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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Platform couriers' self-exploitation: The case study of Glovo

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Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of self-exploitation among platform couriers, using the company Glovo as a case study. The research, based on a qualitative approach with interviews from 22 different stakeholders, highlights the ways in which precarity, entrepreneurial subjectivity, and gamification intersect to create what are referred to as postdisciplinary control mechanisms. These mechanisms shift the locus of exploitation from the employer to the workers' inner selves, which are compelled to follow implicit guidelines due to their precarious situation. The use of algorithmic management by platform companies like Glovo plays a major role in this architecture marked by overwork, exposure to hazardous conditions, and economic dependence. The article urges policymakers to look beyond platform workers' employment status debate and address the design of algorithms and broader forms of labour precarity, so that policies that successfully improve workers' experience are designed.

KEYWORDS

control, entrepreneurial subjectivity, gamification, Glovo, platform work, precarity, self-exploitation

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, platform work's advent and massive expansion brought about an earthquake in the labour relations landscape. At the tip of this proverbial iceberg involving millions of workers around the globe (Vallas & Schor, 2020) stand those employed by the parcel delivery industry: platform couriers.

As an echo of their visibility, couriers' working conditions have drawn much attention, both in and outside academia. The prolific production of scholarly literature on this topic has offered unmistakable evidence that parcel delivery platforms subject workers to work intensification, low earnings, discrimination and hazardous working conditions (Gregory, 2020; Gregory & Sadowski, 2021; Moore & Newsome, 2018; Van Doorn, 2017). Deploying algorithmic management facilitates the intense precaritisation of couriers as it allows decision-making to be largely automated, at once invisibilising the human manager and promising optimal productivity outcomes (Gillespie, 2014). Critical studies on the impacts of algorithms on the governance of workplaces have proved them to be tools dedicated to exacerbating employers' control through information asymmetry and pervasive forms of surveillance, rendering couriers highly dependent on their hiring platforms and further worsening these workers' exposure to indecent working conditions (Griesbach et al., 2019; Shapiro, 2020; Veen et al., 2019).

While the aspiration to see their situation improve has spurred the emergence of protest movements of couriers across virtually the entire globe (Trappmann et al., 2020), parcel delivery platforms continue to flourish, nonetheless—a tendency before the pandemic, but that COVID-19 has greatly accelerated (Curry, 2022). If anything, platforms have proved able to acquire the consent of couriers regarding their modus operandi, mobilising workers' dedicated commitment around both pernicious labour process designs (Galière, 2020) and—further intriguing—even around their disputable classification as independent contractors (Barratt et al., 2020; Vieira, 2021).

These counter-intuitive developments beg explanation. Vallas and Schor (2020) have argued that platform workers have more control over certain aspects of their work than conventional workers. However, whether this is a positive development or not remains under dispute, for how some works have shown it may well be that platforms exert different a form of control rather than simply relinquish it (Gandini, 2018).

This article aims to continue this scholarly debate. To do so, the situation of couriers is scrutinised against the theoretical backdrop of self-exploitation. As elaborated in detail over the following pages, platform workers, in general, and couriers, in particular, are exposed to three possible sources of self-exploitation (precarity, entrepreneurial subjectivity, and gamification), which makes them particularly prone to a 'power that seduces instead of forbidding' (Han, 2017) and, in that way, forges the consent and earns the dedication of those it exploits.

The suggestion that labour platforms may induce self-exploitation has been introduced previously (Gajewski, 2021; Gomes, 2018; Huang, 2022; Prassl, 2018) but is yet to be explored. The present article draws from a critical inquiry into *Glovo*'s labour process in Spain as a case study to understand if, how, and to what extent this paradoxical phenomenon is occurring. The main takeaway is that all three forms of forging workers' consent (precarity, entrepreneurial subjectivity, and gamification) operate as mechanisms of concealed yet meaningful disciplination. As a result, this article's contribution is three-fold. Theoretically, it expands existing knowledge of a phenomenon as complex as self-exploitation, hereby explored in the peculiar realm of platform work. Empirically, it offers further evidence of how platforms' control of workers is exerted in particularly pervasive ways and with meaningful, detrimental

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consequences for their well-being. Normatively, it offers policy-makers evidence for the design of policies that address highly exploitative labour processes as those made possible by algorithmic management techniques.

This article is structured as follows: the next section reviews the literature on self-exploitation and combines it with platform workers' work and employment conditions. Sequentially, research design, methodological options, and limitations are provided. The following section presents the findings. Finally, the last section discusses the findings and concludes.

STATE OF THE ART

Defining self-exploitation

Self-exploitation has been under the spotlight of a number of studies across the various social sciences disciplines. Among others, it has been associated with academics (Brienza, 2016), artists and creative workers (McRobbie, 2016), car factory workers (Morris & Hinz, 2018), care workers (Baines, 2016), (micro-)entrepreneurs (Atherton et al., 2018), farmers (Ekers et al., 2016), journalists (Morini et al., 2014), truck drivers (López-Calle, 2016) and video game developers (Wright, 2015). Regardless of individual occupational particularities, self-exploitation is understood as a socioeconomic device employed by workers to increase their labour market competitiveness by depreciating their labour power.

It may take several shapes: acceptance of wages below what is considered the minimum standard for a given occupation (Keogh, 2021); intensification of the labour rhythm in ways that may encompass short-, mid-, or long-term occupational health risks (López-Calle, 2016); expansion of the working day beyond the agreed paid hours without appropriate compensation or in ways potentially harmful to the worker (Murgia et al., 2017); voluntary subjection to indecent and hazardous working conditions (Baines, 2016). Additionally, it is often marked by workers either mobilising their savings or resorting to bank loans to (i) supplement unsustainable low earnings retrieved from their work or (ii) invest in means or factors of production that are essential to the realisation of their professional activity (Keogh, 2021).

