Racial capitalism, Migration, and the Platform Economy: Emerging Articulations of Informality within Digital Precarious Labor in Madrid

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper examines how platform economies extract value from the exclusionary dimensions of migration regimes to drive accumulation. Through the lens of racial capitalism, we analyze how informality functions as a key mechanism in shaping novel forms of racialization, labor stratification, and devaluation.
Design/methodology/approach: This study draws on cross-sectoral qualitative research based on in-depth interviews with migrant workers in cleaning, care, delivery and multitask platforms in Madrid. We use a racial capitalism framework to explore the intersections between informality, exclusionary border regimes, platform labor, and migrant agency.
Findings: Informality appears as a structural logic of platformization. We identify three critical ways in which platforms intersect with informality and precarious migration statuses: through account subletting practices, the amplification of racialized profiles assigned to specific types of work, and the emergence of new forms of violence shaped by intersections of gender, race, and migratory status. Nevertheless, we underscore the dual role of informality, not only as a driver for exploitation but also as a terrain where solidarities take shape.
Originality/Value: The key contributions of this paper lie in its cross-sectoral analysis of platform labor, shifting the focus from specific working conditions to the structural dynamics inherent to platform economies, integrating an intersectional perspective into the study of labor experiences on digital platforms. We move beyond the conventional dichotomy between migrant vulnerability and traditional unionism, exploring alternative agencies and solidarity networks emerging within these contexts.

Keywords: Platform labor, migration, informality, racialization, racial capitalism

Introduction

Platform capitalism has profoundly transformed labor dynamics, consolidating a framework that combines extreme flexibility, algorithmic control, and risk externalization. Although this model is heterogeneous across sectors and geographical contexts, its most pronounced impacts are observed in activities with higher levels of informality, particularly in offline services (Hunt & Samman, 2023). This is the case for delivery, passenger transport, or care services, where digital platforms primarily act as intermediaries between workers and consumers without serving as the medium through which these services are delivered. These activities, frequently characterized by low skill requirements, unstable incomes, and high job insecurity —as extensively documented in the literature on platform labor (Van Doorn, 2017; Cant, 2019)—, have become a primary avenue for integration for migrants, who, due to their socioeconomic and legal status, constitute the bulk of the informal labor force in many European countries (Sassen, 2014; Graham et al., 2017). While migrant

populations have traditionally formed the backbone of the workforce in these sectors, platformization has significantly reshaped the relationships between migration and labor informality. Research highlights a highly deregulated terrain in which informal and hidden practices — along with predatory parallel markets— have proliferated behind the scenes of the platform economy (Peterlongo, 2023). These informal circuits are not a hindrance to the growth of platforms; rather, they constitute a core feature and enabling condition of their expansion.

This paper critically engages with these dynamics by analyzing the interplay of platform economies, migration, and urban informality from a focus on racial capitalism. Within this framework, we consider the platform as a bordering device that functions as a continuous mechanism of stratification, differentiating workers based on their origin, legal status, and cultural capital (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). In urban contexts, these practices manifest through restrictive policies limiting access to employment, migration controls, and dynamics of socio-spatial exclusion that confine migrants to the margins of the labor market, particularly in informal and platform-mediated sectors. Gebrial (2022) addresses this phenomenon through the idea of 'racial platform capitalism', where racial and migratory divisions generate a cheapened labor force stripped of rights (both labor and citizenship) but always available to be replaced. The persistence of an available workforce willing to provide services at low cost is understood through a return to Marx's concept of the reserve army, which allows dominant economies to maintain the production of surplus populations. This surplus population has historically been linked to migrant populations. In the context of digital platforms, this phenomenon is amplified by the effects of the 2008 financial crisis, which weakened labor relations and expanded temporary, flexible, and fragmented work (Fernández & Gil, 2021). Moreover, research has shown how the algorithmic management of platforms, far from being neutral, reinforces pre-existing hierarchies by assigning the most precarious and poorly paid tasks to those with the least bargaining power, a dynamic that disproportionately affects migrants (Graham et al., 2017).

Delving into these debates, we underscore how racialization operates as a structuring logic of the platform economy at the intersection of migration regimes and urban precarity, with informality being a driving mechanism within these processes. We understand informality not as the absence of regulation or the simple opposite of formality, but as a structural logic of platform capitalism in which formal and informal dimensions are deeply entangled and mutually reinforcing (Surie & Huws, 2023; Peterlongo, 2023; Borghi & Peterlongo, 2023), generating increasingly ambiguous and blurred perceptions of what constitutes formal and informal work (Dimitriadis & Coletto, 2024). Informality thus denotes the heterogeneous practices, legal grey zones, and power relations through which platforms extract value, particularly from migrant workers, while simultaneously shaping new forms of racialized stratification and precarity (Van Doorn et al., 2023; Banks et al., 2020). Drawing on work on racial capitalism, our contribution foregrounds how platforms have generated renewed articulations of informality that shape novel dynamics of labor racialization and stratification. At the same time, we address how these racializing patterns have given rise to specific intersectional forms of violence within platform work, wherein informality plays a central role in sustaining both its impunity and invisibility. Overall, this paper fills a gap in the emerging literature on the role of migrant labor in the platform economy by focusing on informality as the mechanism that connects the processes of platformized capital accumulation with migration regimes and borders as sites of value extraction. The

discussion also acknowledges the dual role of informality, which not only serves to multiply gendered, racialized, and classed violences but is also intrinsic to many social reproduction practices within migrant communities in exclusionary urban settings.

