RESEARCH ARTICLE
Artículos de investigación



# My boss is an *app* and it exploits me: precarious subjectivities among on-demand delivery couriers and drivers[1]

# Mi jefe es una *ap* y me explota: subjetividades de precariedad de repartidores y conductores de aplicaciones bajo demanda

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## Abstract

The uberization of work constitutes a new mode of labor organization within the broader framework of capitalist accumulation, a context in which subjectivities are continually produced and reproduced. This article examines the repertoires that shape the subjectivation process of workers who generate income through mobile applications (apps) offering delivery and transportation services in the city of Santiago de Cali (Colombia). A qualitative empirical study was conducted with 24 participants, using semi-structured interviews. The results were examined through a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and discussed in light of contributions from the Social Studies of Work and Critical Management Studies. The findings indicate that, under precarious working conditions associated with vulnerability and exposure to danger inherent to their tasks—and in the absence of social protection—participants position themselves through different worker labels and incorporate a discourse of freedom and autonomy tied to the flexibility offered by app-based work. This discourse coexists with a form of "self-exploitation" shaped by a subordinated relationship with the apps and their algorithms.

## Keywords

Capitalism; Digitalization; Liberalism; Work organization; Computer programming; Mobile phone; Worker.

## Resumen

La uberización del trabajo constituye un nuevo modo de organización de este en el marco de la acumulación capitalista, en el que se producen y reproducen subjetividades. En el presente artículo, se analizan los repertorios sobre los que se sitúa el proceso de subjetivación de trabajadores de aplicaciones móviles (aps) de servicios de domicilio y transporte en la ciudad de Santiago de Cali (Colombia). Se propuso un estudio empírico de enfoque cualitativo en el que participaron 24 trabajadores, se aplicó una entrevista semiestructurada. Los resultados se analizaron mediante un Análisis Crítico del Discurso (acd) y se discutieron de acuerdo con los aportes de los Estudios Sociales del Trabajo y los Estudios Críticos del Management. Se encuentra que, bajo condiciones de trabajo precarias asociadas a la vulnerabilidad y exposición al peligro por las tareas que se realizan y la ausencia de protección social, los participantes se posicionan a partir de diferentes etiquetas como trabajadores e incorporan un discurso de la libertad y autonomía que ofrece la flexibilidad del trabajo con aps y que coexiste con una "autoexplotación" configurada por una relación de subordinación con las aps y sus algoritmos.

## Palabras clave

Capitalismo; Digitalización; Liberalismo; Organización del trabajo; Programación informática; Teléfono móvil; Trabajador.

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# Introduction

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of individuals generating income through mobile or digital platforms (hereafter "apps," following the English-language usage) (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC] & International Labour Organization [ILO], 2021; World Economic Forum, 2020). This participation suggests a new form of work characterized by the assignment of tasks—through an intermediary platform—to individuals who are neither employed nor under a formal labor relationship with an organization, for the purpose of meeting the needs of others who demand specific services (De Stefano, 2016; Duggan et al., 2020; Meijerink & Keegan, 2019; Schmidt, 2017; Todolí-Signes, 2017; Wood et al., 2019).

Within this framework, apps act as intermediaries in on-demand work. Through their algorithmic systems, they can assign tasks and monitor the work that is carried out and completed at a specific place and time (Duggan et al., 2020; Ravenelle, 2019). This requirement of the worker's physical presence in a defined geographical location distinguishes app-based on-demand work from other forms of digital platform labor in which tasks may be performed remotely via the Internet, regardless of physical location (Wood et al., 2019).

App-mediated on-demand work reflects several features of contemporary transformations in the world of work and organizations, such as labor flexibility and fragmentation (Antunes, 2000; De la Garza, 2000). It also intersects with categories such as non-wage work, informal work, precarious work, unsafe and vulnerable work, unstructured work, atypical or non-standard work, indecent work, and unregistered work, among others (De la Garza, 2009; Neffa, 2008).

Although many of these categories fall within what has been described as the "new regime of capital accumulation" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2002; Stecher, 2015), for some authors, app-based on-demand work is linked to a specific form of accumulation defined as "uberized work" or the "uberization of labor," characterized by a model of work organization mediated by technological systems (Areosa, 2021; Davis & Sinha, 2021; Faraj & Pachidi, 2021; Filgueiras & Antunes, 2020; Franco & Ferraz, 2019).

This model of labor organization constitutes, in turn, a new form of managing and controlling work centered on algorithmic management, which transforms not only the labor process itself but also labor markets (Abílio, 2020; Areosa, 2021; Faraj & Pachidi, 2021; Méda, 2019). For authors

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such as Fudge (2017), Kirven (2018), Siegmann and Schiphorst (2016), and Woodcock and Graham (2020), this transformation results in the precarization of labor—a phenomenon that is not new but that acquires new nuances, making work even more precarious compared with other modalities.

This is due to the intensification of the breakdown of standard employment relations (i.e., legal labor protections), long-term unemployment, contingent labor, growing job instability and insecurity, and the transfer of risk onto workers, among other factors (De Stefano, 2016; Kalleberg, 2009; Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016).

