Platformisation as Development

Discourse and Justification in the South American Gig Economy

Lucas Stiglich

ABSTRACT

Platform companies that intermediate on-demand labour markets, usually described as gig economy platforms, are currently at the forefront of debates about the future of work. It has been widely documented in the literature that major gig economy platforms claim to offer flexibility and independence to workers, while at the same time using algorithmic control techniques to manage them. Through this, companies avoid the responsibilities of formal labour relationships and shift risks to the workers. In order to do so, however, platform companies need to rely on discursive strategies that legitimise their model.

Claims to legitimacy need to appeal to shared conceptions of public value and thus are always contingent on the specific cultural contexts in which they are deployed. However, discursive strategies employed by gig economy companies outside of the USA or Europe have scarcely been explored in the literature. By applying a critical discourse analysis (CDA) to public utterances of the leaders of the Colombian gig economy platform Rappi, this dissertation will look at how platform owners strategically use discourse to justify their accumulation model in the South American context and how in doing so they may create, reproduce or legitimise social hierarchies between different groups in the platform economy.

The research found that, in addition to neoliberal justifications based on the notions of markets as efficient and emancipatory, Rappi's claims for legitimacy draw elements from development discourses. Discourse on development is used to position precarious working conditions as a consequence of the underlying condition of Colombia as a 'poor' on 'underdeveloped' country. This, in turn, has the effect of depoliticising workers' concerns and sub-ordinating them to the higher goal of achieving 'development' for the country. Moreover, this framing constructs 'underdevelopment' as a technical problem that calls for technical solutions, placing the platform provider as an actor who can deliver these solutions.

By understanding discourse as existing in a dialectical relationship with non-discursive practices, this work explores how different cultural and material contexts lead to different legitimation strategies. Justifications are relevant not because they may be concealing an 'actual reality' but instead because the need for justification shapes the conditions of possibility for how accumulation models are materially implemented. Therefore, by developing a critique to the justificatory logics used by platforms, the final objective is not just to denaturalise or lay bare the discursive constructs underlying them, but rather to do so in a way that can force improvements in terms of justice by requiring new justifications to be formulated in response.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, platforms have become almost omnipresent facilitators of social and economic activities and have been hailed by many (both in a positive and in a critical tone) as one of the leading forces transforming capitalism. Although championed by some as technological artefacts that can bring efficiency to free markets through acting as intermediaries, platforms have been theorised in media studies as multi-layered socio-technical systems that actively shape the activities they mediate (Poell *et al.*, 2019; van Dijck, 2013; van Dijck *et al.*, 2018), and in doing so embody a politics (Srnicek, 2017).

Platform companies that intermediate on-demand labour markets, usually described as gig economy companies, are currently at the forefront of debates about the future of work. Although these companies describe what they do as helping individual 'entrepreneurs' connect with potential customers, their model has been characterised as one that precarises workers and exacerbates the commodification of work (De Stefano, 2016; Woodcock and Graham, 2020). As with other platforms, the capital accumulation model of gig economy platforms is based on the collection of data and monetary fees from the transactions they mediate. However, capital accumulation models need to rely on legal code that protects them and can constitute assets as capital (Pistor, 2019) and on discursive constructions and justificatory regimes that grant them legitimacy (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007; Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006).

Claims for legitimacy rely on shared representations and imaginaries, which are influenced by cultural, historical and socio-economic contexts. It has been noted in the literature how major global gig economy platform companies, and in particular those in the ride-hail and delivery sectors, mobilise notions of flexibility and autonomy to justify their operating model and to obscure their role in shifting risks from capital owners to workers through jobs outsourcing (Rosenblat, 2018; Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; van Doorn, 2017). However, literature on platform labour in South America notes that precarious on-demand work arrangements have long been the predominant form of labour in these countries (Grohmann, 2020). Thus, far from replacing more formal work arrangements, gig economy platforms in these countries have been described as offering more formal and stable job options for independent workers (Salazar

Daza and Hidalgo Cordero, 2020) or as centralising and productively appropriating self-managed work practices through data extraction (Costhek Abílio, 2020).

Regardless of how gig economy platforms are contextualised, it remains clear that different contexts may also afford companies different discursive resources with which to claim legitimacy for their business practices. However, most critical literature on platforms and the gig economy tends to foreground trends of technological and economic convergence. In general, less attention is paid to how platforms are intertwined with specific cultural, institutional and politic-economic contexts at the local level and how these contexts condition discursive understandings of platforms in ways that can also affect their material dimension.

Through applying a critical discourse analysis (CDA) to public utterances of the leaders of the Colombian gig economy platform Rappi, this dissertation will look at how platform owners strategically use discourse to justify their accumulation model in the South American context. Combining a critical approach to discourse analysis with insights from political economy and media and cultural studies, I look at how one company seeks to (re)define economic activities and concepts through their engagement with media, and how in doing so, hierarchies between social groups are created, reproduced or legitimised.

In this context, I will try to argue that studying how Rappi seeks to justify and claim legitimacy for their practices offers an entry point to theorise processes of platformisation outside the specific conditions of the US and European economies. There is, sure, a growing corpus of literature that studies platformisation as both a global techno-economic process and as an assemblage of sociohistorical and culturally specific processes (de Kloet et al., 2019; Parks and Starosielski, 2015; Plantin et al., 2018; Plantin and Seta, 2019; Zhang, 2020). However, most of it draws from the traditions of infrastructure and platform studies, which centre the material dimension of platforms to study how they are both shaped by and shape cultural practices and imaginaries. In contrast, less attention has been paid to the role of influential actors in shaping understandings of platforms through discourse and justification.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is divided in three sub-sections. The first will start by looking at work done on platforms from a media and cultural studies perspective, but also a political economy standpoint, to describe how processes of 'platformisation' (Poell *et al.*, 2019) reconfigure social and economic practices and at the same time enable new models for capital accumulation.

In the second sub-section, the emphasis is placed on platforms that intermediate on-demand work. Literature that looks at the social, cultural and historical aspects of gig economy platforms is presented along with literature that pays attention to the tensions existing between the rhetorical claims made by platform companies and the material conditions of their operations. Work centred on the USA and European experiences will be contrasted with emerging work being done at the peripheries of the global economy, in territories sometimes referred to as the 'global South' or as 'developing' countries. This contrast has two main aims: on the one hand, it will foreground how different national contexts lead to different conceptualisations of the economic activities facilitated by platforms. On the other hand, the introduction of terms such as 'periphery' or 'developing' to describe this 'alternative' realities of the gig economy sets the stage to study how companies in these territories may develop different discursive strategies and justificatory logics than those based in the global North or in 'developed' countries.

The last section introduces literature on discourse and justification into the debate on platforms and the gig economy. This section draws insights from Fairclough's approach to CDA (Fairclough, 2010) and the new sociology of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007) to explore the role of discourse in legitimising the platform model of capital accumulation.

Platformisation and capital accumulation

Although the term platform is a contested one and has multiple connotations, it has been used widely in internet and business discourses since, at least, the 1990s (Gillespie, 2010). Within media scholarship, the field of platform studies defines platforms as modular and re-programmable computational entities (Bogost and Montfort, 2009; Helmond, 2015; Montfort and Bogost, 2009), and studies how these entities condition the development of cultural and

social practices through their technical characteristics. Gillespie (2010), however, notes that the term platform has acquired a broader meaning than what its technical definition can accommodate. Under his view, far from just describing a specific technology, the use of the term platform shows 'an attempt to establish the very criteria by which these technologies will be judged, built directly into the terms by which we know them' (Gillespie, 2010: 360). Moreover, he notes how beyond just indicating a functional shape connecting 'complementors' or users with complementing needs, the term platform also 'suggests a progressive and egalitarian arrangement, promising to support those who stand upon it' (2010: 350) and is associated with a 'cyber-political sense of liberty' (Gillespie 2010, p. 352). In that sense, he considers the term platform is used strategically by companies to make claims about what they do and thus situate themselves within the regulatory landscape.