Admittedly, self- and 'super-exploitation' (Tsing, 2009) may seem the same; however, there are subtle yet critical differences. Contrary to the hopelessness that hits super-exploited workers, the depreciation of labour power by workers adopting self-exploitation behaviours is often expected to be temporary, a circumstantial sacrifice to improve their future 'chances of attracting gainful employment' (Ursell, 2000). Consequently, self-exploitation stands as a paradoxical and complex form of 'voluntary servitude' (Durand, 2004; see also: Lopez-Calle, 2016), marked by workers activating their resources 'not to end capitalist exploitation (…) but instead to "become its master"' (Bloom, 2013).

Neither self- nor super-exploitation behaviours are entirely free. Nonetheless, the thin line demarcating one from the other lies in the nature of the imposition spurring their emergence: while self-exploitation is essentially induced contextually, super-exploitation is the by-product of a direct imposition by the employer, who overtly depreciates workers' labour-power's value 'below the level necessary for [them] to reproduce [it]' (Latimer, 2021). Put differently, what makes self-exploitation unique is that it entails the mobilisation of a high degree of consent from workers, calling upon actions, commitment, and rationalisation seemingly close to an entrepreneurial investment in which early detrimental conditions are expected to pay off

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somewhere along the road (Bloom, 2013; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013; Lopez-Calle, 2016). Consequently, it creates 'a spiral of increased competitiveness among workers, shifting the work culture to become more competitive' (Chung, 2022; see also: Mazmanian et al., 2013).

Postdisciplinary control mechanisms

Self-exploitation as a broad phenomenon is closely linked to the transition to the *postdisciplinary* society paradigm, that is, to the departure from a time when the disciplination was prevalent and the era of 'societies of control' (Deleuze, 1992) was inaugurated. A framework in which *opportunities* replace sanctions and an apparently permissive *can* replaces the prescriptive *should* (Han, 2015; 2017).

A closer look at the labour relations landscape suggests that the inducement of self-exploitation behaviours may occur through various *avenues*. This article terms these as postdisciplinary control mechanisms since they allow employers to retain control, if not maximise it, despite the near absence of explicit command forms.

The literature on self-exploitation has identified two such mechanisms: the proliferation of labour precarity and the development of workers' entrepreneurial subjectivity. To this, as explained below, the increasing gamification of labour (Wood, 2018) will be added. Partial overlaps notwithstanding, the following lines discuss them in turn:

Precarity

Precarity may be defined as the transfer of risks from employers and governments onto the backs of workers (Vosko, 2010). It encompasses virtually all dimensions referring to one's work, ranging from the very possibility of having a job to having access to social protection mechanisms. In between stand safe and healthy work conditions, having access to career progression and skills development, as well as to democratic, transparent, and uncoerced mechanisms of workers' representation (Kalleberg, 2018).

As the risk exposure expands, assuming broader and ever-more complex shapes (Standing, 2011), workers are not only induced to internalise it but also forced to cope with its material consequences (or at least the dread of them): unemployment and material deprivation. In a genuinely postdisciplinarian way, workers are thus exposed to employers' 'insecurity-inducing strategies' putting the former 'at [the] mercy' of the latter, 'who exploit and abuse the power this gives them' (Bourdieu, 1998). Thus, employability turns into a permanent source of worry (Southwood, 2017), inducing workers to accept indecent working conditions (Baines, 2016) and adhere to a 'long-hours culture, (…) working by projects or by objectives, (…) with a great investment of time and energy' (Murgia et al., 2017)—a pattern, studies have shown, contributes to further increasing gender inequalities (Lott & Chung, 2016).

Although Morini and colleagues (2014) assure that adopting such behaviours renders workers 'co-perpetrators of their own exploitation', the boundaries between employer-imposed super-exploitation and self-exploitation are admittedly still blurred. If anything, the transition of precarity from the sphere of super- to self-exploitation only acquires such meaning when analysed against the backdrop of the generalisation of 'entrepreneurial subjectivity', and preferentially (although not necessarily) when concealed by gamification.

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Entrepreneurial subjectivity

The development of workers' 'entrepreneurial subjectivity' (Foucault, 2008) occurs due to the widespread normalisation of the so-called *human capital* discourses. The Foucauldian critique of these quasiubiquitous narratives (Bröckling, 2015) unveils how they persuade people to believe they are no longer an alienated part of a broader machine but rather someone who is expected to, and will benefit from, permanently investing in their ability to self-optimise their performance across different spheres of life. One is thus expected to act as an 'economic subject', who is 'for himself his own capital, (…) his own producer, (…) the source of [his] earnings'. (Foucault, 2008)—even if they 'possess nothing beyond his own labour force' (Bröckling, 2015). Hence, entrepreneurial subjectivity becomes a universal requirement even for those experiencing purely salaried work relations, now 'at once responsible and guilty for [their] particular fate' (Lazzarato, 2011), 'who should individually bear and respond to the risks that occur in our working lives' (Chung, 2022).