Despite these precarious conditions, app-mediated on-demand work is positioned as part of the future of work (Digital Future Society, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2020). This is supported by the argument that this modality provides economic opportunities to marginalized groups in the labor market, particularly in countries with high unemployment rates and significant informal labor sectors (De Stefano, 2016; Roy & Shrivastava, 2020). Additionally, the entry requirements for economic participation through these apps are relatively flexible, as they do not demand high educational levels or sophisticated skills when compared with those required in other standard forms of employment (Jabagi et al., 2019).

In countries such as Colombia, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) found that workers on platforms such as Uber have an average age of 38 years; 71% have higher education; 89% have no prior experience in the transportation sector; and 72% report being satisfied with the platform. The main reasons they choose to participate economically through the platform include higher potential earnings (76%) and increased flexibility (64%).

However, prior to joining this form of economic activity, 68% of workers contributed to the social security system—a figure that drops to 36% once they begin working with Uber. Additionally, 51% would stop driving for Uber if offered a full-time salaried job; 35% plan to continue driving in the future; 87% expect to keep working beyond retirement age; and 47% live in financially insecure conditions (Azuara et al., 2019).

This phenomenon of informal or unregistered economic activity has long been characteristic of Colombia and other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (Julián, 2017; Neffa, 2008; ILO, 2021). In Colombia, it was further reinforced by labor reforms in the 1990s, particularly Law 50 of 1990, which relaxed hiring systems and enabled the widespread acceptance of temporary and part-time contracts—thus legally legitimizing various forms of flexible labor.

It is also important to note that the traditional Western model of salaried employment historically extended only to a segment of the population, leaving other groups with the need to rely on multiple strategies to generate income and survive—strategies situated within flexible and informal economic activities. In Colombia, terms and expressions such as *rebusque* and *salir a ganarse la vida* reflect this

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reality. These expressions resemble what Spink (2011) labels as "making do," referring to typically informal forms of labor grounded in an ethic of "doing whatever it takes," which entails particular ways of experiencing and interpreting working life and shaping oneself as a working subject (Stecher, 2015).

According to authors such as Huws (2014), Lehdonvirta and Ernkvist (2011), and Woodcock and Graham (2020), on-demand platform workers, based on their lived experience, describe a sense of autonomy and flexibility that allows them to manage their time and resources more independently compared with traditional employment-based work. At the same time, behind this apparent autonomy lie significant challenges such as job insecurity, lack of social benefits, and dependence on digital platforms as their primary source of income (Graham et al., 2017; Woodcock, 2020; Woodcock & Graham, 2020).

These workers also experience a pronounced sense of labor precariousness, as they lack basic protections such as a guaranteed minimum wage, health insurance, pension benefits, and union rights (De Stefano, 2016; Wood et al., 2019). Moreover, their performance evaluation and access to work opportunities depend largely on platform algorithms and automated decision-making processes, which can generate stress and anxiety (Abílio, 2020; Filgueiras & Antunes, 2020; Ravenelle, 2019; Ruckenstein & Schüll, 2017).

On the other hand, the tasks assigned through these applications take place in urban environments—primarily the streets—which exposes workers to risks and dangers that they must assume personally, as they lack social protection mechanisms (Gregory & Paredes, 2020; Vecchio et al., 2022; Woodcock, 2020). In this regard, although platform workers may experience greater flexibility in their work, such freedom is accompanied by a series of challenges and concerns that affect their well-being, as well as their sense of safety and stability.

Despite these issues, some studies show workers' intention to remain in uberized forms of work (Azuara et al., 2019; Areosa, 2021; Digital Future Society, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2020). For this reason, the aim of the present study is to analyze the repertoires shaping the process of subjectivation among workers who generate income through transportation and delivery apps in the city of Santiago de Cali (Colombia).

To address this objective, an empirical qualitative study was conducted with the participation of 24 workers through semi-structured interviews. The study explored forms of subjectivity associated with the figure of the "entrepreneur of the self," working conditions, and work rules, using Critical Discourse Analysis. The discussion of the results was developed at the intersection of contributions from the Social Studies of Work and Critical Management Studies.

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The article is organized into four sections. First, it presents an epistemological-theoretical approach to subjectivities of precariousness. Second, it describes the methodological design of the study. Third, results and discussion are presented. Finally, the article offers conclusions and recommendations for future research.

## Literature review

There are various theoretical approaches to the notion of subjectivities developed within the social and human sciences and built upon a critical stance toward positivism and, in particular, toward the modern universal subject. This perspective positions subjectivities as experiences—or modalities/forms of meaning-making, thinking, feeling, and acting—that represent a phenomenological, discursive, historical, cultural, and political dimension of human existence. They do not correspond to immutable essences or absolute realities; rather, they are a product, a construction, or an outcome of sociohistorical fields and local contexts (Stecher, 2014).