Van Dijck (2013) proposes bridging the platforms' material and discursive dimensions by viewing them as socio-economic structures and techno-cultural constructs. Under this approach, platforms are comprised of a technical infrastructure, which can include software and hardware, an economic model that underlies its logics and makes them valuable for investors, and a set of service and legal agreements that regulate their use (van Dijck et al., 2018). The ensemble of these three layers facilitates and shapes the interactions that happen through the platform, in ways that reflect to a certain extent the interests of platform owners. The term platformisation, in turn, has been proposed by Poell et al. (2019) to describe the process by which the infrastructures, economic processes and governance frameworks of digital platforms penetrate and transform economic and social spheres of life.

Srnicek (2017) notes that, although they may appear as empty spaces where interactions happen, platforms embody a politics. Through steering connections while at the same time making claims for neutrality, platforms construct and perform new value regimes and economies (van Dijck et al., 2018). It has been noted how the notion of the platform, as used in internet discourse, works towards producing an idea of collectivity in which all participants in the network are framed as part of the same community, thus blurring the boundaries between public and private and concealing relations of power and conflicting interests (Couldry, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018). Critically studying platforms, then, requires inquiring

how specific interests relate to how value regimes and economies are framed and re-imagined through them.

Different terms have been used to describe the model of capital accumulation enabled by platforms, the most common ones include: surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2015, 2019), data colonialism (Couldry and Mejias, 2019; Thatcher et al., 2016), informational capitalism (Cohen, 2019), and platform capitalism (Langley and Leyshon, 2017; Srnicek, 2017). Despite the nuances of each of these framings, there is consensus that the defining characteristic of the platform's economic model is that they extract value from the activities they mediate in the form of data and in the form of monetary fees. However, intangible assets require legal code to become capital (Pistor, 2019), and legal code, in turn, requires socio-legal constructs that justify it. Both being able to extract data and to treat it as a monetisable asset (Cohen, 2019), as well as being able to treat platforms as enclosed spaces from which rents can be extracted in the form of fees (Sadowski, 2020), require specific regulation, and discursive work that can justify that regulation.

Building on the rich semantic nature of the word platform (Gillespie, 2010), and on its resonance with multiple discourses, platform companies creatively combine its multiple connotations to redefine social and economic activities in ways that seek to naturalise its capital accumulation model. Different economic actors, activities and objects can be described through their relation to a higher-order discursive construction, which I will describe here as 'the platform economy'. In platform economy discourse, personal data and the data generated from interactions through platforms are typically framed as raw material available for extraction (Cohen, 2019), consumers of platforms are treated as 'users' who 'co-create value' or as consumer-entrepreneurs (Langley and Leyshon, 2017), and platforms themselves are described as networks or markets (Cohen, 2019; Richardson, 2020). These constructs draw elements from neoliberal discourses that present entrepreneurship, autonomy and flexibility as virtues; frame social problems as individual problems (Fairclough, 2000); impose market logics to social relations (Harvey, 2007; Noble, 2018); and consider markets and networks as democratic and potentially emancipatory models for social organisation (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007). At the same time, these constructs conflate economic value with public value

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(van Dijck et al., 2018) and conceal hierarchies within and between platform users and platform owners. Through this, platform companies seek to naturalise their business model. But these constructs and framings not only position platforms in the regulatory landscape and justify their model of accumulation, they also contribute to constructing imaginaries of how social and economic activities should be organised and how public value should be conceptualised.

The gig economy and platform labour

Platform companies that intermediate labour relations and facilitate on-demand work arrangements are currently at the forefront of debates about the future of work. Although these companies typically present themselves as mere intermediaries that help individual entrepreneurs connect with potential customers, different authors have noted the tensions between these claims and the material dimension of their practices. Although initially described by many as part of a 'sharing economy' (Schor, 2014; Schor and Fitzmaurice, 2015), this category of platforms is now more commonly described in academic literature as the 'gig economy' (De Stefano, 2016; Friedman, 2014; Woodcock and Graham, 2020).

Some authors have shown the contrast between the rhetorical invocation of concepts such as 'platform', 'sharing', and 'entrepreneurship', and the control that gig economy platforms exert over workers. By studying Uber in the USA, Rosenblat & Stark (2016) note that although Uber claims to offer flexibility and freedom to independent entrepreneurs, through techniques of 'algorithmic management' it treats drivers as a managed labour force and creates employment hierarchies. Griesbach *et al*. (2019) studied multiple food delivery platforms and found that companies deploy different algorithmic techniques to control workers' time and activities with little to no accountability. Building on similar insights on the managerial and control role played by platforms, Costhek Abilio (2019) proposes describing gig workers as 'sub-ordinate self-managers' instead of entrepreneurs. In general, most empirical studies of work relations in the gig economy agree that gig workers are not independent contractors merely connecting with clients through the platforms, but that companies develop to some extent a hierarchical relationship with them, while at the same time strategically positioning themselves as

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intermediaries to obscure these hierarchies and avoid complying with employment regulations.

Discursive strategies used by gig economy companies to avoid being regulated as employers are not new but rather build on historical patterns that devalue specific social groups and categories of work. Tsing (2009) notes how global firms that outsourced their supply chains in the last couple of decades of the 20th Century mobilised tropes of management, entrepreneurship or consumption to redefine supply-chain work outside of traditional labour framings, thus normalising the exclusion of peripheral and racialised populations from access to workers' rights. This strategy had the additional consequence of blurring the distinction between self-exploitation and super-exploitation, that is, exploitation that is exacerbated by noneconomic factors such as ethnicity or gender. In the gig economy, Van Doorn notes how gig economy platforms hinge 'on the gendered and racialised subordination of low-income workers, the unemployed, and the unemployable' (2017, p. 908), which predate their existence. In that sense, it can be argued that the discursive work of gig economy platforms not only conceals unequal economic relations but also builds on institutionalised norms that devalue some groups of people and the qualities associated with them (Fraser, 2003).

From a historical perspective, what gig economy companies do has also been situated as part of a decades-long process of precarisation and exacerbated commodification of work. In industrialised countries, this process can be traced to the proliferation of non-standard and informal work arrangements that were introduced in the 1970s and increasingly replaced traditional work contracts (De Stefano, 2016). These new forms of work were originally justified by neoliberal discourses that promoted austerity solutions to economic crises (Benanav, 2020; Harvey, 2005). However, in South America, non-standard and informal jobs have historically been the norm rather than the exception (Grohmann, 2020). Under this context, some authors have argued that gig economy jobs may be attractive for workers given the lack of good, stable jobs in the market (Morales Muñoz, 2020; Salazar Daza and Hidalgo Cordero, 2020). However, empirical evidence shows that through concentration and monopolisation, the initial promise of gig work is gradually turned into lower levels of income and fewer alternative opportunities as platforms gain monopolistic power in informal job

markets (Costhek Abílio, 2020; Salazar Daza and Hidalgo Cordero, 2020). From a centre-periphery perspective, Costhek Abilio (2020) describes what gig economy companies do in the global South as subordinating and appropriating the everyday self-management practices of precarious or independent workers. Under this view, by introducing a layer of technological mediation to traditionally informal economic practices, gig economy companies centralise and make the experiences of precarious self-employed workers productively manageable by turning them into data.

