many Spanish women prefer Filipino women because Filipino women don't say a word. Maybe it's bad to say that, but it's the truth" (María, Barcelona, Clintu and Confío).

Strategies of resignation and resistance

Despite the dominance of corporate discourse on digital platforms, workers' testimonies reveal diverse forms of resistance that vary by job position, gender, immigration status, and work sector. This resistance ranges from questioning narratives of autonomy and flexibility to organizing informal networks to share information and support.

While resignation appears in discourses that normalize long hours and dependence on algorithms, resistance emerges at different levels. Some workers refuse tasks they consider abusive or poorly paid, even if this decision risks penalties. In this context, one delivery driver explains how they initially prioritized accepting orders that suited them, but this became increasingly difficult as the number of workers grew: "Before, we would look for areas or reject some orders, saying 'no, I'll end up without orders here later', but now it's a jungle" (Joaquín, Barcelona, UberEats and Glovo).

No, Airbnb has become a ruthless company, and I think it is great that they have taken action against them. I say, 'You're a ruthless company. You pay like a ruthless company. Those who live by the sword die by the sword' (Pepe, Barcelona, Airbnb).

This testimony demonstrates a form of direct discursive resistance to the corporate narrative. The phrase "pay like a ruthless company" reflects a demand for consistency between actual business practices and responsibilities, rejecting the discourse of collaboration and community that these platforms often promote. The expression "those who live by the sword die by the sword", used by the worker, is especially significant in this context, as it suggests a form of poetic justice.

As Bonini and Treré (2024) point out, there are forms of infrastructural resistance, such as creating digital groups to share information about working conditions and strategies to maximize income. Messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram have served as informal organizing spaces where workers report abusive practices and support each other.

Wait. There are some riders who contact us here, and I tell 'there's a group. Do you want to join?' Okay! They're here a lot, we talk much more. Here we can have, I'm not kidding, like 100 messages a day (Diego, Barcelona. Glovo).

Your talk to people, you contact people, people who are on the street look at this, what this is like (Yoani, Barcelona. Glovo).

Although the platforms seek to isolate workers through individualized evaluation systems, the need for information and mutual support fosters the development of solidarity networks. One worker noted that, given attempts to worsen working conditions, "there is a collective, a union, that tries to prevent this" (Carlos, Barcelona, Amazon Warehouse). These emerging ties form a basis for coordination strategies.

Many migrants, not just them, but many migrants, have union or rights projects, Las Kellys for example, there are several women's collectives dedicated to cleaning and care, both at home and in hotels (Gracia, Barcelona. Topnanny and Rover).

This testimony highlights the role women workers play in care and cleaning tasks and demonstrates forms of resistance and collective organization. The precariousness of these sectors reinforces the idea that the platform economy reproduces traditional gender roles, exploiting women's availability for poorly paid and socially undervalued work.

Well, what Adrián Todolí says... that the Rider Law is a presumption of employment status with a reversal of the burden of proof. What does this mean? Employment status still needs to be proven through legal means, and Glovo has to prove that the party suing, that is, the delivery person who sues, is mistaken, and also if they are in a self-employed commercial contract, right? (Diego, Barcelona. Glovo).

This testimony shows that the worker has a sophisticated understanding of the legal framework. By quoting labor law expert Adrián Todolí and explaining legal concepts such as "presumption of employment" and "reversal of the burden of proof", the worker demonstrates a form of resistance based on legal knowledge, which contrasts with the simplified corporate language used by Glovo. Notably, the worker understands that, despite the Rider Law, platforms like Glovo can still legally challenge the employment relationship, attempting to maintain the fiction of the "autonomous commercial contract". This reflects a critical awareness of how companies use legal language to evade labor responsibilities.

The emergence of these organizational forms shows that the relationship between workers and platforms is not static but is constantly negotiated. While precarization imposes structural limits, workers seek ways to challenge the model through individual action, digital organizing, or collective mobilization. Although these practices are fragmented, they suggest that platform control is not absolute and that there are fissures that allow resistance and the reconfiguration of work on digital platforms.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study problematize the role of digital platforms in shaping labor subjectivities, highlighting the contradictions between narratives of autonomy and flexibility and the realities of precarization. Although corporate discourse presents platform work as a means of individual empowerment, the analyzed testimonies show that this autonomy is largely fictitious and serves the logic of algorithmic control and labor fragmentation. These findings challenge the notion of a homogeneous neoliberal subject and underscore the need to understand the subjectivation of work on platforms as a heterogeneous process marked by tensions, contradictions, and resistance.

Discourse analysis reveals that workers partially internalize the narratives of autonomy promoted by platforms but also pragmatically reinterpret them to justify their work decisions. This aligns with Purcell and Brook (2020), who describe the contradictory consciousness of platform work, where the discourse of freedom is accepted while heightened forms of control are experienced. Thus, although flexibility is presented as an advantage, in practice it entails economic insecurity, technological dependence, and a significant emotional burden.

Algorithmic control is central to the organization of platform work, reinforcing logics of discipline and self-exploitation (Weber et al., 2022). Evidence shows that algorithms not only regulate access to work and income but also impose hidden

restrictions that limit workers' agency. Thus, platforms act as active agents in shaping labor subjectivities aligned with neoliberal values, promoting a restricted autonomy that conceals more sophisticated forms of exploitation (Shibata, 2020).