The strength of our contribution lies in the scarcity of empirical research on informal practices within the framework of platforms in the Global North and the lack of cross-sectoral analyses. Most of the existing work on platform labor and informality focuses exclusively on specific sectors (such as care work, delivery, ride-hailing vehicles, etc.). While acknowledging sectoral differences, our approach focuses on analyzing platformization as a whole, framing it as a structural dynamic that is transforming the relationships between migration, informality, and labor, particularly through specific processes of racialization and labor stratification. By focusing on different platformized sectors in Madrid (Spain), we have been able to observe how informality operates as a structural logic of platform work, as well as the diversity of practices through which the platform functions as a bordering mechanism. This comprehensive perspective has also allowed us to conduct an intersectional analysis of these bordering experiences.

Like other Southern European cities, Madrid has witnessed a swift and extensive expansion of platform capitalism in its diverse forms (such as work, housing, consumption, and tourism), fueled by an economy marked by profound structural precarity. Southern European geographies provide a valuable lens for analyzing informality, as platforms have particularly embedded themselves within informal labor markets, exploiting existing vulnerabilities and migratory irregularities. Spain is a key enclave of Europe's southern border. In the absence of official data, estimates suggest that Spain hosts around 686,000 undocumented migrants (FUNCAS, 2024), many of whom supply labour to digital platforms. Spain is also embedded in enduring post-colonial relationships with Latin America, which significantly shape the composition of this labor force, as well as the processes of racialization and feminization that emerge in relation to platform economies. While studies from other geographical contexts have suggested that platformization may contribute to the formalization of traditionally informal sectors (e.g. Micha et al., 2024), research in the Spanish case reveals a different reality. In the domestic work sector, Rodríguez-Modroño et al. (2024) demonstrate that 'formalization' often serves as a strategic narrative rather than a substantive shift, with platforms continuing to rely on—and even deepen—informal labor relations. In the Italian domestic sector, Dimitriadis & Coletto's (2024) analyze how platforms foster processes of hybridisation rather than genuine formalisation. Similarly, in the case of delivery work, recent reports underscore the persistence of informality as a structural feature of the sector (Observatorio TAS, 2023). Our findings align closely with this evidence, showing how platforms —despite their heterogeneity and sectoral differences— systematically leverage informality to exploit legal loopholes and secure rapid access to a highly precarious workforce with limited or no labor protections.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section discusses the role of informality as a key element for understanding the articulation of platform capitalism and exclusionary migration regimes. Drawing on analyses of racial capitalism, we observe how the devaluation of migrant labor, enabled through bordering logics, has been constitutive of the rise and expansion of the platform economy. Furthermore, we argue that these logics of migrant labor devaluation—characteristic of all phases of capital restructuring—not only reproduce pre-existing structures of race, gender, and class but also generate new forms of

stratification, racial segregation, and bordering, deeply intertwined with informality. The second section outlines the paper's methodology. The last part of the paper grounds this discussion through the analysis of migrant labor in care, cleaning, and delivery platforms in Madrid. We provide empirical evidence to stage a two-fold argument. Firstly, we address how informality generates renewed forms of labor stratification, exploitation, and violence across these sectors. Secondly, we explore how migrants re-appropriate informal practices to navigate the multiple challenges posed by exclusionary urban settings.

Borders and racialized labour: What is new under platform capitalism?

Migrants constitute the majority of precarious on-demand offline platforms workers (Altenried, 2024; Van Doorn; 2020; Milkman et Al., 2021). The exploitation of migrant labor, frequently intertwined with dynamics of informality and exclusion from the formal waged economy, has been a key factor enabling the emergence and expansion of the platform economy (Van Doorn & Vijay, 2024). Building on previous debates that underscore the relationships between national borders and the borders of capital in enabling processes of capital accumulation (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013), a growing body of literature is addressing the centrality of migration policies and precarious citizenship schemes in the production of platformized labour (Altenried, 2024; Collins, 2021). Work on 'platform racial capitalism' has made further contributions to these debates, positioning racialization as a structuring logic of the platform economy in intersection with migration regimes, colonialism, and urban precarity (see e.g. Gebrial, 2022; McMillan Cottom, 2020; Bhattacharyya, 2024). Nevertheless, the central role of informality as a driving mechanism and organizing principle around which these processes are articulated remains widely underexplored in the literature. Most current analyses of formality and informality in platform labor focus on the specific working conditions within platforms rather than examining informality as a broader structural logic, embedded in racialized dynamics, which is transforming the wider organization labor in urban spaces (Surie & Huws, 2023). This theoretical intervention seeks to fill this gap by analyzing how the interaction between informality, platformization, and racialization is reshaping urban labor and migration dynamics. We argue that platform economies have introduced novel forms of informality, which, in turn, have generated new dynamics of labor hierarchization and stratification, driving substantial structural transformations in these processes.

Overall, our contribution situates itself within long-standing debates that conceptualize informality as a heterogeneous sphere of survival and adaptation for the urban poor (Castells & Portes, 1989; Chen & Carré, 2020; Coletto, 2019), and as a field where workers develop strategies to navigate exclusion from formal labour markets. Building on recent scholarship on the reconfigurations of informality under platform capitalism (Peterlongo, 2023; Dimitriadis & Coletto, 2024), our analysis advances these debates by underscoring how racialization operates as a constitutive logic of such reconfigurations. By adopting a racial capitalism perspective, we highlight how informality under platform capitalism not only reproduces structural inequalities but also generates ambivalent spaces of solidarity and resistance.