A different approach has aimed to position the platformisation of work in the global South in relation to its potential for advancing developmental goals (Hira and Reilly, 2017; Reilly, 2020). This body of work typically focuses on the role of platforms in re-shaping social and market institutions and reducing transaction costs. In that sense, topics they look at include the role of platforms in reducing 'market frictions' and overcoming barriers that make it harder for global South countries to access global markets and financial flows (Koskinen et al., 2019). Heeks et al. (2021) argue, based on empirical work conducted in Colombia and South Africa, that platforms in developing countries may undertake or substite functions that traditional market institutions or the State fail to fulfil effectively.

The reviewed literature indicates that, although gig economy platforms in different parts of the world may present similar (if not identical) technical features and business models, the specific cultural, historical and political-economic contexts in which they operate have implications both for workers' and users experiences and for how they can be conceptualised, justified and contested in public discourse.

Discourse and Justification in the Platform Economy

As the literature previously discussed shows, discourse can be used strategically to advance the economic interests of powerful actors. By positioning themselves as platforms and then seeking to define the components of a so-called platform economy in terms that reflect their interests, companies seek to strategically construct value regimes that reflect their economic interests. However, discourse can't be reduced to economic interests only. In order claim

legitimacy for their positions, actors inevitably need to appeal to general justificatory principles (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002; Edwards *et al.*, 2015).

It has been argued that capitalism and capitalist accumulation models do not contain any internal sources of legitimacy to justify society's commitment to them (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007). Therefore, capital owners necessarily need to appeal to external justifications based on constructions of a higher order (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). These justifications, in turn, require shared representations and understandings of public value. That is, shared imaginaries of how society is or should be organised and shared conceptions of what is acceptable or desirable and what is not.

Established discourses provide economic actors with external sources of legitimacy while at the same time setting the boundaries of what can be considered acceptable at a specific moment in a particular society. Chiapello and Fairclough (2002) showed how CDA can be used to study ideological justifications of capitalism by looking at how established discourses are used and mixed creatively by economic actors to establish orders of discourse that justify their position. An order of discourse, in this context, is understood as 'a particular social ordering of relationships amongst different ways of meaning-making' (Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002, p. 195), in which certain ways of meaning-making are rendered dominant, while others are considered oppositional or alternative. Orders of discourse, then, establish principles to determine what is considered reasonable, true or acceptable and what is not, and exercise a power of constraint upon excluded ways of meaning-making (Foucault, 1971). Through drawing from established discourses and creatively mixing them, economic actors may aim to reconfigure orders of discourse to render dominant those interpretations of reality that favour their interests, and exclude those that oppose them.

As noted in the previous two sub-sections, most of the literature on platforms and the gig economy tend to take for granted that platforms base their appeal on concepts such as flexibility, autonomy, and entrepreneurship, which are used to conceal and justify unfair working conditions. However, less has been said about how this discursive work is related to the local context in which the companies base their operations, particularly when it is neither

Europe nor the USA. As literature from South America discussed in the previous section showed, platforms need to be understood in relation to local characteristics that, in many cases, predate their existence. Moreover, changes brought by platformisation take shape in relation to shifting cultural practices and evolving imaginaries (Poell *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, studying the discourses around the gig economy and platforms requires paying attention to the specific cultural, historical, and politic-economic conditions under which they are deployed.

Some literature has examined how discursive work and rhetorical strategies intertwine with local contexts and local political economies outside the USA and Europe. Shibata (2020) looked at how official discourses that accompanied the introduction of gig work in Japan represented it as providing both increased autonomy and flexibility and new sources of economic growth for the national economy. From a CDA perspective, Mishra and Batini (2020) have studied how Indian newspapers reproduce and reinforce Uber's entrepreneurship discourse, which not only helps the company appear worker-friendly but also highlights its role in generating employment opportunities and attracting investment. Zhang has looked at how particular politic-economic characteristics of the Chinese internet and dominant discourses on the importance of small businesses intertwine with Alibaba's strategies to discursively position itself as 'a democratic and participatory contra the deficient infrastructure of the State' (2020: 115). In South America, Grohmann et al. (2021) studied the communication strategies of four labour platforms in Brazil during the Covid-19 pandemic. They found that platforms present themselves as citizen companies that offer opportunities to workers who need them, while at the same time presenting workers as subjects who sacrifice themselves for the benefit of society, and as indebted and invisible individuals who should be grateful for having the opportunity to work.

This literature suggests that, while the accumulation model and technological design of platforms may show a tendency towards global convergence, the meaning-making processes associated with them, and thus also the justificatory logics that platform owners can use to claim legitimacy may differ. While in the USA or Europe justificatory logics appear centred mainly around ideas of individual improvement and increased autonomy, discourses on the gig economy in global South or developing countries tend to highlight the platforms' role in

creating opportunities and driving progress or 'development' for the country as a whole, while relatively sub-ordinating the interests of individual gig workers to these greater goals. In that sense, platform and gig economy justifications in the global South appear to show some elements from development discourses. Developmentalism differs from neoliberalism in that it considers that 'states can and should establish complementary social and economic goals for the nation, and then govern with corporate and social actors to achieve these goals in ways that produce both economic growth and social benefits' (Reilly, 2020: 2). In that sense, far from assuming that markets provide the only valid criteria by which to organise economic activities, it recognises that it might be reasonable to set country-wide objectives and accommodate some level of economic planning to achieve them. However, it has also been argued that discourses on development and 'developing countries' tend to frame problems such as poverty or super-exploitation as external signs of the underlying status of the country as underdeveloped (Ferguson, 1994). Consequently, developmentalism may be leveraged by powerful actors to depoliticise issues of exploitation and position the experiences of workers as a natural condition of underdevelopment. At the same time, underdevelopment (usually understood as having low-income levels) is presented as something that ought to be overcome through technical rather than political solutions.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Platform owners play a prominent role in shaping our understanding of platforms by crafting their own descriptions of what platforms do. When it comes to the gig economy, studying the discourses of platform owners offers a way of enquiring how they seek to stabilise ideas about work and about the relations between consumers, workers, the platform company and the State in ways that reflect their own economic interests, but also in relation to evolving cultural practices and imaginaries. Justificatory logics used by platforms not only seek to grant legitimacy for existing business models but also shape the boundaries of what is considered acceptable and construct imaginaries that may then become materialised in platform designs and regulation.

As Boltanski & Chiapello (2007) note, capitalist accumulation models need to reference constructions of a higher order and shared representations of reality to justify society's

commitment to them. In that sense, in justifying their position through discourse, platform companies need to draw justificatory logics from established orders of discourse. However, the relation between discursive practices and orders of discourse is dialectical (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002). Through drawing from and creatively mixing existing discourses, actors may restructure established orders of discourse, thus establishing new rules to judge what is acceptable and what is not.

Discourses contain imaginaries, that is, conceptions of how a society is, might or should be organised (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002). Economic actors may seek to use discourse to establish imaginaries that work for their interests. Economic imaginaries within discourse develop as actors seek to define certain economic practices (for example, digitally mediated on-demand work) as objects of regulation, and may be materially reproduced as they get operationalised into technological designs or regulatory regimes (Jessop, 2004; Sum and Jessop, 2013). This action becomes particularly relevant in moments of crisis or significant socio-cultural transformations, as actors seek to strategically (re)define and stabilise understandings of new social and economic practices as they develop (Edwards *et al.*, 2015; Fairclough, 2010; Jessop, 2004).