However, the blur of boundaries between the standard wage earner and the (micro-) entrepreneur is not one-way only. As neo-liberalism pushes more and more workers to the independent contractor status, depriving them of the 'mediation between the company and the worker' (Rolle, 2003)—but imposing their dependence upon big corporations (Huws, 2014), the effects of the human capital paradigm become increasingly pervasive. So, at the intersection of the entrepreneur and the *traditional* employee, a new hybrid-class subject arises: the *entreployee* (Pongratz and Voß 2003), interchangeably referred to as 'entrepreneur of himself' (Foucault, 2008) or 'entrepreneurial self' (Bröckling, 2015). This transformation leads to a scenario where

> Capital explores the freedom of the individual to reproduce itself within free competition. (…) [Capital's domination] is based on self-organisation and voluntary personal optimisation. Hence, it does not need to overcome any resistance. (…) The human being is discovered and made object of self-exploitation (Han, 2017)

Gamification

Part of a broader trend characterised by the 'progressive merging of play and work' (Goggin, 2011), gamification may be defined as 'the design approach of implementing elements (affordances, mechanics, technologies) familiar from games to contexts where they are not commonly encountered' (Warmelink et al., 2018). Its implementation in labour contexts has increased over the last years and has been long identified as a mechanism for heightening workers' productivity. This effect results from the immersion of workers in their tasks, pursuing the accomplishment of *goals* that grant them access to *rewards*, at once being 'less aware of being tired' and driving their energy for horizontal forms of competition rather than vertical conflictual manifestations (Burawoy, 1979). As part of this process, gamification has fostered the potential to replace 'older forms of labour surveillance and oversight with equivalent seemingly "playful" forms that workers engage with' (Woodcock & Johnson 2018).

Notably, these pressures may come from above as well as from peers. The 'game of making out' (Burawoy, 1979), in which workers are induced to exert peer pressure among themselves to keep taking part in the *game*, irrespective of the rewards, would be one example. In this

context, the main incentive for abiding by the unwritten, implicit, employer-designed code of shared social norms—that is, the *game*—ensures the possibility of experiencing a continued sense of belonging. But this is not the only setting where peer pressure may take its toll. The pressure for the attainment of results in teamwork context can also lead to stress and self-intensification, even when making out is not possible, as in sites where Just-in-Time/Total Quality Management is the dominant mode of production. In such scenarios, the game-like design consists of dividing the workforce into teams who compete against one another, with each team having as *score* the performance of its least productive member (Delbridge et al., 1992).

When employed as part of a broader strategy of the governance of workplaces (Schrape, 2014), gamification can 'enable exploitation and control' (Dragona, 2014). Remarkably, it relies on reconciling what would otherwise be contradictory interests through the obscurement of the unbalanced power dynamics that underly work relations (Burawoy, 1979). As such, it is the subtly designed gamified labour process, rather than the explicit voice of the employer, that induces the worker to accept detrimental working conditions or outcomes. As the worker is self-exploitatively immersed in attaining goals, the employer is released from the accusation of super-exploitation.

Platform work as a sight of self-exploitation?

The prolific literature production on platform work of recent years has depicted it to be a sight of uncertain and low income, intense work rhythms, exposure to multiple forms of risk, discrimination, and often significant amounts of unpaid work (Briziarelli, 2018; Gregory, 2020; Huang, 2022; Moore & Newsome, 2018; Van Doorn, 2017). However, the literature also documents how platform workers are found 'engag[ing] in individualised expressions of agency which reinforce, rather than test, capital's accumulation' (Barratt et al., 2020, p. 1646; see also: Galière, 2020; Gregory & Sadowski, 2021; Shapiro, 2018). Such *prima facie* contradictory accounts beg explanation. After all, what could justify that workers exposed to extreme precarity not only consent to this degree of exploitation but commit to the success of their hiring platforms and, further surprisingly, even adhere to the narratives carved to make their exploitation socially acceptable (e.g., Barratt et al., 2020; Vieira, 2021)?

The starting point for shedding light on this puzzling state of affairs is the observation that platform work constitutes a 'labour regime' sui generis (Schor, 2021), where workers are treated as independent contractors instead of salaried wage earners and a significant amount of the operation is overseen by algorithmic tools rather than by human managers (Schor, 2021). Combining these two features allows platforms to create an environment where power is centralised, but control is relatively spread (Vallas & Schor, 2020), offering 'workers choices over aspects of the job that conventional employers typically do not'. (Schor et al., 2020).

This peculiarity creates a setting where power is unmistakably postdisciplinary, relying on normative rather than bureaucratic forms of control (Gandini, 2018). To be sure, the literature on platform work has shown how precarity, entrepreneurial subjectivity, and gamification—the three postdisciplinary control mechanisms identified earlier—are inherently present as part of this labour regime. However, less attention has been devoted to the possibility that these are not simply individual, self-contained characteristics that may or may not be observed, but rather pieces of a broader puzzle that—in this very particular context—dialectically interact and

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reciprocally amplify the effects of one another, paving the way for self-exploitation behaviours to emerge.

The case of food-delivery couriers is a tragic example of this. For instance, although those deemed as unproductive by platforms are 'shut out of the system and swapped out for another worker that has displayed more ability to meet demand and generate value' (Gregory & Sadowski, 2021), their situation is commonly wrapped around the narratives of freedom of choice and autonomous *collaboration* that abound in the platform economy (Healy et al., 2017; Sundararajan, 2016). All too often, the uncertainties inherent to the independent contractor status are inverted to induce in workers the notion that riding for the platform constitutes an opportunity and that individual success relies exclusively on one's ability to outperform peers (Galière, 2020).