Authors such as Stecher (2014) argue that, from this perspective, it is possible to analyze how, within the economic, social, cultural, political, and technological parameters of flexible capitalism and within specific work contexts, individuals deploy forms of labor subjectivity. Some of the historical-social developments of labor subjectivities, according to this author, emerge from the Foucauldian or discursive tradition within Critical Management Studies (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003), which has had a significant influence on the sociology and social psychology of work in Latin America (Stecher, 2014).

Within this tradition, several approaches examine how capitalism—particularly in a neoliberal context—constitutes a new way of producing subjectivities (Castro-Gómez, 2015; Hanlon, 2016). In this sense, the flexible or post-Fordist firm is conceived as a device of subjectivation that shapes individuals into a specific type of labor subject (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003; Read, 2009; Rose et al., 2006; Stecher, 2014, 2015). Within this framework, the subject is understood as an entrepreneur of the self—autonomous and free to maximize personal utility through work (Ibarra-Colado, 2001; Read, 2009; Rose, 1996; Rose et al., 2006).

In this context, the uberization of work constitutes a specific form of capitalist accumulation within neoliberalism (Franco & Ferraz, 2019; Kaye-Essien, 2020), characterized by a technologically mediated model of labor organization (apps and their algorithms). This technology provides a structure connecting users who demand services with other users who supply them, thereby generating value among them (Duggan et al., 2020; Schmidt, 2017).

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However, this infrastructure establishes a governance framework outside the protections of labor laws, employment regulations, and collective agreements, allowing responsibilities, risks, and costs to be transferred to the connected parties—reducing labor and production costs for the company that owns the app (Kirven, 2018; Schmidt, 2017; Todolí-Signes, 2017). Likewise, some means of production required to perform services or tasks are assumed by the workers themselves, to whom platform-owned companies also externalize their business risks (Kirven, 2018; Srnicek, 2017; Todolí-Signes, 2017).

According to authors such as Areosa (2021), working conditions for app-based workers are characterized by elements such as: (a) exposure to all kinds of extreme weather conditions (cold, rain, heat, humidity); (b) in some cases, intense physical exertion (as with delivery workers who rely on bicycles as their means of production); (c) vulnerability to various accidents, particularly traffic-related, as transportation and delivery services take place in the streets; (d) absence of organizational protection, since "no one" is their employer; (e) high likelihood of experiencing insults, harassment, and/or assaults; (f) no entitlement to days off, paid vacation, or weekend rest; (g) earnings that may at times fall below the minimum wage, depending on algorithmic randomness and time/performance invested; (h) low social visibility of their work, resulting in relatively weak sources of recognition (Areosa, 2021).

With regard to the subject produced through the uberization of work, several epistemological pathways exist, including the notion of neoliberal governmentality, which builds on the contributions of Michel Foucault (2004/2007). Governmentality is defined as a set of institutions, procedures, analyses, reflections, calculations, and tactics aimed at governing populations, political economy, and security systems (McKinlay et al., 2012; Rose et al., 2006). This political rationality or governing mindset is concerned both with the government of populations and with the government of "oneself." Thus, individuals must perform certain actions upon themselves in order to become specific types of subjects (Castro-Gómez, 2015; Ibarra-Colado, 2001; Kaye-Essien, 2020).

According to authors such as Kaye-Essien (2002), the uberization of work constitutes a form of neoliberal governmentality. The companies that own the apps can shape subjectivities through the coercive laws of neoliberal competition. These companies pressure the state to implement new technologies. By evading its role as an arbiter of markets and firms, the state enables app-owning companies to write the rules that organize and guide the marketplace of services they intermediate.

Furthermore, the process of subjectivation occurs through the slogans and advertising disseminated by these companies to attract and recruit independent labor. Once workers accept the income-generation terms, they become conditioned by the rules of these companies, without the support of the state or labor unions (Cockayne, 2016; Kaye-Essien, 2020; Moisander et al., 2018; Mumby, 2019).

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From the perspective of neoliberal governmentality, platform work is often presented and promoted as an opportunity for individual entrepreneurship and labor autonomy. Through narratives and advertising slogans, these platforms construct an image of the worker as an entrepreneur of the self—someone capable of managing their own career and maximizing their earnings autonomously and independently (Lehdonvirta & Ernkvist, 2011; Srnicek, 2017; Woodcock, 2019).

On one hand, platforms promote the idea that workers can become their own bosses and owners of their time (Woodcock, 2020). By presenting on-demand labor as a flexible and individually adaptable option, these companies disseminate the notion that workers can pursue their own labor trajectory and take control of their economic destiny (Fleming, 2014; Moisander et al., 2018). This narrative of autonomy and freedom to determine one's own working conditions reflects the principles of neoliberal governmentality, which emphasize individual responsibility, self-management, and self-regulation as pathways to success in the labor market (Foucault, 2007).