One of the ways in which platform owners seek to justify their practices and through which they may shape understandings of economic practices is by setting the terms by which platforms and the economic practices they facilitate are discussed in public debates. As Hoffmann et al. (2018) argue, understanding how influential business leaders frame and discuss platforms in public is crucial to understanding the role of platforms in contemporary social life. This dissertation will inquire how the leaders of one major South American gig economy platform, Rappi, claim legitimacy for their business model through their public utterances, and how in the exercise of doing so they reconfigure orders of discourse and create or reproduce social hierarchies between social groups. The two research questions to be addressed through the research are:

RQ1: What justificatory logics do Rappi leaders use to claim legitimacy for their platform business model?

RQ2: What social hierarchies do Rappi leaders discursively create or reproduce in the exercise of justifying their practices?

CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

Rappi is a gig economy platform that started operations in Colombia in 2016 and is currently active in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay. In 2018, Rappi became the first Colombian tech company to reach a US$1 billion market valuation after raising US$200 million from venture capital funds (Endeavor Colombia, 2018). By July 2021, the company's capital valuation had increased to US$5.25 billion (LABS English, 2021).

Although company representatives have stated to investors that their goal is to become a super-app (Lima, 2021), that is, an app that concentrates as many services as possible in one place, they are mainly focused on the delivery of groceries and meals. In that sense, their operating model is similar to that of platforms such as Uber Eats, Deliveroo or Instacart; albeit with the difference that they offer the possibility to ask 'anything' from the 'Rappitendero', which is the term used by Rappi to refer to courier workers that service their customers.

The company treats Rappitenderos as user-entrepreneurs who offer their service to consumers through the platform. Rappitenderos are not related to Rappi through a formal work contract. However, a typical Rappitendero in Colombia works for Rappi for more than 8 hours a day, during six or seven days a week. For 81% of the Rappitenderos, Rappi is their only source of income, 93% of them are not affiliated with any social security system, and 54% do not have any health insurance. Additionally, more than 50% of the Rappitenderos in Colombia are Venezuelan migrants (Observatorio Laboral de la Universidad del Rosario, 2019)

In recent years, Rappi's leaders have given several interviews and speechs in which they describe and claim legitimacy for their platform business model, and discuss their vision both for the company and for Colombia. These appearances became more frequent during 2018 and

2019, in the months after they reached a US$1 billion market valuation, and after the first big strike organised by Rappitenderos in October 2018 (Patiño, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

To address the research questions, this dissertation will analyse public utterances of Rappi executives using a CDA approach. Discourse analysis parts from an understanding of language as something that constructs reality in opposition to just describing it. The approach, then, considers that in the action of naming, (re)defining and describing social and economic practices, knowledge about them is being created. However, in as much as discursive practices construct knowledge, actors may struggle to impose specific accounts of reality to attain specific goals (Gill, 1996). In that sense, the way accounts about what platforms do are assembled is to some extent reflective of the interests of the actors that participate in assembling them.

Within discourse analysis, some intellectual traditions consider discourse to be fully constitutive of the social world (see Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). However, the questions under analysis part from an understanding of discourse as something that shapes and is shaped by material conditions. We are interested in exploring how discursive practices create, reproduce or even legitimise social hierarchies between different groups, which are not entirely discursive but also have a material dimension that is made evident, for example, in the material conditions that workers in the gig economy endure. The research, then, is concerned not just with discursive practices but also with how they exist in a dialectical relation with material aspects of the social world (Fairclough, 2017). In that sense, it considers economic imaginaries to be discursively constituted and materially reproduced (Jessop, 2004).

Fairclough's version of CDA (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 2007; Fairclough, 2000, , 2003, , 2010, , 2017) is better suited for this task than other traditions within discourse analysis, such as Discourse Theory (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987) or discursive psychology, which consider discourse to be fully constitutive of the social world (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). Fairclough's CDA understands discursive practice as one aspect of social practices, which is

both a cause and effect of social and material relations (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). In that sense, discursive practice exists in a dialectical relation with other social practices and with orders of discourse (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002; Fairclough, 2017). Under this approach, the analyst's role is to uncover how the material and discoursal dimensions of objects of social analysis relate to each other. According to Jørgensen & Phillips (2002: 63):

> The research focus of CDA is accordingly both the discursive practices which construct representations of the world, social subjects and social relations, including power relations, and the role that these discursive practices play in furthering the interests of particular social groups.

Nevertheless, CDA does not just describe these relations. Instead, as its name suggests, its oriented towards creating critical research that can serve to rectify injustices (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). Thus, by deconstructing how discourse reflects and produces social hierarchies that may become operationalised in non-discursive practices, CDA provides a basis for action to change them (Fairclough, 2017). Critically analysing the discourses about gig economy platforms, then, is an initial step to develop new understandings that can contest dominant discourses and further the interests of workers, civil society organisations or other actors in ways that can then become operationalised in new designs, business models or regulations.

To address the research questions, this dissertation looks at public utterances of Rappi executives as pieces of public relations. Public relations are defined here as 'the strategic attempt to control the agenda of public discussion and the terms in which discussion takes place' (Weaver et al., 2006: 17). Through public relations, companies seek to claim legitimacy for their position and their actions, and to maintain or contest hegemonic and material power (Edwards, 2018). In that sense, companies and company leaders may use discourse strategically to advance their economic interests through public relations. The choice of analysing only public utterances as public relations excludes other instances in which the company also engages in discursive practices. Given the restrictions of time and space of this project, public utterances were prioritised because of their central role in justifying and claiming legitimacy for the capital accumulation model, in contrast with other instances of

discursive practices that are more oriented towards practical needs, such as the platform interface, the website or advertisement contents.

Sampling

In order to build a corpus of texts to analyse, public appearances of Rappi company leaders in Colombian media between the year 2016 and June 2021 were identified using Nexis, Google News search service, and the websites of El Tiempo and El Espectador, the two leading Colombian newspapers. The use of Google and the two newspapers' websites was necessary due to the limited availability of Colombian print outlets in Nexis and to complement the corpus with interviews in broadcast media.

Eight communicative events in which company leaders appear in the media were selected. The criteria for selection was whether the communicative event is one in which company leaders explain aspects of their business model to justify it or give opinions on how the economy should be organised and regulated. Texts in which company leaders give lengthy statements were prioritised, and those in which they are only quoted briefly were excluded.

The selected communicative events consist of five print interviews, two radio interviews, and one public speech (**Appendix A**). In most texts, Simón Borrero (Rappi's Co-Founder and Chief Executive Officer) is the main speaker. However, utterances by Sebastian Mejia (Co-Founder and President), Alejandro Galvis (Chief of Staff) and Sebastian Ruales (Commercial Director) are also included. This sampling strategy assumes that public utterances of companies' leaders in which they discuss company affairs reflect a company's public relation strategy rather than purely personal opinions. In that sense, although the speakers may vary, the goals they seek through their engagement with the public and the position from which they speak are assumed to respond to the company's interests.

Operationalisation

The analysis of the communicative events followed Fairclough's three-dimensional model as described by Jørgensen and Phillips (2002). In that sense, the communicative events were analysed in their discursive, textual and social dimensions. At the discursive level, special

attention was put into what discourses are used and articulated in the texts. At the textual dimension, structural and linguistic features of the text were analysed to look at how events are connected to actors or objects, how subjects are positioned in relation to one another, and how truth modalities and grammatical features are used to present some views as less valid than others. At the social dimension, the emphasis was on how discursive practices reproduce or restructure orders of discourse, and what implications this may have for non-discursive practices.