Not without irony, the triumph of this discourse simultaneously feeds on and obfuscates the precarious nature of workers bond to their hiring platforms, favouring the development of an entrepreneurial subjectivity (Barratt et al., 2020; Vieira, 2021). If anything, it can distract workers' attention from the fact that their de facto autonomy vis-à-vis platforms and bargaining power over working conditions are practically none (Franke & Pulignano 2021; Rosenblat, 2018; Van Doorn, 2020). Even in instances where grievances against platforms grow, these seem to be often paired with the development and enactment of an entrepreneurial identity that ensures that workers' conduct is at all times rationalised and calculated according to the imperatives of the market (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021).

The postdisciplinary power exerted by platforms has also been documented to rely significantly on gamification. Similar to other labour regimes, this control technique is visible across several instances where a game-like environment promotes the immersion of workers in their tasks through a logic of competition among peers (Lehdonvirta, 2018), something which, in conditions such as those offered in platform work, has obvious potential to expand the entrepreneurial subjectivity of workers.

Still, platforms have climbed one step up the gamification ladder. Thanks to algorithmic management, the second leg of platforms' difference from most *conventional* employers, these firms can invisibilise the control exerted over workers and thus offer an illusionary sense of individual autonomy (Fourcade & Healy, 2017; Franke & Pulignano 2021; Griesbach et al., 2019; Huang, 2022; Veen et al., 2019). This is facilitated by rating systems that bring customers into the managerial decision-making loop (Rosenblat, 2018) but also—and perhaps primarily—by the existence of an unsurpassable information asymmetry between the hiring platform and workers (Shapiro, 2020). This colossal informational gap leaves the latter systematically in the dark regarding the accuracy and veracity of the former's decisions and announcements. Consequently, workers find themselves forced to *play a game* to which they were not given access to the *rulebook*. This leads them to take on behaviours of 'anticipatory compliance' (Bucher et al., 2021), attempting to *please the algorithm* by adopting the conduct they imagine to be most in line with the automated assessment of their hiring platform—even when such behaviours end up being at odds with their own interest as workers (Rosenblat, 2018). Observing this among ride-hailing drivers, Dubal (2023) has posited that platforms go beyond the gamification and incur in the 'gamblification' of labour process—a neologism seems that insightfully captures how algorithmic management techniques' treacherous and opaque nature can manipulate workers into not just extending working hours but actually losing money from working.

Considering all the above, the suggestion made by several works that platform work may indeed spur the emergence of self-exploitation behaviours (Gajewski, 2021; Gomes, 2018;

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Huang, 2022; Prassl, 2018) seems worthy of theoretical credit and further investigation. What is left of this article is dedicated to exploring in what ways self-exploitation materialises in the life of platform workers, attempting to unveil the *wheels and cogs* behind each of the three postdisciplinary mechanisms and how they dialogue with one another to create such a control strategy that is, at once, so effective for platforms and so pernicious for workers.

METHODOLOGY

Researching self-exploitation among couriers was accomplished through a case study of *Glovo*'s operation in Spain. This choice relied primarily on the properties of this research strategy as the most suitable for identifying causal mechanisms (Yin, 2003).

Glovo is a parcel delivery digital platform, which, in Spain alone, during the research period, counted 7000 signed-in couriers—commonly designated as *Glovers*. *Glovo*'s labour process is essentially like that of other parcel delivery platforms, where a self-employed workforce is managed through automated decision-making mechanisms dedicated to ensuring the optimisation of productivity and enhancement of control (Griesbach et al., 2019; Shapiro, 2020); however, none of them is as gamified as *Glovo* was during the research period. Its unusual combination of postdisciplinary control mechanisms thus allows a deeper insight into the self-exploitation *black box*.

Drawing on a deductive thematic analysis (Verd & Lozares, 2016), self-exploitation is explored from three different yet interrelated perspectives offered by the conceptual distinction of postdisciplinary mechanisms, namely: precarity, entrepreneurial subjectivity, and gamification. Each corresponds to one unit of analysis unit, where the way each unfolds in the lives of Glovers is paired with the manifestations of self-exploitation it encourages.

The first research step was to critically watch one of the induction videos of *Glovo*, which allowed me to get acquainted with the basics of the labour process and some of the company's jargon. Afterwards, 19 couriers, one *Glovo* management representative (*hereafter, simply management*), and representatives of two couriers' unions, *Riders x Derechos* (*RxD*) and *Asociación Profesional de Riders Autónomos* (*APRA*), were interviewed. All interviews were semistructured; their script was designed to retrieve as much information as possible on *Glovo*'s labour process design and its impacts on *Glovers*' everyday life.

Out of the 19 couriers interviewed, 14 were men, 5 were women; 17 were full-timers, 2 were part-time students; 8 were exclusively working for *Glovo*, 11 had side-gigs (8 of which, other delivery platforms); 6 were undocumented migrants, 13 were fully documented citizens (6 migrant, 7 native Spaniards); 10 delivered using bikes, 9 used motorbikes.

The present research was conducted from February 2020 to January 2021—meaning most of the research was conducted in the framework of the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond the impact on *Glovers*' life, this implied that all interviews were conducted through video calls and not presentially, which may have partially hindered the construction of a deeper rapport and access to further relevant information.