Why is Platform Capitalism Racial?

When discussing the ‘Futures of Racial Capitalism’, Gargi Bhattacharyya (2024) frames the platform economy as one of the key structural transformations of our time. She contends that platform capitalism represents the dismantling of one phase of economic organization, turning spaces previously considered as ‘home’, ‘leisure’ or ‘community’ into places where surplus value can be extracted. As such, the rise of platforms and digital labor represents a ‘spatial fix’ (Harvey, 1982) in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, characterized by the platformization of urban spaces and the growing infrastructural role of platforms as mediators of urban life (Sequera, 2024). As with previous phases of capital reorganization, this ‘spatial fix’ simultaneously acts as a ‘racial fix’ (Melamed, 2015), as racial hierarchies enshrined the inequalities required for accumulation and economic restructuration. The platform economy sediments over long-standing histories of racialized dispossession and stratified labour markets, as well as in ongoing neoliberal transformations of labour. Notwithstanding, it does not merely reinforce pre-existing racial and neoliberal structures; it also generates new forms of racialization and racial hierarchization (Animento, 2024), in which informality plays a central role.

A framework on racial capitalism foregrounds the differential exploitation of labour, the devaluation of work, and the creation of surplus populations as central to capitalist accumulation (Virdee, 2019). Processes of devaluation and differentiation, which underpin the racialized production of differential value, have been integral to every stage of the platform economy (Gebrial, 2024). A growing body of literature is addressing the ways racialization functions as a key organizing principle of platform capitalism (Gebrial, 2024), particularly in the interplay with migration regimes (Animento, 2024; Van Doorn & Vijay, 2021; Altenried, 2024). Borders and migration regimes are the central devices within last century’s capitalism for (re)producing disposable and devalued labour. Extensive scholarly debates have underscored how borders, rather than solely excluding, operate as tools of ‘inclusion through exclusion’ (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013) producing a migrant labor force stripped of rights and tailored to the fluctuating needs of capital. The ‘Ilegality’, ‘irregularity’, and ‘deportability’ of disposable migrants (De Genova & Peutz, 2010) operate as means of ‘differential inclusion’ (Mezzadra, 2010) of racialized migrants to stratified labour markets. The expansion of platforms and their ‘on-demand’ labour configurations precisely rely on taking full advantage of these dynamics. However, it would be reductionist to limit the functionality of borders to the production of labour to meet the needs of capital. Within the neoliberal framework, borders have transformed into a lucrative niche for extracting surplus value, fostering the emergence of an entire migration industry (Gilmore, 2007, 2024; Bhattacharyya, 2024). Making a central contribution to ongoing debates on ‘platform racial capitalism’, we suggest that the platform economy is precisely situated at the crossroads of migration as a border industry and as a source of a migrant workers’ ‘reserve army’. In a context where access to labor emerges as a key manifestation of the ‘urban border’ (Darling, 2017) —understood as the deterritorialization of practices of migration control and management into cities as key spaces where migrants develop their everyday lives— platforms have positioned themselves as the most viable employment alternative for migrants. These platforms have thus become ‘migration infrastructures’ (Xiang & Linquist, 2014) simultaneously constraining, facilitating, and mediating migrants' mobility across various spatial scales. Hence, the ‘platformization of migration’ (Collins, 2021; Van Doorn & Vijay, 2024; Altenried, 2024) precisely stands at the intersection of the role of borders mediating mobilities and distributing populations into racialized categorizations and opportunities as part of the process of accumulation (Bhattacharyya, 2024).

What is the role of informality?

In light of the above, we identify key ways in which the platform economy exploits racial dynamics. On the one hand, it generates new forms of stratification through the devaluation of racialized labour. On the other hand, it extracts value from borders and migration regimes in a dual sense —both as a source of disposable and on-demand labor and as an infrastructure mediating migratory movements. In what follows, we unpack how informality is a central dynamic enabling these processes. We explore how informality interacts with prior neoliberal transformations of work, arguing that the increasing infrastructural role of platforms is blurring the boundaries between the formal and the informal as well as making informal practices the norm rather than the exception (Surie & Huws, 2023). This shift is driving important transformations in the overall organization of urban labor.

The production of new patterns of racialized labour stratification is embedded in informal practices that leverage different citizenship status and generate new boundaries and relationships of exploitation (Animento, 2024). Within platformized labor, practices of informality transform citizenship precariousness into a site for value and rent extraction through practices such as account subletting (Baril, 2024). These practices, which have become structural to platforms' functioning, generate new divisions and exploitative relationships among migrants with legal documentation and those without. They not only led to a (re)devaluation of migrant work but also foster dynamics of dependence and abuse between individuals with formal access to employment or platform accounts and those without. Peterlongo (2023) shows how platforms take full advantage of these informal mechanisms embedded in the labour process, revealing a dynamic interdependence between formal and informal structures. Beyond practices typically associated with illegality (despite being overlooked by the state), informality also includes the exploitation of 'alegality', or the gaps and uncertainties in labour legislations. In this sense, informality has benefited platforms who scaled up rapidly and before employment regulations (Van Doorn, 2023).