Throughout the analysis, I put special attention to how different discursive strands and their justification logics are used and combined. In our analysis, the importance of the different discourse strands lies in that they provide the external justifications for Rappi's practices. At the same time, *interdiscursivity* may indicate how different justificatory logics are creatively combined to configure new orders of discourse in order to present Rappi's model and its consequences for social ordering as the only possible or the best of possible alternatives to organise economic activities (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007).

To address the second question, I put special attention to how the dominant ways of meaning-making in Rappi's leaders' discourse reproduce and conceal power relations and social hierarchies. In order to do so, the analysis looks at how actors are positioned in relation to other actors and to the platform through structural features of the text and how different identities or social groups are constructed through these relations. To analyse the social dimension of discourse, I paid attention to how discursive elements are articulated with economic and social activities (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 2007). To this end, I take a multidisciplinary approach that combines a discursive analysis of the texts with insights drawn from the literature on platforms and the gig economy reviewed earlier.

The analysis followed the following steps: first, discursive themes were identified and coded after a close reading of the texts. Then, the text was surveyed to highlight recurring textual features relevant to the research problem, such as metaphors, truth modalities, and transitivity. Finally, the findings from these two dimensions were analysed in relation to the

literature reviewed in the theoretical chapter to analyse the social implications of Rappi's discursive practices.

Criticism and limitations

Although CDA is a well-suited methodology for the research problem this dissertation addresses, criticisms of the methodology need to be considered. CDA considers that actors aim to set the terms by which we understand certain phenomena in ways that reflect specific interests. However, the subjective nature of the analytical exercise implies that the result of the analysis is also contingent on the position of the researcher, who may ground the analysis on an often implicit understanding of an 'actual' reality that exists in contrast with the accounts of reality assembled in the texts under analysis (Potter, 1996). In line with this, Verschueren (2001) considers that analysts may selectively identify aspects of the text that reinforce their preconceptions and arrive at findings that are a product of conviction. When this is the case, the analyst interpretation of the texts would be as valid as any other possible interpretation. Another criticism points to how critical approaches tend to adopt overtly simplistic macro-sociological theories and consider that the role of discourse is solely ideological, that is, that its only objective is to conceal or disguise relations of domination (Hammersley, 1997).

Although the subjective nature of the methodology leads to these risks, some measures taken should reduce the problems associated with them. In terms of avoiding selectivity and over-interpretation, it is expected that the operationalisation of the research through a system of codes (**Appendix B**) and the engagement of a broad and diverse corpus of literature that covers non-discursive aspects of the phenomena under study should mitigate that risk. Additionally, the inclusion of insights from the new sociology of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007) in the conceptual framework responds to the critique formulated by Hammersley (1997). Instead of considering discourse to serve purely an ideological goal of concealing to conceal 'all-powerful economic relations' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007: 26), this approach argues that the need to claim legitimacy by appealing to shared representations of the common good does put constraints on what powerful economic actors can do.

It is also essential to reflect on which voices are considered in the analysis and which are not. Discursive understandings of the world that become dominant are rarely, if ever, entirely determined by one actor. Instead, they reflect ongoing discursive struggles of various actors or social groups that may aim to fix meanings in ways that reflect their goals (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987). In that sense, studying how dominant discourses are formed requires looking not only at dominant actors but also at oppositional voices that may challenge them and influence their evolution. Initially, the research design also contemplated including the view of workers to consider how they challenged the companies' claims to legitimacy. However, two main factors difficulted this: on the one hand, media articles that covered Rappi rarely included voices of workers directly. Although in some interviews with Rappi leaders' the interviewer voices what she considers to be workers' concerns, I could not find any print interviews in which workers discussed working conditions or Rappi's economic model more generally. Furthermore, there was the problem of considering who is a legitimate speaker for the workers. For most of Rappi's existence, Rappitenderos did not have any official trade unions that represented them. In October 2020, a first official app workers union (Unidapp) was established in Colombia. However, representatives from Unidapp had not been interviewed in mass media outlets by the time the sampling was done.

Although this may be a limitation for the purpose of this research, it is also a confirmation of one underlying assumption of the approach taken: that companies and company leaders play a major role in setting the terms by which their technologies and business practices are framed and discussed, in contrast to a less prominent role played by the workers. The reasons why this is true are varied, but may include access to media, ideological leanings of the major media outlets in the country, or the capacity to organise an effective communications strategy. Regardless of the reason, what remains clear is that, as Hoffmann et al. (2018) argue, understanding the role of platforms in contemporary social life requires understanding how influential public figures discuss and frame these platforms. In the case of Rappi, these influential public figures are the company founders and executives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the most relevant findings from the analysis are presented and discussed in four sub-sections. First, the main discourses and justificatory logics found in Rappi discourse are outlined. The second sub-section looks at how through describing the platform as a market, Rappi leverages dominant neoliberal discourses to position its model as contributing to public value and, at the same time, conceals power relations inherent to its model of capital accumulation. The third sub-section looks at how the terms entrepreneur and entrepreneurship are mobilised to justify the position of gig workers as freelancers and to position platform owners as philanthropic leaders deciding society's destiny by articulating both neoliberal and developmental notions of entrepreneurship. Finally, the fourth sub-section summarises the main findings of the research and discusses them in relation to the research questions.

Discourse and Justification: Articulating Neoliberal and Development Discourses

In their public utterances, Rappi executives draw justificatory logics from different discourse strands and combine them creatively. As expected, Rappi executives build on the positioning of platforms as mere facilitators of market interactions, benefitting from its resonance with neoliberal discourses that present markets as efficient, democratic and emancipatory. However, they also constantly draw elements from development discourses, which in Colombia are usually associated with entrepreneurship and innovation discourses (Calvo Martínez *et al.*, 2019). As a result, market-based justifications of platforms intertwine with developmental goals and understandings of progress. At the same time, alternative accounts of what Rappi is are positioned as opposed not just to free markets or to innovation, but to 'economic growth', which is considered a necessary condition to overcome Colombia's most pressing problems.

Some statements, like the one quoted here from an interview Borrero gave in 2018 to El Tiempo newspaper, show the use of rhetorical invocations of platforms as described in the literature (Gillespie, 2010; Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; van Dijck *et al.*, 2018), as a way of seeking immunity from regulation:

> Rappi is a platform that connects users who have a request with 'Rappitenderos' who have enough time to run errands. For example, think of the yellow pages. If someone needed a plumber and searched for one there, no one would come out and say that the yellow pages had to pay social benefits to the plumbers. (Patiño, 2018)

Rappi executives continuously draw from established discourses that position the company as a technology firm offering just the means for 'users' who need a service to connect with Rappitenderos ('providers') who can offer it (van Dijck *et al.*, 2018) while at the same time claiming that in doing so they are creating efficiencies in the market and driving prosperity. In that sense, they also draw on justificatory logics based on neoclassical economics, which, as Boltanski & Chiapello (2007) argue, favour a utilitarian approach that aims to maximise total wealth in an economy regardless of its distribution, while at the same time presenting the notion of markets as places that favour political freedom. This is in line with what Van Dijck et al. describe as 'the creation of economic value serving a nondescript amalgam of private and public interests' (2018: 23) which is purposefully conflated with the creation of *public* value.