Besides the COVID-19 context, another important event occurred: in June 2020, the Spanish Minister of Labour announced a new legal framework for platform workers—having couriers as its target (Ginès i Fabrellas, 2021). Interestingly, the tensions around the new law (Vieira, 2021) incentivised interviewees to make themselves available to participate and provide in-depth details on their situation. Be that as it may, throughout the entire research period, all *Glovers* operated under so-called TRADE contracts, a hybrid status of *economically dependent*

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self-employed worker that virtually equalised them to independent contractors (Jódar & Pericàs, 2017). Even before the promised new regulatory framework was implemented (which only happened in August 2021) both the Spanish Inspection of Labour and courts at the highest level considered the TRADE classification as fraudulent, given workers' hardly disguisable subordination to platforms' disciplinary power (Todoli Signes, 2021).

FINDINGS

The present section is dedicated to presenting how each of the three postdisciplinary control mechanisms (precarity, entrepreneurial subjectivity, and gamification) is present in *Glovo*'s labour process and induces workers to take on self-exploitation behaviours. Despite the partial overlap and dialectic relation bonding all three, they are presented in turn for clarity.

Precarity

Classified as independent contractors, *Glovers* have precarity as an unmistakable trademark of their lives. Their income, for instance, is unpredictable. This means they start their day knowing they will have to carry the burden of work expenses—taxes, fuel, and, in some cases, food and energy drinks purchased to endure long hours riding a bike—but clueless regarding how much they will earn.

> Not knowing how much money you will have (…) worries you and is something that is always there (…). Thinking how many hours I have, how much money I could make… (woman, full-time, exclusive, documented, bike rider)

Inevitably, this translates into sentiments of guilt and worry for acts as trivial as resting and spending time with family.

> When I take a day off, I often find myself full of guilt… wondering how much I could be earning at that moment (man, full-time, exclusive, documented, bike rider)

The lack of access to social protection mechanisms amplifies such constant and pervasive anxiety. This leaves them unprotected in case of disease, injury, parental obligations, or dismissal, even when the latter is conducted in a unilateral, unjustified manner, as reported by some interviewees to happen often among couriers operating for *Glovo*.

On top of that, in the background of their daily routines, the trajectory of most *Glovers* reinforces their dependence vis-à-vis the platform. Even if this is a diversified workforce, composed of different levels of educational attainment and occupational histories, all *Glovers* are linked by experiencing a precarious situation in one way or another.

For some, this condition is due to a path marked by the inability to secure a stable, well-paid job that would allow them to reach the late years of a career without worries of an eventual nonrenewal of their fixed-term contracts. For others, being an undocumented migrant closes the doors of the formal labour market. This circumstance leaves no alternative but to rent a

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Glovo account and ride until the account owner decides to change the password and steal their earnings or a client reports them to the platform and the account is deactivated.

Here is where precarity kicks in as a postdisciplinary mechanism. Trying to make ends meet and understandably afraid of what the future will bring, *Glovers* are induced to take on behaviours that jeopardise their physical integrity. Among others, two forms of hazardous conduct stand as the most common.

First, worrying about the weather is a luxury most *Glovers* cannot afford. If anything, it is precisely when the conditions are worse that demand is higher. Additionally, *Glovo* pays a bonus per each delivery accomplished in the hours of rain—an incentive most simply cannot waste. As a result, where one could otherwise find solid grounds for not working due to the harshness of cold, rainy, or windy weather, these workers are encouraged to ride their bikes and motorcycles through the streets.

> It is a risky situation also when there are strong winds that, to be honest, don't let you ride, but you go out to ride because you need (...). You must get out (...), you should do those hours to earn money. (woman, full-time, exclusive, undocumented, bike rider)

Second, *Glovers* need to make the most of each working day, for the earnings of the next one are unknown. This promotes a culture of long hours of work and self-neglection at the most basic levels.

> If you work for 10 hours in a row, when are you going to eat? (...) You eat along the way or something like that. (...) If the demand is good, you must make the most of it! (man, full-time, exclusive, undocumented, bike rider)

Unsurprisingly, such conduct comes at a cost. Beyond all the psychological distress associated with maximising the earnings every working day, the scars and pain throughout *Glovers*' bodies speak for themselves.

> When I get home, I have to take two painkillers and put my legs up against the wall... as if I had broken them... (man, full-time, exclusive, documented, bike rider)

Entrepreneurial subjectivity

The fact that precarity operates as a postdisciplinary control mechanism inducing the adoption of self-exploitation behaviours does not necessarily rule out that other mechanisms are at play, too—if anything, they all interact and mutually influence one another. That is the case of entrepreneurial subjectivity. To be sure, the development of entrepreneurial subjectivity is a crucial piece of *Glovo*'s control over its couriers. For this reason, the platform invests strongly in having the couriers in its ranks develop and internalise such a mindset. This is visible in *Glovo*'s discourse and practical actions.

Glovo's discourse is structured around the advantages/incentives for workers to join the company's ranks. ‘Autonomy’ (interchangeably referred to as ‘self-organisation’, ‘independence’, or ‘freedom’) is its discursive backbone since the first contact with the platform. Both in

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the induction video (0'56; 3'50) and in the words of management, 'You are your own boss' is often present. Consistent with that, management frames Glovo as 'a client (...), a tool to have them [couriers] generating income', reaffirming that 'independent work (...) has clients and, in our [Glovo's] opinion, we are a client of that independent worker'. *Glovers* are thus free to 'collaborate' with other platforms or have any other job they want.