On the other hand, companies that own these apps highlight the opportunities for growth and personal development they purportedly offer, framing this type of work as a launchpad for future labor or entrepreneurial opportunities. This discourse fuels the illusion that independent work can, by itself, forge a prosperous and meaningful career. The narrative of upward mobility reinforces the idea that individual success is within reach for anyone willing to take risks and pursue their goals with determination—an idea aligned with neoliberal governmentality principles that celebrate competition and meritocracy as engines of social progress (Rose, 1996).

Regarding the approach to subjectivities of precariousness, authors such as Lorey (2016) argue that one of the foundations of capitalist accumulation—serving as a mechanism for regulation and the social contract in neoliberal contexts—is precariousness itself, which functions as a rule or instrument characteristic of our time. According to this author, precariousness is not limited to insecure jobs; it encompasses the entirety of existence, implying a life shaped by unpredictability, uncertainty, contingency, and exposure to danger.

In this sense, for the subject (the entrepreneur of the self), the body is imagined as personal property—one's "own body"—that must be sold as labor power in the best possible way in order to live and to live better, all while managing the precarious condition (Lorey, 2016).

In line with the above, subjectivities of precariousness are not only related to the experience of feeling vulnerable, insecure, or exposed to danger in relation to work and life itself (Gregory & Paredes, 2020; Lorey, 2016; Vecchio et al., 2022), but also to the agency of the subject—understood

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as an entrepreneur of the self—in managing this precarious condition. This is reflected in particular ways of being, feeling, and acting as labor power shaped by neoliberal rationalities embedded within the labor market and within productive structures (Fleming, 2014; Lorey, 2016; Stecher, 2015).

Workers operating within digital platform environments undergo a notable transformation in their subjectivities, which are intrinsically tied to the neoliberal and precarious labor context in which they work (Cockayne, 2016; Kaye-Essien, 2020). This subjective metamorphosis is grounded in the theory of neoliberal governmentality. Platform workers are encouraged to adopt a particular modality of labor subjectivity characterized by apparent autonomy and flexibility in performing tasks, while simultaneously marked by insecurity and dependence on the very platforms that determine their income (Graham et al., 2017).

Precariousness—an inherent feature of app-based on-demand labor—plays a fundamental role in shaping these subjectivities (Gregory & Paredes, 2020; Woodcock, 2020). The absence of social protection mechanisms and guarantees characteristic of employment-based work, such as a minimum wage, access to healthcare, protection from occupational risks, and pension benefits, combined with exposure to danger in the environments where tasks are performed, places workers in a position of constant vulnerability (Wood et al., 2019).

This precariousness affects not only their material well-being but also their sense of identity and capacity for action within the labor market. Workers are forced to adapt to the fluctuating demands of platforms and to confront uncertainty and risk as inherent elements of their daily work experience (Abílio, 2020; Filgueiras & Antunes, 2020; Ruckenstein & Schüll, 2017).

Platform control and surveillance mechanisms play a crucial role in shaping labor dynamics and workers' subjectivity (Cockayne, 2016; Gandini, 2019; Roberts & Zietsma, 2018). Operating within a context characterized by flexibility and deregulation, platforms rely on a set of mechanisms designed to monitor and discipline their workforce efficiently and often subtly.

One of the main control devices used by platforms is algorithmic tracking of labor activity. Through sophisticated algorithms, platforms monitor workers' performance in real time—from order acceptance to delivery speed (Cockayne, 2016; Gandini, 2019; Roberts & Zietsma, 2018). This algorithmic surveillance not only enables platforms to optimize task allocation but also exerts constant pressure on workers to maximize their productivity and efficiency at all times (Chen & Sun, 2020; Woodcock, 2020).

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Another control mechanism used by platforms is the evaluation and ranking of workers. Through rating systems provided by users, platforms collect information about each worker's performance and use these ratings to determine access to future work opportunities. This constant evaluation serves not only as a disciplining tool but also significantly shapes workers' self-image and sense of worth (Cockayne, 2016; Gandini, 2019; Roberts & Zietsma, 2018; Woodcock, 2020).

Platforms also impose a series of rules and policies that regulate worker conduct. These rules may include restrictions related to time and geographic location, as well as specific behavioral guidelines during the provision of services. Workers who fail to comply with these rules risk being penalized or even removed from the platform, reinforcing the sense of constant surveillance and the need to conform to the expectations imposed by the platform-owning company (Cornelissen & Cholakova, 2019; Kaye-Essien, 2020; Gandini, 2019).

In this context, the subjectivities of platform workers are configured not only as a response to the material conditions of work but also as phenomena intrinsically linked to the power and control structures operating through these digital platforms (Abílio, 2020; Chen & Sun, 2020; Cockayne, 2016; De Stefano, 2016; Filgueiras & Antunes, 2020). The algorithmic management of the labor force, combined with the lack of transparency in decision-making processes, exerts a significant influence on how workers perceive and negotiate their labor identity and their position within the dominant economic system (Chen & Sun, 2020; Kaye-Essien, 2020; Parwez, 2022; Vecchio et al., 2022). This governmental influence not only shapes subjectivities but also contributes to perpetuating and reinforcing power dynamics and inequalities within the labor market of digital platforms.