The devaluation of work and life, coupled with the dehumanization of labor through the interplay of informality, precarity, and racialization, has sparked discussions about 'necrocapitalism' within the platform economy (Orr et al., 2023). This scholarship highlights how various actors —not only digital platforms but also the state and institutions, through omission and lack of regulation— contribute to the racist premature death of platform workers. This aligns with Gilmore's (2007:7) definition of racism as 'the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death'. Gilmore's conceptualization, particularly influential in debates on racial capitalism, is especially relevant for analyzing the multiple forms of racialized, gendered, and classed violence generated by platform economies. In the discussion below, building on prior work addressing the specific forms of violence shaping migrant platform labor, we examine how informality functions as a central element in the reproduction, circulation, and impunity of these violences, deeply intertwined with gender, race, class, ethnicity, and migration status.

Racial Capitalism, Informality and Resistance

Gilmore (2007) defines racial capitalism as a technology of anti-relationality that reduces collective life to relations designed to sustain neoliberal capitalism. This process imposes a systematic forgetting of the interconnections, relationships, and collective practices of social cohesion rendered inert outside the logics of capital accumulation and state management. Based on the analysis thus far, we can assert that platform capitalism, with its specific forms of racial stratification, worker atomization, and individualization, amplifies these dynamics to their fullest extent. However, in addition to theorizing capitalism as racial, a framework on racial capitalism makes legible racialized collective resistance reconstituting collectives and arranging social forces for survival over and against capital accumulation (Melamed, 2015; Robinson, 2021). Racialized platform capitalism is met with multiple forms of resistance from migrant communities, among which practices of informality—particularly given many migrants' status as 'liminal populations'—also play a fundamental role. In this sense, we argue that informality within the framework of migrant platform economies has an ambivalent character. On the one hand, as we have demonstrated, it serves as a central mechanism of accumulation and the reproduction of intersectional violences. On the other hand, it often becomes a tool for migrant communities to engage in mutual aid practices and social reproduction in response to a system that condemns them to premature death (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013). Ray (2024) refers to this as the 'digitally organized informality', encompassing a plurality of practices and socio-spatial networks of care and support of migrant platforms workers in the absence of formal and institutionalized supportive systems. Peterlongo (2023) uses the term 'acts of technological reappropriation' to refer to those practices that elude the totalizing control logic of platforms. While these practices do not always constitute acts of open opposition or resistance—and may, as we have argued, at times even involve forms of exploitation that serve the platforms' own objectives—they can nonetheless be driven by logics of solidarity. The urban emerges as an ambivalent space, enabling both the expansion of platform labour and nurturing forms of resistance from below. In dialogue with this literature, the discussion below explores how practices such as account subletting or the use of platforms as 'migration infrastructures' also function as strategies employed by migrant networks to resist forms of exploitation.

Researching Migrant Platform Labor in Madrid: Context and Methodology

The findings draw on a qualitative methodology based on 35 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2024 with migrant workers in several delivery (Glovo, Uber Eats), care (Cuideo, Domusvi, Sitly), cleaning (Webel, Domestiko, Doméstico24), and multitask (Milanuncios, Nextdoor, Wallapop) platforms in Madrid (Spain). This work is complemented by prior fieldwork involving 42 interviews with food delivery workers and couriers between 2019 and 2022 as part of author 2's doctoral work. The paper adopts a broad notion of platforms, acknowledging their heterogeneity and the differences among them in terms of work organization, algorithmic functioning, and software design. Interviews have been complemented with close collaboration with domestic worker collectives (such as Territorio Doméstico in Madrid) and organizations or unions of delivery workers (including Riders x Derechos and the Observatory of Work, Algorythm, and Society).

Informality as a structural logic operates in different ways across the different sectors examined. While informal labor practices and racialized devaluation operate in similar ways across different delivery platforms —e.g. Glovo or UberEats—these processes manifest

through more varied configurations in the domestic work sector. Here, some platforms function primarily as intermediaries, merely connecting clients and workers—often through mutual subscription fees—and involving minimal algorithmic intervention. This is the case of multitask platforms—those designed to accommodate a wide range of services, including buying and selling products, also used as marketplaces for labour activities—and many of the specific domestic work platforms we have examined. These intermediary platforms tend to constitute the most precarious segment of the sector, even more than the traditional informal labor market, as digital interaction replaces pre-existing support networks. In this context, they function as 'arrival infrastructures' (Van Doorn & Vijay, 2024), offering the only accessible employment alternative for those lacking rights and resources in the city. Despite the precarious conditions, the minimal entry barriers sometimes lead newly arrived migrants to view these platforms positively, as an immediate means of securing income and navigating early settlement. By contrast, placement platforms—which mostly operate in the care sector but not exclusively—impose formal entry barriers, such as legal documentation and certified training. However, these requirements primarily serve to segment the labor force at the point of access. Rather than ensuring compliance with labor protections, such barriers operate as a filtering mechanism, determining who gets access to platform-mediated work, while the platforms often function outside the scope of existing labor regulations (Rodríguez-Modroño et al, 2024).