On the practical side, the design of *Glovo*'s labour process also aids in inculcating entrepreneurial subjectivity in workers. They are allegedly free to choose when and how many hours to work by *booking* their working schedule according to their preferences on two preassigned weekdays (more on this below). Additionally, according to management, *Glovers* are free to reject any order the app requests them to deliver, cancel the hours they had booked, and log out from the app altogether during an ongoing working slot without suffering any penalty, being as they are independent contractors. Reflecting this, several interviewees praised the platform for *giving* [them] *an opportunity* (woman, full-time, exclusive, undocumented, bike rider) to freely manage their time, seeing as natural that in days they do not work 'you don't earn anything, [as] happens to all independent workers' (woman, full-time, not exclusive, documented, motorbike rider).

As a means to further deepen workers' permeability to its entrepreneurial discourse, *Glovo* promotes their atomisation through the conduct of regular surveys. These instruments are intended to legitimise some of the platform's unpopular decisions. For instance, during the research period, *Glovo* reduced the fixed fare paid per delivery and put more emphasis on punctual bonus, claiming such a decision had been taken as a result of workers' expressed preferences in one such survey. Moreover, they form part of the platform's antiunion discourse and practice, justified by workers having their voices heard through this mechanism and grounded on the fact that workers are independent contractors and, hence, not eligible to join a union.

Interestingly, this attempted isolation of couriers is not just horizontal. Facilitated by the deployment of algorithmic management, *Glovers* are barely ever in touch with anyone from management, something that—combined with the independent contractor status—offers a feeling that supervision is absent, and one is free to act according to their preferences: *No one asks you where you are going or what you will do* (woman, full-time, not exclusive, documented, motorbike rider).

Although not all interviewees were convinced by the entrepreneurial discourse of *Glovo*, there is plenty of evidence that the platform is effective in contributing to the creation of a meritocratic businessperson self-image among the workers in its ranks. As a consequence, several interviewees framed their uncertain income not as precarious but as dependent upon one's individual merit to make it a living wage. 'If you work hard enough, you can get a good income', one of the interviewees explained (woman, full-time, not exclusive, documented, motorbike rider).

Proving itself as a postdisciplinary control mechanism, the ideational process that underlies the development of *Glovers*' entrepreneurial subjectivity is associated with unmistakable practical manifestations of self-exploitation. For instance, even when working long, unsustainable hours, workers frame their work as a source of satisfaction rather than of income, oblivious to the fact that due to the low value of fares and the game-like design of *Glovo*'s labour process (more on this below) only by working very long hours can full-time couriers make ends meet.

> No one obliges me to work 10 hours per day. By chance, I like to work, and the more I work in this thing of delivering, the more I like to satisfy the client. More

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> than seeing it as a job, that satisfaction is the most important. (man, full-time, exclusive, documented, bike rider)

Additionally, invested in the attempt to maximise their productivity—and, to some extent, mitigate the intense fatigue they are exposed to—couriers interviewed consistently reported often resorting to credit.

> When we can, we buy ourselves an electric bike. It is much more expensive; it's an investment (man, full-time, not exclusive, documented, bike rider)

Crucially, this results in the internalisation of the need to be more efficient, something that may take months (if not years) to pay off for them, assuming they are not *disconnected* for some reasons beyond their control before the debt is clear. Notably, resorting to credit further deepens couriers' dependence on the platform, rendering them even more stranded in the necessity to generate earnings that, besides their daily expenses, cover the payment of their debts every month. Not without irony, however, the platform leverages the demanding working conditions offered to its own workers to improve its service to customers without incurring in any actual investment.

Gamification

The last of all three postdisciplinary mechanisms responsible for the inducement of self-exploitation behaviours among *Glovers* is gamification. As earlier mentioned, the gamification of *Glovo*'s labour process is present in the way fares are decided: rainy days and peak hours are paid at higher rates, thus inducing couriers to expose themselves to hazardous situations or, when that is not the case, ride faster to maximise their earnings.

> I cross a lot of red signs. (...) One is working with hours given by Glovo, so one must go quickly to deliver more orders in one hour. (man, full-time, not exclusive, undocumented, bike rider)

However, this is just one part of a much more complex gamified architecture. From the first time they log in the app, *Glovers* are confronted with a setting that 'is like a game (...), [where, in the beginning,] you don't have all options unlocked to play the game as you want; you have to pass some levels'. (woman, full-time, exclusive, undocumented, bike rider). This perception, common to all interviewees, arises from the fact that access to working hours depends on the number of *excellency points* one has. The higher the number (up to a maximum of 100), the better one will be ranked and, consequently, the sooner one is given the possibility to book slots at each of the two weekly booking windows. Working slots are a scarce good, so the later one has access to book them, the greater the odds of having few slots available. This, inevitably, leads not only to worse working schedules, with 'one hour here, another hour there' (man, full-time, not exclusive, documented, bike rider) but—much more importantly—to the very possibility that the reduced number of working slots gotten render a tiny number of deliveries resulting, in turn, in a situation where making ends meet is hardly possible.

The points system put in place by *Glovo* is very strict and intended to control the different dimensions of couriers' conduct. The score is broken down into five categories: one, worth 35%, measures to what extent couriers have, over the last 28 days, worked in the hours determined

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by Glovo as *diamond*, normally the peak demand hours each day; another, worth 5%, translates the assessment of couriers' performance and conduct made by *Glovo*'s *partners* (restaurants and stores); yet another, worth 15%, reflects couriers' reviews by customers; a fourth one, worth 35%, computes *Glovers*' 'efficiency', which officially refers to workers showing up for the slots they booked, but—according to couriers interviewed—can also be impacted by logging off during an ongoing shift; finally, the fifth dimension, worth 10%, gauges *Glovers*' 'antiquity', a function of the number of deliveries made rather than any measure of time.