## Methodological design

An empirical qualitative study was conducted following the critical–interpretive approach proposed by Stecher (2013). Semi-structured interviews were used as the technique for data collection. Participants were selected through convenience sampling, based on geographic

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location and availability, using the snowball technique. Inclusion criteria required participants to be adults and economically affiliated with home-delivery (couriers) or transportation (drivers) service platforms.

Interviews were conducted between 2021 and 2022 in various locations across Santiago de Cali (Colombia), close to the points where participants picked up passengers or delivery orders, during transportation routes, or at their places of residence. For all cases, informed consent was obtained to ensure confidentiality and anonymity in handling the information. Interviews were audio-recorded for transcription and subsequent analysis.

The study included a total of 24 male[2] participants between 19 and 56 years of age. Among them, 9 were married with children; 3 were married without children; 8 lived with family members (parents or siblings); 1 lived alone; and 3 did not answer. Most participants had completed secondary education (14); 6 had undertaken higher education (technical, technological, or professional); 3 had completed primary education; and 1 participant was currently enrolled in higher education. Their time working in this economic activity ranged from 4 months to 5 years.

For data analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used following the approach of Fairclough and Wodak (2000), which considers and studies language as social practice and examines its relationship to power. From this perspective, power is understood within the discourse–society relationship, wherein institutional, political, gender-based, and other discourses coexist, revealing frictions, tensions, and conflicts among groups of subjects within a specific society (Fairclough & Wodak, 2000).

The transcripts were examined through open coding, which enabled the construction of three analytical categories, aligned with the perspective of neoliberal governmentality and its subjectivation devices and their relationship with precariousness (Castro-Gómez, 2015; Ibarra-Colado, 2001; Kaye-Essien, 2020; Lorey, 2016; McKinlay et al., 2012; Rose et al., 2006): (a) around the "entrepreneur of the self," (b) according to working conditions, and (c) according to work rules.

## Discussion of results

The analysis of the collected information made it possible to identify three repertoires that shape the process of subjectivation. These repertoires group together elements related to how work with apps is felt and experienced, as well as the actions through which individuals engage, and how

[2] During data collection, a low participation of women in this type of work was observed, and only a few agreed to take part in the study. However, they were not included in the results of this manuscript due to potential biases that might arise when introducing gender-based comparisons, given that the initial focus of the research did not include this category. Addressing this topic in future studies would be valuable.

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they construct the world of work, others, and their own future. The three repertoires reveal the incorporation of various neoliberal discourses associated with the new organization of work and capitalist accumulation inherent in the uberization of labor, the conditions and rules of this type of work, and the interactions individuals construct based on their own competencies.

## The Entrepreneur of the Self: "The Body as Property to Be Sold in a Labor Market"

The first repertoire identified is associated with the entrepreneur of the self. Here, self-governance is reflected in the selling of the body as labor power in a labor market and in the constitution of a subject framed as an "entrepreneur." Within this repertoire, the commodification process of labor power becomes evident, shaped by the income-generating alternatives offered by apps, as well as by the consideration of the physical effort or bodily wear resulting from the work activity. Additionally, discourses and positionings emerge in which subjects narrate themselves from the periphery of the labor market and describe how these forms of work enable their insertion into it.

In participants' positionings as workers, various labels appear through which they narrate themselves using specific and concrete identities regarding who they are and what they do. Other labels, more general and abstract, also emerge—labels that blur the specific link participants have with any given app, particularly because some generate income across several apps. Nonetheless, the rhetoric used in their discourse suggests that they regard the economic activity performed through apps as "work," which leads them to use diverse labels to position themselves as "workers." Table 1 presents some examples.

**Table 1**

*Labels Used by Participants to Position Themselves as Workers*

| Type | Relation | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| General / Abstract | Related to worker/occupation category | "independent"; "app worker"; "driver"; "chauffeur"; "delivery worker"; "courier." |
| | Related to work and apps | "I manage platforms"; "I manage individual transport apps"; "freelance work." |
| Specific / Concrete | Related to worker/occupation category | "I'm a Rappi"; "I'm an Uber"; "Rappitendero." |
| | Related to work and apps category | "I work with Uber"; "I work with Rappi"; "I drive for Uber." |

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Although profit opportunities in apps are often promoted as sources of "extra" income, authors such as Franco and Ferraz (2019) argue that these kinds of jobs may be leading to a scenario in which such activities are no longer sporadic or self-determined, but rather become the primary source of income for a large number of workers. This is reflected among the study participants, for whom economic participation through apps constitutes their only source of income. Nearly half of the participants work with more than one app: "I work with WayCali, InDriver, and Cabify—those three… you have to look for several options because if you work with only one, sometimes nothing comes in; with all three, you have more possibilities" (Participant 14, driver).