The selection of platforms and interviewees was carried out through the circulation of a questionnaire via social and digital networks, often in collaboration with domestic workers or rider organizations. Of the 35 interviewees, 18 were women—four of whom worked in delivery, some of which simultaneously engaged in delivery and domestic work platforms. Although the questionnaire was not explicitly targeted at migrant workers, 90% of respondents had a migratory background. Migrant backgrounds varied by sector: most delivery workers interviewed were Venezuelans, while domestic platform workers came from a broader range of countries, including Peru, Colombia, El Salvador, Brazil, Cameroon, Poland, and Venezuela. The majority—except for those on placement platforms—had been in Spain between one and four years and had not yet been able to regularize their administrative status. Most respondents were young or middle-aged (25–45) professionals with training and qualified jobs in their countries of origin. Platform work was often seen as a temporary solution shaped by immigration law and the non-recognition of foreign qualifications.

Gaining access to the domestic sector proved more challenging than in the case of delivery work, as it takes place within the private sphere of the home. Here, field access was generally easier in the case of marketplace and intermediary platforms than in placement-based ones—those that fully mediate the job assignment process— where our sample was limited to just two participants.

Overall, this broad and cross-sectorial methodological approach has enabled us to analyze how informality operates through specific logics shaped by intersecting structures of race, gender, and class across different sectors. It provides a deep understanding of individuals' experiences, perceptions, and strategies in relation to the dynamics of labor precarization and bordering in urban contexts. Additionally, it allows us to explore the interactions between informality, digital platforms, and emerging forms of racialization across different spaces, both public and private.

The Platform-Informality Nexus: Digital Labor in Madrid

This discussion examines the dynamics of platform work through the experiences of migrant workers in delivery, cleaning, and care platforms in Madrid (Spain). A main finding is that most of the interviewees work on these platforms irregularly as part of the migration process. The encounter with the border is one of the key factors in the devaluation, disqualification, and racialization of platform work. In the sections that follow, we highlight three critical ways in which platforms intersect with informality and precarious migration statuses, fostering exploitative relationships: through account subletting practices and the perpetuation of migratory precarity, the amplification of racialized profiles assigned to specific types of work, and the emergence of new forms of violence shaped by intersections of gender, race, and migratory status. The discussion concludes by exploring the dual role of informality: not only as a mechanism for deepening oppression and exacerbating precarities but also as a resource for solidarity. Very often, informal practices open pathways for mutual support, allowing migrant communities to survive in exclusionary urban spaces.

Practices of informality, emerging forms of racial stratification, and the (auto)reproduction of migrant exploitation

Informality in platform-based work is framed by the context of both a crisis in the regulation of labor relations (Sanz de Miguel, et al., 2023) and migration regimes that exclude migrants from the formal waged economy (Bhattacharyya, 2024).Digital platform work has taken root in the interstices of labour law, rendering labour relations increasingly malleable and adaptable. Even in Spain, where specific legislation has been introduced, the platform model has produced volatile labour protections. The ‘Rider Law’ (Real Decreto-ley 9/2021) — first piece of regulation worldwide of platform-based delivery work, driven by workers’ mobilisations — fails to address many of the informal configurations of platform labour (Observatorio TAS, 2023), several of which are examined in this article.

Digital platforms operate in these contexts as the most accessible pathway for those facing administrative, linguistic, educational, or training limitations (often due to the non-recognition of foreign qualifications). Paula, who has worked for various delivery and cleaning platforms since arriving from Venezuela two years ago and has been unable to regularize her status, claims that

> There is no other alternative. Either in restaurants, washing dishes, or... but for most people who arrive, it’s as a delivery worker (Paula, May 2024)

This makes platforms a mechanism with greater disciplinary power over migrants, constituting a pathway for labor border-making. Those with greater capabilities to access the labor market have more opportunities to reject unfavorable conditions or situations. In contrast, for those facing limiting circumstances, their agency is restricted to accepting specific conditions. The informality of these labor relationships also generates uncertainty that constrains workers' decision-making capacity. Informal labor ties eliminate the mechanisms of labor security that ensure economic or legal compensation in cases of dismissal, non-payment, or job continuity. This means workers do not know the consequences of rejecting demands from service contractors or expressing dissatisfaction with adverse labor conditions or situations.

Such insecurities are further exacerbated by the informal rental of accounts, a practice that, despite being increasingly widespread within the platform economy, still remains underexplored in the Global North. These practices arise when individuals who do not meet the platform registration requirements—namely, a valid work permit and a NIE (foreign identity number)—rent accounts from others, usually fellow migrants who possess the necessary documentation, in exchange for a fixed fee or a percentage of their earnings. Obtaining a work permit is particularly challenging, as it typically requires either a successful asylum application or a valid employment contract, proof of three years of continuous residence and a prior two-years employment relationship. In all these cases, job permits are granted under different temporary regimes, generating multiple layers of differential access to platform work. In these cases of account subletting—which are increasingly becoming the norm rather than the exception— there are no mechanisms to guarantee or standardize the terms of these rentals (and therefore the specific working conditions). In this context, these workers have only one resource: trusting the person renting them the account. Alberto, a Venezuelan migrant who, like many others, was undocumented and rented a platform account via Facebook, accounts this situation:

> I rent the account. They take 25% of what I earn. There are owners who charge 25%, and others who charge 30%. It depends on the agreement you have with the owner. For now, I'm working like this because, while I wait for my papers, I have to accept these conditions. Plus, you have to pay for the bike rental (...) It has to be someone trustworthy because there have been cases where people say, 'Yes, yes, I'll rent you the account,' and then, when they get the money, they disappear (Alberto, January 2024)