While Rappi leaders mobilise neoliberal discourses that present self-regulating markets as the best of possible orders to claim that Rappitenderos should not be formally employed, they also claim to be organising the market in a way that benefits 'local economies'. In that sense, they try to position Rappi as a 'different' kind of platform, describing their model as being more beneficial to 'local economies' than, for example, global social media platforms. To do so, they draw on certain elements from development discourse. Throughout different moments, what the company does is described as both 'driving growth' and 'creating opportunities' to 'improve the lives of people'. An example is seen in a radio interview with Simon Borrero:

> I admire a lot the… the companies that have a local impact. Companies like… companies like the social networks, for example, those are big companies that have changed the world, but do not have much local distribution, they don't impact local commerce. In fact, they don't drive the economy. I admire companies like, I don't know, the ones in China, for example, where they are truly transforming the local economies and that is what moves us in Rappi. If Rappi continues to grow… today, we are creating opportunities for fifty thousand Rappitenderos in the region, but if

we continue to grow at the current rate, we will create opportunities for five hundred thousand Rappitenderos, tens of thousands of businesses, millions of users. (FM, 2019)

In addition to describing Rappi as a platform that has an 'impact', or that 'drives the economy' and particularly the 'local' economy by 'creating opportunities', the mention of Chinese platform companies as potential models to follow seems to be in tension with neoliberal ideals of free markets as both efficient and emancipatory. Chinese platforms have been described as being shaped by a techno-nationalist approach to internet regulation that prioritises national interests over a free-market approach (Plantin and Seta, 2019). It has also been noted how they have developed a symbiotic relationship with the State (Zhang, 2020), in which platforms are allowed to disrupt and replace public functions as long as they remain aligned to the higher end goals of the government. In that sense, there are characteristics of Chinese platforms that resonate with a developmental approach to platforms that considers that 'states can and should establish complementary social and economic goals for the nation, and then govern with corporate and social actors to achieve these goals in ways that produce both economic growth and social benefits' (Reilly, 2020: 2) and that platforms can fulfil functions that the State fails to deliver (Heeks et al., 2021).

Development discourse is also leveraged to depoliticise economic discussions. Ferguson (1994) noted how development discourses had the effect of creating depoliticised objects of knowledge and making the case for expanding technocratic solutions to social problems. In Rappi's case, by presenting the platform as a more efficient driver of development 'opportunities' than the State itself, development discourse can be used to argue for the expansion of Rappi's governance model as the best possible way to achieve the objective of making Colombia a 'rich' country. This de-politicisation and subsequent technification of societal problems and solutions is made evident by Borrero in a radio interview:

> Because we believe that growth solves all problems, we do not think there is time to fix certain problems and turn off growth. We believe that by moving out of the comfort zone, and pushing us towards achieving growth, other problems will solve

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themselves. I believe in Colombia we are still discussing a lot between left and right and we forget that there is something we shouldn't discuss. That is, the discussion between going up or going down. What is that discussion? The one between everything that can bring growth and everything that can hinder growth. (FM, 2019)

The combination of features from neoliberal discourse and development discourse shows both aspects that work towards socio-cultural change and aspects that work towards stabilising dominant orders of discourse. By presenting the platform as a driver of 'local economies' and distancing it from traditional platforms that 'don't drive the economy', Rappi presents its business model as an exceptional case that justifies taking a different regulatory approach than what is usually assumed to be expected for other companies. In that sense, although Rappi executives use the rhetorical invocation of platforms to seek legal immunity from industry-specific regulations, they also anticipate criticisms usually levied towards major international platforms by claiming they pursue socially desirable objectives at the local level. What otherwise would be considered just a neutral act of connecting parties is presented as a new source of 'opportunities' to 'improve the quality of lives' and 'drive economic growth'.

On the other hand, development discourse is also incorporated to justify and stabilise the existing social hierarchies. By presenting certain subjects as 'beneficiaries' of development, their political agency is neglected to favour a developmental approach to achieving the 'common good', which is understood as promoting economic growth. In doing so, the situation of workers is positioned as a consequence of the country's underdevelopment. Consequently, the political dimension of public affairs is disregarded in favour of a technocratic approach to solving social issues.

Overall, by positioning economic growth as the only important country objective and Rappi as one of the main actors driving economic growth, criticisms of Rappi's model are positioned as either ill-informed or opposed to country-wide objectives. In that sense, the articulation of elements from neoliberal and development discourses seeks to present Rappi's model as the only possible path for things such as 'lifting' people out of poverty and 'solving' the most

pressing problems of the country; and alternative or oppositional interpretations of the consequences of Rappi's model are deemed less acceptable.

The use of elements from both neoliberal and development discourses, then, serves mainly three purposes. First, neoliberal notions of the platform as an intermediary allow company owners to seek immunity from regulation by detaching themselves from any responsibility in managing the workforce. Additionally, the articulation of this with elements from development discourses is used to claim their business model serves the purpose of advancing country-wide development objectives that go beyond just intermediating markets, while at the same time presenting precarious working conditions as a consequence of those objectives not having been yet achieved. Finally, the claims to the scientific and technical nature of the neoclassical economic principles that underly neoliberal and development discourses are used to position criticisms as ill-intentioned, anti-scientific, or naïve.

Platforms as Markets: Constructing Value, Concealing Power Relations

Through their justifications, leaders aim to (re)define certain economic activities in ways that reflect their interests and conceal basic characteristics of the platform accumulation model and the relations of power and domination inherent to it. In that sense, although in every interaction through Rappi there are at least four entities involved: the Rappitendero, the seller, the consumer and Rappi; through the market metaphor, the role of Rappi owners, designers and engineers in setting the terms in which the transactions occur and extracting value from them is moved to the background.

Gillespie (2014) proposes studying how the power of algorithmically driven systems is constituted through discourse by looking at how technology providers struggle to present their systems as neutral and at the same time justify their existence by claiming they drive positive social outcomes. In the case of Rappi, clear tensions exist between the claims of the platform being just a connector technology facilitating consumers and providers to meet each other, and the claims about the 'opportunities' that Rappi creates, and its contribution to driving the growth of and development of the Colombian economy. By presenting the app as a technological device that merely replicates the functioning of the market economy, Rappi

leaders aim to 'outsource' the justification for the social dimension of their technical systems, making claims to neoclassical economics and the notions of the market as the best possible model for organising social and economic activities. The tension between the 'technical' and the 'socially desirable' is, to some extent, resolved by presenting the platform as a self-regulating market technology. Given the dominance of discourses that present markets as both the most efficient way to create wealth and as systems with emancipatory potential, by positioning the platform as a market, the same qualities may be attributed to it.

The company also mobilises the market metaphor to present the earnings that workers can get as a sole consequence of their ability to conduct themselves in a market economy. This excerpt from an interview with Alejandro Galvis shows how the notion of the platform as a market is used to shift the burden of responsibility for their income to Rappitenderos:

> Because this is a platform based on the market economy, we are completely
> subsumed to what consumers demand in order to have a business. That's a key point
> in our model. And we explain this because when a Rappitendero connects during
> nights and weekends, they have many orders to serve. Outside of those periods,
> sales fluctuate a lot. Then, to think about hiring under the current regulatory regime
> is not viable with our model. Because it is a platform, the model allows the work to
> be conducted flexibly, instead of by shifts. The Rappitendero logs in and logs off at
> his discretion, when and where he wants to. (Portafolio, 2019)

However, the contradictions between the discursive notion of markets and the actual functioning of the platform become evident when the market framing is used to justify the service rates Rappitenderos are paid for their work, which in practice are fixed through an obscure process entirely controlled by Rappi and enforced through its software. This statement by Borrero illustrates the tension between the idea of the platform as a technologically mediated free market and the pricing mechanism of the platform:

> It's very easy to come out and say 'the Rappitenderos should be paid more', but if
> we were to charge 10 000 pesos for an order, the users would stop ordering and, as

a consequence, the Rappitenderos will not have enough income. It's basic market

economics. (Patiño, 2018)

Although the claim is that Rappitenderos are engaging in free-market transactions and thus the rates they get paid are the 'natural' consequence of free markets, Borrero here implicitly admits that the service rate is determined by Rappi and not by an imagined technologically mediated 'market'. As Cohen (2019) notes, unlike markets, platforms are discrete legal entities with their own aims and owners. By replacing and rematerialising markets, platforms do away with some of the economic theory's core assumptions about them: that they are open to entry and disruption and that prices are the guiding mechanism for assigning resources and signalling market power. Although Rappi executives claim their platform acts based on the rules of a 'market economy', Rappi eliminates the central role prices play in a market economy by acting as a central planner.