Each uberized worker represents the story of someone who has not succeeded in the formal labor market or who has been excluded from it due to requirements related to education or experience, occupational conditions, gender, ethnicity, religion, among others (Graham et al., 2017; Jabagi et al., 2019), as well as due to structural conditions associated with unemployment (De Stefano, 2016; Roy & Shrivastava, 2020):

> (Reason for joining) …due to lack of job opportunities, because I am overweight—obese—I can't perform in an industrial job because of my weight, so it's easier for me to work as a driver… due to lack of experience in the transportation sector they wouldn't hire me, so I ended up working independently. (Participant 2, driver)

The above reflects participants' willingness to sell their labor power at any price and without any rights. Likewise, participants indicated that the main reasons for beginning to work with apps are time flexibility—"Because I can manage my own time and go out to work whenever I want" (Participant 17, delivery worker)—and the ease of generating income—"It's the fastest way to make money" (Participant 5, delivery worker). According to the participants, time flexibility also allows them to spend more time with their families or engage in other personal activities. However, there are also cases in which individuals do not sell their labor power based on income, but rather based on bodily wear: "Maybe I can work more calmly than [in my previous job], but in that job I earned more" (Participant 11, driver).

Some of the discourses and positionings expressed by participants align with entrepreneurial rhetoric, which is presented in a seductive and persuasive manner: the idea that one can be a free worker, without a boss, with total autonomy, without rigid schedules or hierarchical orders, with the possibility of progressively increasing earnings, and of experiencing the "adventure" of getting to know the city—in other words, "being your own boss" (Cockayne, 2016; Kaye-Essien, 2020; Moisander et al., 2018; Mumby, 2019): "On the apps you don't have a boss, and you have free time that you don't have in a traditional job or company." (Participant 1, delivery worker) "You manage your own time. If you don't want to go out to work, you don't. If you want to go out with your family, you go out with no problem" (Participant 23, driver).

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One of the core elements of entrepreneurial discourse promoted by app-owning companies is the idea that anyone with certain skills and competencies—creativity, sacrifice, innovation, motivation, and risk tolerance—can become an entrepreneur and create a business capable of generating employment for oneself and others, thereby producing wealth and value for society.

However, according to the participants, personal skills or attributes are overshadowed by the ease of earning income through apps, which is reflected in the acceptance requirements—such as an identification document (cédula or passport), motorcycle or vehicle license, driver's license, and a savings account. Consequently, the requirements relate more to access to means of production than to the individual's attributes.

Regarding this repertoire of subjectivation, the "entrepreneur of the self" is shaped by factors such as educational attainment. Some participants feel unvalued or believe they do not have a dignified job because they studied but cannot practice their profession. For these participants, the value of their labor power does not correspond to the work they perform—in other words, they are not selling their labor "in the best possible way." In contrast, other participants emphasize that the flexibility characteristic of this type of work is well-suited for those who study, making it functional for their aspirations and making the value of their labor power proportional to their work and profile.

## Working Conditions: "Precarious Work, but in the End, Still Work"

The second repertoire emerges around working conditions. Through various tensions and ambiguities derived from evaluating their own experiences and comparing them with other forms of work—especially formal employment—participants highlight both positive and negative characteristics. These are often layered on top of one another but ultimately reveal a general acceptance or resignation toward the work and their situation.

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As part of this repertoire, participants reveal conditions of insecurity and vulnerability associated with their work: "Providing services in dangerous neighborhoods, exposed to insecurity, robberies, and accidents." (Participant 24, driver) They also highlight the complexity and difficulty involved: "Being on the street all day, spending money, wearing out the vehicle. Dealing with people all day." (Participant 21, driver) "Being stuck in city traffic is the hardest part." (Participant 11, driver) However, participants consider that precariousness manifests more in the modality of non-employment—or unprotected work—than in the nature of the work itself, especially when compared with formal jobs:

> The good thing about working with a company is that you have everything: social security, pension, vacation, occupational risk coverage. I have security. But as an independent driver, the only thing I have is what I earn each day, and I don't have any security—just the Sisbén[3]. (Participant 10, driver)

This reflects the structural conditions of the labor market, where labor flexibility and informality are shaped both by the absence of labor laws and by the presence of laws that legitimize some of these forms of work. For some participants, this absence translates into lack of protection or insufficient guarantees: "Very few labor rights." (Participant 3, delivery worker) "Lack of social benefits." (Participant 6, delivery worker) "Since we aren't employees, we don't pay into social security." (Participant 18, delivery worker).

In participants' discourses, certain tensions and ambiguities arise regarding security, where app-based work is evaluated in comparison with the benefits offered by formal employment:

> The good thing about a company job is that you can contribute to pension and insurance and everything related to social security. But the good thing about the platforms is that sometimes you can go out with no money and by midday you already have enough for food (...) it's not too low either because that's what I live on, but yes, one would like to be better off in terms of social security. (Participant 16, driver)

Participants not only describe their precariousness in terms of working conditions—vulnerability, exposure to danger, and constant uncertainty—but also discuss how this state is shared with others, although with variations that allow distinguishing or classifying degrees of precariousness depending on occupations or tasks:

> You take more risks, you risk your life more, right? Because you don't know who you are picking up; it's more insecure. But well, I also see it as the same in the sense that if I worked for a company or independently, there are always risks, but as a driver there are more risks. (Participant 20, driver)

Degrees of precariousness are also described in relation to household composition. For those who are married and have children, precariousness becomes a family condition, since their income generation constitutes the primary support for several dependents. Their situation is contrasted with that of individuals whose income does not sustain a family unit, a circumstance attributed to lower degrees of precariousness.