A key finding of this study is the fragmentation of labor ties, which hampers collective organization and reinforces isolation. As Riesgo Gómez (2022) points out, digital reputation systems foster individual competition and hinder the development of solidarity. However, supporting the thesis of Grohmann and colleagues (2023) and Bonini and Treré (2024), the results also reveal resistance strategies, ranging from informal support networks to attempts at union organization. Although still limited, these actions suggest that there are cracks in the platform model that could be exploited to build fairer labor alternatives.

The impact of gender and migrant status on the formation of labor identities is also central to this analysis. Women, especially in care sectors, face additional barriers stemming from gender stereotypes that limit their access to other jobs and expose them to greater vulnerability (Cavalcanti Zanforlin & Grohmann, 2022). Similarly, due to their precarious legal status, migrant workers often accept more unfavorable working conditions, reinforcing their structural exploitation within the platform model (Ong, 2006). These structural inequalities highlight the need for an intersectional approach to analyze how platforms perpetuate exclusion and differentiated precarization based on socioeconomic and cultural factors.

The findings of this study challenge reductionist interpretations of neoliberal subjectivation in platform work. Rather than assuming a complete internalization of corporate discourse, the results show that workers negotiate, resist, and redefine these narratives according to their material conditions and expectations. This aligns with Watts (2021), who argues that neoliberal subjectivation is not a uniform process but a dynamic of constant contestation.

Thus, the discussion of the results allows us to question the scope and limits of autonomy in platform work, showing how corporate narratives act as ideological markers that legitimize precarization. However, it also raises questions about possible forms of organization and resistance within this model. In this sense, the study highlights the need to broaden theoretical frameworks to integrate the complexity of work experiences on digital platforms and to explore strategies for collective transformation in response to the growing precarization of work in the digital age.

Limitations of the study

Despite advances in understanding platform work, significant gaps remain. Most studies focus on urban contexts in developed countries, while experiences in

emerging regions, where the impact differs, are only beginning to be documented (Cavalcanti Zanforlin & Grohmann, 2022). Furthermore, sectors such as domestic work and care have received less attention than transportation and distribution, highlighting the need to analyze precarization in these less visible areas.

The diversity of work experiences in the gig economy requires further exploration. Piasna and Drahokoupil (2021) note that perceptions vary by gender, age, and socioeconomic background. This study contributes to the discussion with a discursive analysis of the tensions between narratives of autonomy and the realities of precarity, exploring how workers negotiate these contradictions. These tensions would affect not only perceptions of work but can also generate resistance and redefinitions within platform work.

Regarding limitations, this project used short-term ethnography (Pink & Morgan, 2013), which is appropriate for an ephemeral labor market where workers move in and out and generally wait for less flexible work. However, understanding these environments could be enhanced with long-term methods, such as the life story approach (Feixa, 2018). Further exploration of strategies of resistance and collective organization is also needed, especially considering the role of emerging unions and other forms of digital labor connections. The fragmentation of platform work presents a challenge for collective action, but the dynamics of informal solidarity observed suggest that there are foundations on which more structured organizational responses could be built.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes with a critical reflection that connects the stated objectives to the findings, focusing on their labor and social implications. Regarding the general objective, which aimed to critically analyze the impact of autonomy and flexibility narratives on labor identities, the findings show that these discursive constructions serve as mechanisms for legitimizing precarization. Although managerial discourse has effectively shaped subjectivities aligned with the neoliberal model, emerging forms of resistance were identified. While still fragmented, strategies such as organizing into informal groups, using multiple platforms simultaneously to maximize income, and discursively questioning the flexibility narrative indicate that the precarization imposed by platforms is not unchallenged. Although these forms of resistance have not achieved structural transformation, they reveal fissures in the hegemonic discourse that could be leveraged to develop more robust collective responses.

Regarding the first objective, workers have clearly internalized corporate language. Many testimonies show how workers adopt the corporate discourse

of entrepreneurship, normalizing precariousness as part of their professional identity. However, tensions also arise between the promise of autonomy and the reality of algorithmic control, creating space for questioning and resistance. These findings complicate the concept of the neoliberal subject. Although neoliberal subjectivation is central to the platform model, its adoption is neither absolute nor uniform. Workers are not passive recipients of corporate discourse; they negotiate, reinterpret, and sometimes resist these logics according to their material conditions and work expectations. Thus, the study underscores the importance of avoiding deterministic approaches and recognizing the heterogeneity of work experiences on digital platforms.

Regarding the second objective, which identified ideological markers in workers' discourses, it was confirmed that structural inequalities not only persist but are amplified by the platform model. Factors such as gender and immigration increase the vulnerability of certain groups, especially in the care and cleaning sectors, where women face additional barriers linked to cultural stereotypes and exclusion dynamics. Furthermore, migrant workers without legal status experience greater precariousness due to their lack of access to basic labor rights. These findings align with the arguments of Cavalcanti Zanforlin and Grohmann (2022), who argue that digital platforms capitalize on the structural vulnerability of certain groups, reinforcing preexisting inequality gaps. Thus, this study reaffirms the importance of adopting an intersectional approach to analyze how the platform model not only reproduces neoliberal logics of self-exploitation but also consolidates differentiated mechanisms of exclusion.

In conclusion, it is important to highlight that digital platforms have established a labor model based on the externalization of risk, decentralization of control, and subordination to algorithmic logic that reinforces precariousness. However, their capacity to shape subjectivities is neither total nor definitive. Although the corporate discourse of entrepreneurship and individual autonomy remains powerful, the tensions identified show that workers are not passive in the face of imposed conditions. The fight for fairer working conditions will depend not only on regulatory changes that provide greater guarantees, but also on workers' ability to develop new forms of resistance and collective agency in an increasingly precarious environment.

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