The way the construction of platforms as markets is articulated with the economic activities taking place through the app has the effect of concealing the central role that the platform plays in constituting the economic relations it mediates (Langley and Leyshon, 2017), as well as the ways in which platform owners extract and accumulate value through their role as mediators. By positioning Rappitenderos as independent economic agents engaging freely in market transactions, not only the role of the platform in setting the service rates is obscured, but so is its role in algorithmically managing workers (Griesbach et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2015; Rosenblat and Stark, 2016) and extracting value from their work.

Through this framing, then, power relations between platform owners, consumers and Rappitenderos are concealed. Equating the platform's technical features with the 'natural' functioning of a market economy aims to naturalise its outcomes and obscure the role of human intervention in generating those outcomes. Finally, because the framing of platforms as markets builds on a neoliberal notion of public value that considers markets the best way of maximising society's wellbeing, the platform is presented as a technology geared towards the public interest.

The Polysemy of Entrepreneurship

One theme that constantly appears in Rappi's discourse is that of entrepreneurship. The term 'entrepreneur' is used both to describe Rappi founders as well as Rappitenderos. However, the attributes assigned to entrepreneurs vary depending on the context in which the term is used, therefore allowing for the term to be mobilised for various purposes in different contexts. Consequently, the terms entrepreneurship and entrepreneur are used to justify different ways of treating different actors while simultaneously presenting them as part of the same category.

The positioning of founders as entrepreneurs replicates not just neoliberal discourses on the value of entrepreneurship but also elements of the 'hero entrepreneur' discourse that presents entrepreneurial individuals as those who hold the responsibility of defining the destiny of society by creating innovations that can drive development (Calvo Martínez et al., 2019). As Calvo Martínez et al. (2019) note, the figure of the hero entrepreneur has become dominant over the past decade in development discourses in Colombia, in line with a broader framework of neoliberal programs for development that present innovation and entrepreneurship as an efficient way of advancing development goals. When discussing the beginnings of Rappi in a radio interview, Borrero says:

> Come on, what has happened with Rappi is that we've been very lucky to put together a group of entrepreneurs who have a passion and have the internal drive to create impact, which is a bit weird, because usually one… one works with people who want to make money. In Rappi, a group of entrepreneurs got together that what they want or how they measure their lives is by having an impact. (FM, 2019)

Here, the entrepreneurs credited with the creation of Rappi are portrayed as philanthropically driven businesspeople who care more about the 'impact' they have in society than about profit. That positioning of entrepreneurs as drivers of social progress justifies a lax approach towards business regulation. The deregulation of entrepreneurship is praised as something that will drive development by unleashing the innovative and entrepreneurial spirits of purpose-driven individuals who can determine the destiny of society.

The notion of 'entrepreneurship' as something that should not be regulated takes a different connotation when describing the work Rappitenderos do. In different passages of the texts, the courier workers are described as 'entrepreneurs' who are 'in charge' of their 'own time' and do not want to respond to 'a boss'. In such cases, the notion of entrepreneurship as beneficial for society is mobilised to justify the deregulation of work relations. However, this is done by imagining workers as entrepreneurs and consequently projecting onto them the same desires entrepreneurs are assumed to have. In an interview with La Republica newspaper, Borrero argues:

> If you ask the Rappitenderos, they don't want to be employees; they are entrepreneurs. They don't want a fixed schedule; they don't want any of that. What they want is the flexibility that the app gives them (González Bell, 2018)

By highlighting the entrepreneurial and 'flexible' nature of the Rappitenderos occupation, Rappi reframes the work Rappitenderos do outside of the terms in which labour struggles are usually waged (see Tsing, 2009). However, the use of terms such as 'entrepreneurs', 'flexibility', and 'autonomy' to describe work may also be read as an attempt to set expectations on how workers should perform. As Gregory & Sadowski (2021) argue, platforms impose a governance regime that pushes workers to develop behavioural traits aimed at continuously proving themselves productive to the platform to get assigned jobs. In that sense, in platform mediated entrepreneurship, self-management practices common to informal self-employed 'entrepreneurs' need to be re-oriented towards imperatives set centrally by the platform. In this context, workers are encouraged to develop traits usually associated with flexibility and entrepreneurship to make themselves more valuable for the platform.

The use of the term entrepreneur to describe gig workers can be seen as a rhetorical device that aims to flatten hierarchies and justify deregulation, while at the same time exerting a form of governmental control over workers to maximise their productivity. This illustrates a tension on how Rappitenderos are represented throughout Rappi's discourse. Rappitenderos are conceptualised both as independent, self-motivated individuals who want autonomy and flexibility and as human resources that need to be governed strategically to drive economic

growth. Thus, for example, when Simon Borrero talks about how the country should be run, he considers that decisions about resource allocation, including the allocation of educational resources (which allow individuals to grow their embodied 'human capital'), should be taken with a 'tactical approach' to maximising the country's growth, citing the platform's success to argue that the country should be run 'as if it was Rappi' (Diario La República, 2019). Under that framing, workers' bodies are seen as one component of a larger system that needs to be optimised for wealth creation, rather than as individuals benefitting from the emancipatory promises of autonomy and flexibility offered by markets.

Discussion and Final Remarks

Going back to the research questions, what the analysis found is that Rappi leaders' discourse seeks to justify the platform business model not just in terms of the flexibility or autonomy it brings to users and workers, but mostly in terms of the potential it offers to 'develop' the country. In that sense, in opposition to what literature from global North countries shows for the discourses of North American or European platforms, this case shows an attempt to leverage the notion of Colombia as a 'developing' country to seek immunity from regulation. This is done by claiming that the platform has the potential not only to advance development goals, but also to do so in ways that the State has not been able to.

This is not to say that dominant discourses reviewed in the gig economy literature are not incorporated in Rappi's justifications. As the analysis has shown, the framing of the platform as a mere market intermediary and the construction of gig workers as user-entrepreneurs are mobilised to seek immunity from regulation. However, development discourses lend the platform a broader repertoire from which to draw justifications. These discourses, in turn, allow Rappi leaders to justify their practices even if we were to accept that Rappitenderos are subordinate workers that in an ideal world should be regulated as such. Based on the premise that the conditions the workers face are external signs of underdevelopment, the question of regulation can be postponed for as long as the country remains in that condition for, as one executive said in an interview, those places in which regulations are being put in place, mainly in Europe, 'are very different from our market' (Portafolio, 2019).