At first sight, such a rigid and fine-grained score system may seem at odds with the otherwise postdisciplinary control paradigm dominant in *Glovo*. That would definitely be the case if not for the fact that—as earlier mentioned—this score is used to automatedly sort workers for the purpose of making working hours available to them. This means the system is inherently competitive, so performing well is a requirement not just important to please the platform as boss per se; much more importantly, it is decisive to outperform one's peers as a means to get access to booking slots earlier than them. In other words, to *please the algorithm*, one needs to prove to be better than everyone else across the five parameters: work all the peak hours, please *partners* and customers, show up on time and behave *properly*, and deliver more orders than all others.

Combined with their exposure to precarity, such a gamification of the labour process impels workers to adopt several evidently self-exploitative behaviours. For instance, to minimise the odds of bad reviews, several interviewees report preferring to purchase products that are misplaced in orders from their own money, rather than risking customer complaints or arguments with *partners*. Still trying to get good reviews, couriers try to win the hearts of customers by engaging in conversations to 'be nice, help them solve problems, and so on' (man, full-time, exclusive, not documented, bike rider) even if that means losing work time they could be otherwise using to deliver more orders. Motivated by the need to outperform fellow couriers, several interviewees report 'circulating from one place to the other, never stop[ping], to make me more visible to the algorithm thanks to a stronger GPS signal' (man, part-time, not exclusive, documented, bike rider)—even if this produces further fatigue while offering no evidence of being effective. On top of that, while management claims couriers can 'enjoy the city while delivering', the immersion in such a notably competitive labour process induces *Glovers* to experience their work as a race and—again—expose themselves to accidents and other hazardous events.

> When you are riding, you just think of getting from point A to point B as fast as possible… even if that means crossing a few 'no entry' signs… (man, full-time, exclusive, documented, bike rider)

One last facet of this gamified labour process makes the architecture of Glovo so immersive and, consequently, so prone to self-exploitation behaviours. Irrespective of the score couriers have and the corresponding possibilities for booking enough working hours, they can nonetheless sign-up for the so-called 'loose hours'. Essentially, these are slots released by the platform *Glovo* throughout the day that can be *grabbed* on a first-come, first-served basis, which management says exist to respond to circumstantial labour needs the algorithm was unable to predict.

Interviewed couriers consistently reported relying on these *loose hours* to make ends meet every week. Of course, *grabbing* these depends on following the app closely and being promptly ready to ride.

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> I access during the night, at 2, 3 AM to the app, and there I begin to select some available hours so that I can work. (...) To work 5 hours, I must be connected to the app for at least 10 hours: 5 hours hunting hours, and 5 hours that are those I will execute. (man, full-time, not exclusive, undocumented, bike rider)

> To be able to work, you compete with all others who also want to work. So, we are all there, constantly refreshing the app until one slot is colored white, meaning it is open. (...) Then, you must go out to the street and be there struggling to grab one hour, half-hour... a little bit here, a little bit there... deliver one or two orders... sit on a bench and again try to grab one hour whenever it's possible... in the end, you are in the street for 10 hours and you work 5. (man, full-time, not exclusive, documented, bike rider)

This approach put in place by the platform comes at a cost for couriers. As shown in the lines above, it entails working long, unpaid hours, sometimes late in the evening, which increases their fatigue and, in turn, their proneness to errors and road accidents. Remarkably and perhaps primarily, it operates as a hook from *Glovo*, who breeds—and sometimes feeds, even if meagerly—the hopes of workers that one day they will be able to climb to the top of the ranking and have enough working hours to do their job calmly, as posited in the form of promise by management. However, that aspiration can hardly ever be truly realised, for evidently the algorithm running the labour process has no compassion for fatigue or family time; it just wants the job done.

> One weekend I did not want to work, so that I would have some time with my girlfriend and my mother-in-law. But I knew what was coming, that my ranking position would be awful... And when I returned to the app, I saw that I had gone from 92 to 80 points, which is really a lot, because with 80 points you do not get [working] hours (man, full-time, exclusive, undocumented, bike rider)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This article started by asking how platforms are able to acquire the commitment of workers to detrimental labour process designs and ultraprecarious situations such as that arising from wrongful classification as independent contractors (Barratt et al., 2020; Galière, 2020; Gregory & Sadowski, 2021; Shapiro, 2018; Vieira, 2021). Building on previous works (Gajewski, 2021; Gomes, 2018; Huang, 2022; Prassl, 2018), the findings suggest that this occurs by workers developing self-exploitation behaviours.

In *Glovo*, the case study informing this article, couriers are impelled to develop a thorough rationalisation of the labour process so they can live up to a degree of productivity that allows them to make ends meet from working in this platform. To be sure, *Glovers* need to organise their days to work in peak hours strategically. Consequently, they must pick the best working slots to maximise the number of orders received, adjust their conduct—including managing their emotions—to obtain positive reviews from restaurants and customers, choose the best routes to deliver as many orders as possible within the time available without having road accidents or fines, and often put their physical needs and limitations in second place to make

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the most of a working day. In short, they need to fully impersonate the ideal-typical 'entreployee', *de facto* (even if not *de jure*) tied to an employer but at the same time entirely dependent on their abilities of self-organisation and personal optimisation.