[3] Sisbén is the System for Identifying Potential Beneficiaries of Social Programs in Colombia. It classifies the population according to living conditions and income levels to guide social investment and ensure it reaches those who need it most.

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Despite the precarious conditions identified by the participants, more than half express the intention to continue working in this modality. These intentions are narrated in contrast with formal employment: "I would continue with the car, as an independent worker—fewer benefits, but I kill myself less." (Participant 14, driver). Likewise, these intentions are expressed as a career plan or projected trajectory based on the opportunities offered by app-based work: "For now I'm fine because I can improve my health by using the bicycle, but later on I hope to get a motorcycle so I can do more deliveries and thus earn more income" (Participant 6, delivery worker).

This desire to continue working through apps also constitutes an income-generation strategy based on an assessment of market demand: "Well, the best thing is that there's really constant work—people always need to get around and they look for what's affordable." (Participant 2, driver) Ultimately, participants view these jobs as stable opportunities, despite also framing them as insecure: "Yes, I would like to continue working, but I would like to have social security, which is what we don't have in this line of work" (Participant 14, driver).

## Work Rules: "Autonomy, Freedom, and Flexibility"

In this third repertoire, the way participants incorporate and accept the work rules inherent to *apps* becomes evident. Through this process, one can trace the discourses and positionings related to autonomy and freedom—discourses marked by tensions and ambiguities, as participants simultaneously describe intensified work, increased burdens, sometimes increased indebtedness, longer working hours, and reduced rest. Formal employment is frequently used as a reference point to highlight contrasts.

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Participants express tensions related to working hours: "You don't have a fixed salary because you can make a bit more than in a company job, but with more time dedicated to it" (Participant 9, delivery worker). On average, participants work around eleven hours per day—more than three additional hours compared with a standard employment-based workday in Colombia. They typically work seven days a week. This shows that when the body is the primary work instrument, precarious conditions become embodied (Lorey, 2016), as seen in the physical wear resulting from the amount of time devoted to the job.

The exploitation of labor is shifted from exploitation by a boss or "another person" to "self-exploitation" as the time dedicated to work intensifies: "The job is beneficial because each person decides how long they work, and they aren't exploited because of their work performance" (Participant 4, delivery worker). "I like having freedom over my time, but you have to expose yourself for long hours to carry out the activities." (Participant 3, delivery worker) Likewise, labor exploitation is described as an act of agency by the app itself, which becomes a kind of boss-like avatar: "Abuse by the applications toward delivery workers." (Participant 15, delivery worker) The app controls and disciplines: "Many unjustified sanctions from the platforms" (Participant 18, delivery worker).

Participants also point to other factors that influence their work and restrict their freedom and autonomy, such as users: "Rude customers who think they can be the bosses of delivery workers, because the app (name) gives them all the authority" (Participant 7, delivery worker). "Restaurants are the hardest because they treat you like trash and push you aside, making you wait for the order outside the restaurant" (Participant 9, delivery worker).

Participants' discourses highlight power asymmetries between users and platform workers. Customers who adopt abusive or authoritarian behaviors exert control over workers, undermining their autonomy and treating them as subordinates. As such, although participants adopt discourses of freedom and autonomy, they simultaneously experience forms of control exerted by other individuals and by the app itself.

However, it is ultimately through algorithms that control over the body is enacted—over time, movements, and location—for both task assignment and completion, as well as for performance evaluation (user feedback). This constitutes a disciplinary mechanism perceived by participants as unjust, since such feedback can lead to the loss of benefits (income) or fewer task assignments (lower income; penalties).

Digital platforms impose systematic control over workers through algorithms and tracking technologies that determine task allocation, regulate working times, and monitor workers' locations at all times. From the perspective of governmentality, this algorithmic control can be understood as a labor discipline mechanism that regulates and normalizes workers' behavior to ensure efficiency and productivity in favor of the platform and its users.

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Thus, the autonomy and freedom promoted by apps conceal a relationship of control (Abílio, 2020; Filgueiras & Antunes, 2020). Although workers may choose their schedule and number of working hours, the instructions and algorithms establish control mechanisms that subject them to the needs of companies that rely on a steady supply of labor to perform tasks demanded by the market (Abílio, 2020; Ravenelle, 2019).

Although platforms promote the idea of autonomy and freedom for workers, in reality they are subject to a set of rules and procedures designed by the companies themselves (Cockayne, 2016; Cornelissen & Cholakova, 2019; Gandini, 2019; Roberts & Zietsma, 2018). Algorithms operate as covert instruments of power that shape workers' actions and decisions, often limiting their ability to act independently. This exercise of control is concealed behind the rhetoric of flexibility and autonomy, reflecting the subtlety and sophistication of governing strategies within digital platform work.