Van Dijck et al. (2018) argued that platformisation tends to present the distinction between public and private as an 'irrelevant societal classification' and that the platform's interest in the global market bypasses local levels of social organisation and thus clashes with institutions that sustain democratic societies. The case of Rappi shows a blurring of the line between the private and the public, but also discursive practices and legitimation strategies that are anchored at the national level, and as such may have consequences for how platforms are implemented in specific places and at specific times. These discourses foreground the notion of the platform as a good complement that can fulfil the failure of State institutions rather than clashing with them. By positioning the path to development as one that can only be achieved through the efficient implementation of 'technical' solutions, the platform is positioned as the actor that can implement the technical solutions that the State has failed to deliver.

One salient aspect of Rappi's justification strategies is that they seem aimed predominantly at society as a whole, but particularly at those who do not see themselves as potential Rappitenderos. In *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Boltanski & Chiapello (2007) argue that capitalism needs to find external justifications in order for people to engage with it. However, it appears from this analysis that Rappi does not need to justify itself to Rappitenderos to get them to engage, as they seem to be driven mainly by material necessity. In that sense, the accumulation model profits from an oversupply of unemployed or underemployed (potential) gig workers. The evidence suggests that the company constructs Rappitenderos as a fungible and superfluous workforce (van Doorn, 2017) who are permanently available regardless of the conditions offered to them. This situation is exacerbated by the recent surge of Venezuelan migration to Colombia and other countries of South America, which is reflected in the fact that more than half of Rappitenderos in Colombia are Venezuelan (Observatorio Laboral de la Universidad del Rosario, 2019).

As this suggests, Rappi's discursive practices point towards a restructuring of the order of discourse which has consequences for how different subjects are hierarchically positioned. Although the notion of entrepreneurship is used to fictitiously flatten hierarchies between groups and present founders and gig workers as part of the same category, the different ways the word is mobilised and the tension with other descriptions given to gig workers make clear

the distinction between different subjects. Whereas workers are represented as entrepreneurs when discussing how the work relation should be regulated, they are represented as people in need of opportunities to improve their material conditions when presenting Rappi as a platform that drives development. Additionally, they are framed as human resources to be efficiently administered when discussing how economic growth (a necessary condition for 'development') is to be achieved. In opposition to them, a non-descript 'we' is used to refer both to consumers and to society as a whole when talking about the benefits Rappi brings to them in terms of efficiency and convenience. Rappi thus benefits from and reproduces institutional patterns of cultural value (Fraser, 2003) that subordinate peripherical and racialised workers. By presenting their precarious situation as a consequence not of human decisions but of the country's underdevelopment, political discussions on the issue of work regulation are deprioritised in favour of imagined technical solutions that can drive economic growth.

CONCLUSION

This research has foregrounded the importance of considering local contexts when studying the platformisation of social and economic practices. As Poell *et al*. (2019) argue, platformisation needs to be understood in relation to shifting cultural practices and imaginaries. The analysis has shown how in this case, established neoliberal discourses intertwined with the notion of Colombia as a developing country afford Rappi justificatory logics that are different to those employed by major platform companies based in 'developed' countries. In that sense, although platformisation is a global phenomenon of technological and economic convergence, this analysis shows essential discursive divergences at the local level. Understanding these divergences is relevant because discourses contain imaginaries that can be materially reproduced. Furthermore, the existence of different justification strategies also means that resistance efforts against the negative consequences of platformisation also require developing discursive strategies tailored to each context.

By critically analysing utterances of the founders and executives of Rappi, the research has shown how their claims for legitimacy draw elements both from neoliberal and development discourses. Claims to the scientific nature of neoclassical economics and the notion of markets as the best way to organise economic practices are mobilised to conceal the power relations prevalent in the platform economy and to naturalise their outcomes. In addition to this, development discourses are used to position precarious working conditions as a consequence of the underlying condition of Colombia as a 'poor' or 'underdeveloped' country, while at the same time denying workers a voice by claiming that the solution to underdevelopment is technical rather than political. Through this, the company presents its platform as a technology capable of delivering the solutions to social problems that the political process has failed to deliver. Although this work has only looked at companies' discourse, further efforts in understanding the discursive dimension of platforms should include and centre particularly the voices of those more affected by them.

The findings of this research, then, open up new questions in at least two directions. First, there is a need to understand better how different actors take part in forming dominant and oppositional discourses about platforms and the gig economy. In that sense, work should be done to study how other stakeholders, the government or civic society organisations voice their concerns about the platform economy and how this shapes economic imaginaries and discursive understandings of platforms. This, in turn, leads to a second area of inquiry, about how discourses and imaginaries about the gig economy and platforms become materialised. Here, objects such as policies, service agreements and platform interfaces can be analysed to look at how they are shaped by discourses and justificatory logics.

Justification and critique exist in a dialectical relation: developing a critique of capital accumulation models can delegitimise existing justificatory logics and create the need for capitalists to develop new justifications in response (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007). Moreover, this work has considered that justification is not a mere ideological exercise of concealment, but that it has the power to shape non-discursive practices by imposing constraints on what is considered acceptable. In taking a critical approach, one of the objectives of this work was to deconstruct and challenge the justificatory logics employed by platforms in the South

American context, with the idea that delegitimising them can bring positive changes in terms of symbolic and economic justice. Our findings point to the need to re-politicise the platform economy and foreground how the techno-economic models of platforms are shaped through discourse rather than being purely technical. Doing so should require companies to revisit their justificatory strategies by taking criticisms seriously, which can have effects that are not only discursive but also transform the material dimension of the platform economy.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

List of items sampled

#	Item	News Outlet	Date of Publication	Company representatives	Reference
1	Radio interview (transcribed)	W Radio	03/08/2016	Simón Borrero (Co-Founder & CEO)	(Sánchez Cristo, 2016)
2	Print interview	El Tiempo	27/07/2017	Simón Borrero (Co-Founder & CEO)	(Martínez Castro, 2017)
3	Print interview	El Espectador	03/06/2018	Sebastián Mejía (Co-Founder & President)	(Bohórquez Aya, 2018)
4	Print interview	La República	02/11/2018	Simón Borrero (Co-Founder & CEO)	(González Bell, 2018)
5	Print interview	El Tiempo	07/11/2018	Simón Borrero (Co-Founder & CEO)	(Patiño, 2018)
6	Public speech (transcribed)	La República	28/02/2019	Simón Borrero (Co-Founder & CEO)	(Diario La República, 2019)
7	Radio interview (transcribed)	La FM Radio	07/05/2019	Simón Borrero (Co-Founder & CEO)	(FM, 2019)
8	Print interview	Portafolio	18/07/2019	Alejandro Galvis (Chief of Staff), Sebastian Ruales (Commercial Director)	(Portafolio, 2019)

Appendix B

Coding Book

Codes	Description	Files	References
Discursive themes			
Development discourse	Statements that refer to economic growth or economic development as the main goal that a country should pursue and to the role of platforms in advancing those goals.	7	29
Economic science & Neoliberal discourse	Statements that show a utilitarian view of wellbeing, that position free-markets as the best of possible systems of social organisation, or that make or rely on claims to the 'scientific' nature of neoclassical economics.	6	20
Entrepreneurship	Statements that reference the notion of entrepreneurship to explain and justify certain practices, arrangements, and relations.	8	29
Platform discourse	Statements that position the company as a platform acting as an intermediary.	5	22
Textual features			
Ethos	Instances in which language is used to construct the identities of certain social groups based on specific attributes.	7	34
Transitivity	Instances in which verb (in)transitivity is used to connect (or not) events with specific subjects or objects.	6	18
Truth modality	Instances in which a truth modality is used to position certain views as true or ways of meaning-making as valid, and alternative views as questionable or invalid.	5	12

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