This creates a paradoxical state of affairs, where the platform is undeniably the sole holder of power, but workers' agency is crucial for their individual success throughout the whole labour process. Expanding the insights of Vallas and Schor (2020) regarding the peculiarities of platform work, Wood and Lehdonvirta (2021) have drawn attention to the fact that, due to such a power imbalance, workers' agency is, however, a 'subordinated' one—for it is primarily exerted to improve workers' position vis-à-vis customers, but of minimal impact to counter the unequal distribution of power between workers and their hiring platform(s). Not unrelated, Barratt and colleagues (2020) as well as Gregory and Sadowski (2021) have shown how platform workers develop agency due to the nature of the labour process they are engaged in and how—contrary to intuition—they use it to reinforce rather than challenge platforms' power. This article bridges these insightful accounts.

As illustrated by the previous section, workers' agency is indeed vital. Without it, they would be unable to surpass the obstacles in their way, develop strategies to maximise efficiency, and mitigate—even if by partially normalising—the sources of frustration and anxiety that form part of their everyday life. This is where the thin line demarcating super—from self-exploitation is crossed in the context of platform work. Workers are not simply imposed upon by platforms' detrimental working conditions and an entrepreneurial approach to the labour market; they become a constituting, active part of that process. Without ever being (explicitly) commanded to, workers expose themselves to dangers, work incredibly long hours, develop feelings of guilt for resting, hire loans that will stick with them for long periods and, tragically, will require them to work even more to have their bills paid. Yet in the end—for many—the platform is still seen as an opportunity.

This is, of course, a picture with many shades of grey rather than made of black and white alone. Concomitantly with self-exploitation behaviours, there are manifestations of mutual-aid or collective agency among platform workers. For instance, through social media, workers warn each other whenever *Glovo* opens work slots that can be grabbed irrespective of ranking position. However, these moments are very much exceptional. If anything, the combined intervention of the three postdisciplinary control mechanisms identified earlier (precarity, entrepreneurial subjectivity, and gamification) creates a virtually inescapable, quasiperfect storm of self-exploitation, where workers do not only comply anticipatorily (Bucher et al., 2021) but actually impersonate and enact the goals of the platform as if they were their own. Undoubtedly, self-exploitation is enhanced exploitation.

The deployment of algorithmic management techniques is critical to this labour process marked by self-exploitation behaviours. Having an algorithm managing the attribution of orders, compiling information on workers' performance (in turn, expressed as *points* of their *score*), and sorting workers for purposes of attribution of workable hours helps validate among couriers *Glovo*'s self-depiction as a mere technological intermediary between workers and customers—rather than the boss, let alone the employer—as well as the notion that workers' success is a function solely of their merit. As a result, algorithmic management cements the mutually reinforcing interaction between the three postdisciplinary mechanisms by making precarity acceptable, entrepreneurial subjectivity plausible, and gamification further immersive.

This observation calls for a critical appraisal of Vallas and Schor (2020) postulate that platforms (partially) relinquish control since what this article finds is not that platforms do not

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really cede domination but that they metamorphise it to make it more effective. In fact, the type of control exerted by platforms, very much reliant on the inducement of self-exploitation behaviours, seems to have detrimental effects in the lives of couriers, with consequences ranging from debt to occupational injuries spreading across this workforce. Further research is welcome to test if this means that, contrary to their discourse but consistent with what is possible to foresee in this article, platforms play the role of quicksand rather than of a trampoline in the career of workers, who find themselves stranded in a low-skilled, low-paid job.

Returning to the extant literature, it is possible to conclude that self-exploitation can, at times, be the by-product of a 'power that seduces instead of forbidding' (Han, 2017), for instance, taking the shape of entrepreneurial subjectivity; however, as this article shows, this only accounts for part of the causal story behind such a complex phenomenon. As Marx (1996) insightfully noted, material circumstances lead workers to accept and be a committed part of the degradation of their own working conditions, too. On top of that, as reflected by the literature and observed in this article, highly gamified labour process designs can also induce the adoption of self-exploitation behaviours. Thus, when discussing the phenomenon of self-exploitation, the exposure to different control mechanisms—hereby called postdisciplinary—should not be overlooked. In fact, contrary to the often-unidimensional approaches to self-exploitation, which consider only one of these mechanisms at a time, this article suggests a broader approach, one that envisages self-exploitation as the result of a dialectic relation between all three. Taking stock of the current findings, that seems to be the case in platform work.

This has obvious policy-making implications, namely regarding the need to go beyond the debates on couriers' (mis)classification. Undoubtedly, this is still a critical matter since it represents a decisive obstacle for workers having access to the rights they are due. However, this is only the tip of the iceberg for ensuring decent work. My argument is two-fold.

First, authorities must regulate and monitor algorithm usage in the labour relations framework. In this regard, *Glovo* stands as a prime example of how algorithmic management may—albeit in a disguised fashion—foster a tremendous potential of generating extremely unbalanced power relations within a company, which can hardly ever have any different outcome than the exposure of workers to multiple forms of contingency and danger. Second, addressing the exploitative nature of so many platform occupations, particularly couriers, requires depriving employers of a determinant source of advantage vis-à-vis workers: the latter's lack of alternatives. Building on the accounts of Bourdieu (1998), this article has shown that job insecurity is not only generated by employers but also leveraged by them to divide and exploit workers. What happens in the realm of platform work is in no way different—if anything, just more extreme. So, policymakers need to look at this form of labour not as an isolated island but rather as a constitutive part of the broader labour market. This implies preventing and adequately handling situations of undocumented working persons, indecent wages, consecutive temporary and/or zero-hour contracts, and bogus self-employment, among others. Failing to do so will inevitably lead down a road where technology's use serves domination and exploitation only, rather than progress and fairness, as desirable and increasingly necessary every day that goes by.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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