Baril (2024) examines how citizenship precariousness plays a key role in the everyday of riders and it is central to the extraction of rent by multiple parties. Alberto's testimony, highlighting how he not only has to pay rent to the account holder (pay for the right to work) but also for the bicycle rental, is representative of what Baril refers to as 'citizen rentiership'. Given that opening an account requires legal documentation, access to citizenship rights becomes a new form of bordering and rent-extraction within migrant communities.This highlights informality as a contentious and productive terrain in which different actors negotiate power based on their differential relationship with the state (Banks et al., 2020). Hence, uneven power relationships between workers and account holders shape emerging forms of exploitation and devaluation of labor, driven by informality and reinforced by barriers to labor markets and citizenship rights. Throughout our interviews, several account renters reported instances in which payment was withheld by the account holder, often citing missing orders or low ratings as justification. Although the existing literature focuses solely on these subletting practices within the delivery realm, our cross-sectoral research reveals that they occur across various sectors, taking on different forms and manifestations. Elena (January, 2024), a Brazilian worker in cleaning platforms, describes how she has occasionally used the platform to subcontract other migrant workers for big jobs, allowing her to increase her earnings. Our analysis reveals that labor bordering within platform capitalism is not solely driven by nationality or country of origin; administrative status plays a crucial role in shaping hierarchies among migrant platform workers.

In addition to creating new relationships of migrant exploitation, the intertwinning between platformization and informality has given rise to new forms of racial stratification. While the former are grounded in differential access to account ownership, the latter materialize in the construction of ideal racialized profiles tailored to specific types of work. Algorithms and stereotypes driven by consumers and developers create ‘ideal’ profiles for specific jobs. These profiles often align with established assumptions on informal migrant labor, such as Latina women in caregiving, Eastern European women in cleaning, or young men in physically demanding jobs. Thus, although racialized and gendered labor profiling practices are not new, we observe that platformization further amplifies these dynamics through unilateral evaluation systems and on-demand operational logics. These systems not only reinforce existing hierarchies but also introduce new axes of stratification, such as age, the digital gap, nationality, or physical appearance, embedding these variables into their algorithms and workflows. In our interview with Analisa and her mother (February, 2024), Flor accounts how she was offered significantly fewer jobs in the same platform —suggesting that age-coded visual cues and digital fluency play a significant role in shaping visibility and employability on the platform. Moreover, there is strong evidence in research showing how platforms facilitate the circulation of 'racist scripts' and evaluations that reinforce certain profiles while devaluating others (Animento, 2024; Ibrahim, 2023). Jeanne, a Cameroonian worker in the domestic platform Topayuda, recounts how being required to include a profile photo in the platform often puts her at a disadvantage when users choose among available workers.

> On the app, when someone hires you, they see can see your photo, origin, everything… [talking about one of her jobs] It was the woman who had contacted me, she had no issue with my skin color, you know? But I think the man did. He wasn’t the one who hired me, but he was the one paying. And his attitude… it really bothers you (Jeanne, February 2024)

Jeanne explained that she could not speak out against this experience of racism for fear of receiving a negative rating on her profile. This highlights that, far from being neutral, the algorithm bypasses any formal control over discriminatory processes, not only in relation to the widespread informal labor practices within these jobs but also within the platforms’ formal operational frameworks and standard functioning. We observe, yet again, how the entanglement of formal and informal structures gives rise to novel configurations of racial and gender-based oppression within the labor dynamics of digital platforms.

Finally, new racialized profiles have also emerged within the intersection between the platformization of sectors, global migration, and urban precarity. This is exemplified by the predisposition for delivery tasks among migrants from Latin America, particularly Venezuela. Our fieldwork highlighted a significant presence of Venezuelans in this sector - over the 80% of the migrant delivery workers interviewed were from Venezuela -, with many recounting experiences of stigma from their migrant counterparts, driven by the negative regional perceptions of Venezuelan migration. According to Dana—a Glovo account renter—Venezuelans represent a significant portion of the workforce, as renting accounts has become one of the few viable and commonly understood pathways into employment amongst Venezuelans. However, she also emphasized that they frequently face racism from other Latin American migrants. As she put it:

> Well, I think the thing is that most Venezuelans are all over the world—we're like a plague, really. So of course, people who don't have much money go, for example, to Peru. And also, people escape from prison and leave the country, and they go to Peru and do what they do… Many of us migrate to find work, but we live with this stigma (February 2024)

Here, we encounter new forms of racial devaluation of labor within these platforms, where the lowest positions are often filled by a specific migratory flow that also faces stigma from others in the sector. This highlights how while practices like account renting are strongly conditioned by access to citizenship, regimes of 'differential inclusion' are deeply stratified along lines of ethnic origin, the plurality of migratory status, and language skills, all of which contribute to differentiated levels of precarity and exposure.

'On demand' informalities and intersectional violence(s)

Paula is a Venezuelan migrant who arrived in Madrid with her younger brother after both of her grandparents passed away during the pandemic. She had remained in her home country to care for them following her mother's emigration to Spain. Drawing on recommendations from her Venezuelan social networks and friends, who noted that 'most people who arrive end up working in delivery' (Paula, May 2024), Paula began working as a delivery rider. During her time riding for a sublet Glovo account, Paula experienced the loss of a close friend:

> He was killed by a taxi driver. I was shocked. We had just finished talking to him, and then he stopped responding. He worked through the night, and everything happened at 5 am, with no one else around. He had arrived in September, had no papers, and was alone. Someone from his family in Venezuela had to come over because the police can't release information to just anyone

Reflecting on her experiences, she emphasized that the risks involved were not limited to 'being out on the streets', but also the fact of being a woman and having to enter customers' homes, a concern shared by almost all women in our interviews: 'A man might come out to pick up his order in the nude, and that makes you feel harassed and scared'. Paula is currently employed by a domestic service platform, explaining that an accident led her to quit delivery work and find a job in another platformized sector: 'I fell down the stairs while carrying the scooter and was unable to work for a long time'.