# Conclusions

The objective of this study was to analyze the repertoires involved in the process of subjectivation among workers who generate income through home-delivery and transportation apps in the city of Santiago de Cali (Colombia). According to the findings, participants positioned themselves from experiences of vulnerability, insecurity, risks, and dangers to which app workers are exposed due to the nature of the tasks they perform in the city—particularly in street environments. However, at the center of this positioning lies the absence of protection or social security, which, for participants, is obtained only through formal employment.

Participants engaged in these forms of uberized work do not have a labor relationship, as their activity does not constitute employment. Therefore, they are compelled to self-manage their own means of work and assume their own risks. As a result, these workers are pushed/forced to become entrepreneurs of themselves—that is, their own capital, their own producers, and the source of their own income. They are responsible for managing their own risks, self-insuring, self-regulating, and pursuing their own self-realization. Thus, the figure of the "entrepreneur of the self" is a form of subjectivation promoted by neoliberal governmentality which, within the context of labor uberization, is shaped through technological mediation.

The repertoire of the "entrepreneur of the self" reveals how workers govern themselves through selling their labor power in a labor market characterized by on-demand work applications. This process reflects the formation of an entrepreneurial subject seeking to generate income through various apps. Although these activities are marketed as sources of extra income, they are increasingly becoming the primary source of income—especially in Latin America.

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Time flexibility and the possibility of rapid earnings are seductive factors for participants, who identify themselves as independent workers even though, under current legal standards, they do not fulfill the characteristics of self-employed workers, since they remain subject to app-owning companies and the algorithms that oversee and control their work. Likewise, this type of work entails a lack of access to social protection schemes.

A process of direct subordination—without the mediation of employment—was observed, in which workers are subordinated to diverse forms of capital. In this neoliberal context of labor uberization, companies use discourses appealing to autonomy and freedom to promote flexible/uberized work arrangements that create a fictitious legal erasure of the real relationship of subordination of labor to capital. This arrangement is presented as if it were a relationship between equal capitalists, although only one party is the true "owner" of their labor power. From the perspective of governmentality, these discourses can be interpreted as governing strategies aimed at encouraging certain entrepreneurial behaviors and mentalities among workers.

The second repertoire centered on working conditions. Participants revealed the insecurity and vulnerability associated with their work on apps. Despite the precarious conditions, most participants intend to continue working under these modalities, suggesting a degree of resignation to existing labor conditions. Comparisons with formal employment reveal an acceptance/resignation toward app-based working conditions. Although participants recognize the lack of social security and associated risks, they nonetheless view these modalities as a "stable" opportunity to generate continuous income.

The third repertoire involves the neoliberal discourse of freedom and autonomy, in which narratives are distorted by the experiences of control that arise in these jobs. In this context, the app becomes a boss—one that controls, monitors, disciplines, and exploits (through increased time dedicated to generating income). These technologies exert disciplinary power over workers by promoting certain entrepreneurial behaviors and discouraging others. It is important to recognize that the control exercised by platforms is not unidirectional, but interacts with other forms of power and social control.

This is exemplified by user feedback, which not only affects workers' reputations and incomes, but also influences their sense of self and their position within the social hierarchy. This intersection reveals the complexity of power relations within on-demand platform labor and underscores the need for critical analysis through the lens of governmentality.

Ultimately, the study shows that on-demand platform workers are situated at a crossroads between the pursuit of autonomy and the acceptance of precarious conditions—a tension between freedom and new forms of surveillance and algorithmic control. The rhetoric of entrepreneurship and flexibility in app-based work obscures the realities of insecurity and lack of labor protection, leading workers to adapt to these conditions as an inevitable feature of the contemporary labor market.

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For future research, we suggest incorporating an analysis of the repertoires shaping the process of subjectivation among app-owning companies and their relationship with national governments, which would broaden the analytical framework proposed in this study. It is also important to consider the contributions of Science, Technology, and Society Studies (STS) regarding assemblages and materialities, to explore precariousness as an emergent condition within app-mediated work embedded in a sociomaterial network in which neoliberal governmentality, new business models, app algorithms, labor markets, productive sectors, and other actors coexist. Finally, we recommend the use of narrative-based methodological strategies to examine labor trajectories, enabling identification of the historical labor paths of individuals entering this type of economic activity via apps.

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## Authorship Note

Cristian Bedoya Dorado, principal investigator, participated in data collection and analysis, fieldwork, theoretical framework, writing, and revision of the final manuscript. Deidi Y. Maca Urbano, co-investigator, participated in data analysis, theoretical framework, writing, and revision of the final manuscript.

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# Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest with any institution or commercial association of any kind.

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*I hereby certify that this is a true, complete and correct translation from the original document I had in sight.* ***JOSÉ F. JARAMILLO SANINT****. Official certified translator and interpreter for the English-Spanish-English languages, according to Resolution No. 0499 issued by the Colombian Ministry of Justice.*