Paula's solely experience illustrates the myriad of violences faced by platform workers. Numerous studies have examined how informality and atypical forms of work within the platform economy exacerbate worker vulnerabilities, even highlighting the necropolitical dimensions of platforms, which can lead to the loss of workers' lives, as evidenced by the death of Paula's friend (Orr et al., 2023). These necropolitical effects are constitutive of the racial capitalist geographies of migration, where the 'premature death' of racialized surplus populations forms the foundation for the devaluation of life and labor (Gilmore, 2007). Román, a delivery platform worker highlights how the lack of legal documentation—and the instrumental role platform work plays in obtaining it—perpetuates platform impunity when it comes to reporting abusive practices:

> Our ultimate goal is to secure residency and legal papers in this country. When you go to justice without legal documentation, you find yourself in a legal predicament where you are the affected party, and this obstructs your primary objective (Román, February 2024).

The majority of migrant women working on platforms in our fieldwork reported experiencing gender-based violence. While Paula highlighted the threat of entering unknown private residences, for many other workers in cleaning and care sectors, their entire work takes place within these private spaces. In such environments, gendered violence manifests in various forms. Elena (January 2024) shared her experience with us just a week after being assaulted by a man while working on the Domestico24 platform. The assault resulted in her hospitalization, yet she chose not to report the incident due to fear of engaging with the police. In other cases, these violences appear as threats or intimidation, as described by Analisa (February 2024): 'The man was taller than me, he was becoming agitated and turning red with anger, and of course, I thought, what if he goes crazy and hits me or does something?' or sexual violence, as in the case of Juana:

> Some people here overly sexualize Latina women. So there's also that fear that, because you're Latina, instead of being about cleaning work, the client might have another intention (...) You have to take precautions (Juana, February 2024).

Overall, by examining diverse platformized sectors and drawing on a range of experiences, our fieldwork exposes the intersectional dimensions of the everyday violence embodied by platform workers—violence that extends well beyond the violation of labor rights. The women's narratives not only detail the specific gendered violences they have experienced but also underscore how these are profoundly shaped by intersecting factors such as racialization, as evident in Juana's account above. Furthermore, this cross-platform research demonstrates how the 'feminization of digital labor' has amplified and diversified the forms of violence present in on-demand platform work—an issue that remains critically underexplored. Crucially, the interplay of various forms of informality, including labor informality and migrant precarity, emerges as a central mechanism in the reproduction of these violences.

Everyday strategies and practices of solidarity in informal platform work

Informality, however, also constitutes a space for migrant organization and resistance (Palacios & Kaufmann, 2024). Practices such as account subletting, although often perceived as lacking solidarity among migrants of the same origin, also reveal how informal networks can serve as points for collective articulation and survival. Román, from Venezuela, told us that he was able to migrate and begin working thanks to a relative who had migrated before and opened a Glovo account for him (Román, February 2024). Peterlongo (2023) notes how certain 'acts of technological reappropriation'—such as account sharing—can reflect exploitative and profit-oriented dynamics, but may also follow logics of solidarity and mutual aid. These practices, though complex and sometimes contradictory, demonstrate how migrants transform spaces of exclusion into opportunities for organization and mutual support, challenging the tendencies toward atomization inherent in algorithmic design and platform capitalism.

> Honestly, in almost every place I go, people are very kind, really. Yeah. No one fights or anything, it's all very smooth. Actually, we're all helping each other. Like, if I need a charger or, "Hey, come over here." (Roberto, January 2024)

Furthermore, a perspective on racial capitalism sheds light on these experiences that challenge the hegemonic tendencies of individualization and the rupture of collective ties characteristic of platform capitalism and other forms of accumulation within the capitalist framework. Although platform's design is oriented toward promoting fragmentation and competition, migrants manage to create pathways for generating spaces of solidarity and collective resistance, demonstrating that social relations can be reconfigured even in deeply exploitative contexts.

It is crucial to understand that the agency of migrant platform workers should not be limited to analyzing the constraints imposed by algorithmic management combined with their vulnerability as migrants, nor should it solely rely on the traditional lens of unionism. These are the two predominant approaches in studying resistance within digital platforms. However, a more comprehensive analysis breaks away from rigid paradigms that juxtapose action and inaction, as it often observes different responses combining everyday networks, survival strategies, and the deployment of individual or collective resistance mechanisms, albeit not structurally organized.

> Honestly, I think everyone just does their job because, like most of us working here, we don't have our papers yet. So, I think everyone keeps to themselves and forms their little group, but when we need help, if someone sees another person struggling, we always try to step in. For example, if someone can't find an address and I see someone from Glovo, I'll ask, "Hey, do you know where this address is?" and they always try to help me. So, I do think there's a kind of community where we all help each other. (Dana, February 2024)

Networks are often formed through arrival connections, shared knowledge, and daily practices, representing a central element of the strategies for social reproduction. Although these dynamics often include exploitative practices, such as account subletting or dependency on intermediaries (as previously explained), they also arise in profoundly solidaristic contexts, enabling migrants to survive in an environment of precarity and inaccessibility to social security systems. These networks can emerge from strong ties, such as kinship relationships, or occasionally from weaker connections.

> It's like having a helping hand, and they help you move forward. I see people of all nationalities there, everyone. (Claudia, February 2024)

These networks function as social infrastructures that mediate access to work, generate informal support systems, and enable collective resistance practices against a labor model that pushes them towards vulnerability and insecurity. Paradoxically, these relationships and solidarities are often also established through digital platforms, such as Nextdoor or Facebook, in specific groups for migrants of shared origin in Madrid. WhatsApp groups and other digital platforms that serve as spaces for sharing job opportunities, advice to avoid traffic or police controls, and updates on company conditions, facilitating the circulation of key information for their daily lives. These strategies arise in response to the structural inaccessibility of social protection systems characteristic of platform-based work

(Ray, 2024). Without access to social security, severance pay, or benefits such as sick leave or vacation, migrants rely on these networks not only to find work but also to address emergencies or ensure basic survival. While they cannot be considered structured forms of resistance, nor the starting point for building alternative collectives, these practices demonstrate how migrant workers establish useful mechanisms to collectively overcome the limits of institutional, corporate, and algorithmic exclusion.

The fact that a significant portion of the migrant population in Spain comes from Latin America helps to overcome language barriers. This creates an opportunity to establish networks of solidarity and connections among workers who face similar conditions. The migratory structure presents significant challenges in terms of bureaucratic procedures, access to housing, and job searches, especially when individuals lack prior support networks. The ability to use a common language and share cultural realities allows many people settling in Madrid to navigate these barriers. These practices challenge the paradigm of the 'self-made entrepreneur' imposed by platform capitalism. Although migrants are pushed to adopt roles of self-exploitation to survive, the collective networks they belong to show that their agency is not reduced to atomized individuality. On the contrary, these subjects transform their precarity into a point of collective articulation, where social relationships and shared knowledge enable them to organize around practical and solidaristic solutions.

Conclusion

This article makes significant contributions to understanding the role of informality as a central element at the intersection of the platform economy and migration regimes. Drawing on racial capitalism as a theoretical framework, we have analyzed various processes of devaluation and racialization of the bulk of informal migrant labor in platforms as constitutive of the rise and expansion of the platform economy. Furthermore, by analysing informality as an ambiguous terrain of power negotiation, our findings advance contemporary debates on migrant workers' subaltern agency within the platform economy, and highlight how these are shaped by everyday practices of mutual support under racial capitalism. Through a cross-sectoral analysis of informal migrant labor in care, cleaning, and delivery platforms in Madrid (Spain), the two analytical sections have identified three interrelated ways in which platforms operate as bordering devices in relation to informal practices. All these issues have major implications for research and for addressing current social and policy challenges emerging from the platform economy.

First, our research reveals how these practices are increasingly becoming the norm rather than the exception in many platformized sectors, giving rise to specific relations of exploitation and devaluation of labor within migrant communities. These dynamics are shaped by uneven access to citizenship rights and work permits (and consequently account ownership) within exclusionary border regimes. This has important implications in Spain and analogous contexts, where regulations are failing to address widespread prevalence of informal subcontracting chains and account leasing practices, particularly among undocumented migrants. Recognizing and addressing these dynamics is crucial for the development of inclusive and effective labor policies.

Second, we have examined how platforms not only reproduce racialized and gendered ideal types or profiles for specific jobs but also generate new ones by introducing unilateral evaluations and rating systems. We argued that these forms of stratification operate not only at an informal level but are embedded in the platforms' functioning, to some extent formalized and reinforced by the absence of mechanisms to address discriminatory practices within these systems. This demands addressing the specific challenges posed by platformization in terms of algorithmic transparency, accountability in rating and evaluation systems, or digitally-mediated discrimination.

Third, our cross-sectoral analysis has enabled us to examine, from an intersectional perspective, the forms of violence inherent in platform work and how these are amplified by informality. In addition to the forms of violence highlighted in the existing literature, our research opens new debates on how these dynamics interact with different positionalities, particularly within the wider context of feminization of digital labor. Intrinsically linked to the feminization of migration, the increasing presence of women workers is not limited to the most traditionally feminized platformized sectors but is also present in other sectors, such as delivery, where women are often rendered invisible in research. These findings point to the urgent need for measures that address the specific risks and vulnerabilities experienced by women workers in platform environments.

Finally, the last part of the discussion addresses the ambivalent nature of informality within platformized migrant labor. Focusing on migrant agency and the practices of social reproduction, resistance, and sustaining migrant lives, we demostrate how migrants also appropriate these informal practices to build support networks and mechanisms of resistance. These forms of informal resistance add to a broader repertoire of worker struggles and mobilizations within the platform economy. Beyond visible collective actions such as strikes, protests, or unionization efforts, workers have engaged in a variety of tactics, ranging from strategic account sharing and selective acceptance of tasks to the formation of mutual aid networks and informal support groups. These practices challenge the dominant narratives of platform labor as individualized and fragmented, revealing instead a complex landscape of agency, negotiation, and contestation that often escapes formal institutional recognition but plays a crucial role in shaping everyday working conditions.

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