Exploring Modern Slavery in the gig-economy: a practice-based study

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ABSTRACT

Gig economy platforms have innovated several service businesses, among others, by changing the labour market and working practices. Such innovation confronts the extant legislative context and results in a grey area of operations that challenges the boundaries of the law. This shaded situation makes it difficult and insidious to distinguish forms of labour exploitation within innovative working practices. To tackle this ambiguity we conducted an ethnographic case study in a digital food delivery company operating in Italy. The final objective of this study is to explore platform-based working practices in order to understand how they might translate into practices of modern slavery. This study adds on the understanding of gig work by conceptualizing platform-based working practices. Furthermore, it contributes to studies on modern slavery by elaborating practices that make modern slavery actioned and actionable in new organizational forms.

INTRODUCTION

The new business models of the on-demand economy constituted a real disruptive innovation that is changing the way of doing business in different sectors, from private transport to home food delivery (Hossain, 2020). According to these models, workers are required to perform simple tasks or *gigs*, namely a ride or deliver a meal, following the guidelines given by a digital platform which acts as the mediator of the work performance (Cherry & Aloisi, 2016). So far, this phenomenon has received a great attention especially regarding the motivations of gig workers in embarking on this type of activity and the analysis of the working relationship between platforms and workers (Murphy, 2015). Regarding motivations, flexibility, both in choosing when and if to work and in setting hours, appears to be the main driver of aspiring gig-workers (Pesola et al., 2018) although it can be limited in practice (Dong & Ibrahim, 2017), especially in relation to the possibility of making significant gains (Aloisi, 2015).

Several authors studied what kind of work regulation is implicitly associated with the innovative relationship between platforms and on-demand workers; the debate concerns implications on the adequacy of employment protections (Pesola et al., 2018). This issue is complicated by the fact that platforms consider themselves to be mere technological intermediaries in the relationship between workers and customers (Pesola et al., 2018), leading in some cases, to the paradox of identifying the algorithm that manages workers' shifts as the actual employer (Cherry & Aloisi, 2016). So, the new business models of the gig economy often move within grey legal areas where it is difficult to extend the protections available to employees of more traditional sectors. It is precisely in these grey areas that forms of labour exploitation, including forms of modern slavery, are recognized to flourish (Crane, 2013).

Pursuing a practice-based-study based on ethnographic research, the aim of this paper is to identify modern slavery practices (MSP) within one of the most widespread models of the on-demand economy, namely that of digital food delivery. This work will shed light on how work is actually organized within these types of platforms by identifying 22 MSP, and will contribute to both the understanding of gig work and of modern slavery.

The paper is organized as follows. In the next section, we present a brief review of the concept of modern slavery. Then, we discuss the relationship between modern slavery and the gig economy. In the third section, we present both the data collection process and the method. In the fourth section we illustrate the platform studies, and then our analysis follows. Last, we

elaborate our findings and contributions. We close with a discussion and the limitations of the study.

LITERATURE BACKGROUND

The concept of Modern Slavery

The literature on modern slavery has increased significantly in recent years (Caruana, 2020), pointing at novel phenomena belonging to the so-called 'repugnant' markets (Roth, 2007), i.e., real markets in which socially reprehensible dynamics take place. Research in this area is critical and highlights the use of physical and psychological violence (Caruana 2020), women trafficking (Shelley, 2003), human trafficking (Van Dijk, 2019), forced labour (LeBaron, 2019) and sex trafficking (Kara, 2010).

As argued by Phung & Crane (2019), the concept of modern slavery has trouble achieving abstract and definitional clarity, even if it is recognized as a current issue within property law. In this regard, the first definition of slavery, given during the League of Nations Slavery Convention in 1926, (Crane, 2013) claims that "slavery is the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised which highlight the exercise of power in the form of property rights over a human being"[1]. Since then, several authors have underlined how there is a compelling need to update this definition to the contemporary economic context (Crane, 2013).

Crane (2013) provided a theoretical framework of modern slavery. At first he identified the "enabling conditions" of MS into the following external factors: industry, socio-economic, geographic, cultural and regulatory context. Then, "exploiting capabilities", namely, access and deployment of violence, debt management, accounting opacity, labor supply chain management, refer to the firm's ability to gain advantage from existing conditions and continue to perpetrate slavery. Finally, beyond exploiting capabilities there are sustaining and shaping capabilities through which firms accomplish the institutional work mandatory to the preservation of slavery favorable environment; i.e. moral legimitazion and domain maintenance. He also specified five "outcomes" of modern slavery: the first four were identified by the (non-governmental) association called Antislavery International: (1) forced to work through threat; (2) owned or controlled by an "employer", typically through mental, physical, or threatened abuse; (3) dehumanized and treated as a commodity; and (4) physically constrained or restricted in freedom of movement. The last is (5) the economic

[1] League of Nations Slavery Convention art. 1(1), Sept. 25, 1926.

exploitation. In this perspective, Bales (2000, p. 6) pointed out that modern slavery involves "total control of one person by another for the purpose of economic exploitation".

A key element of Crane's definition is that all five of these outcomes must simultaneously occur for modern slavery to be recognized. If they do not occur sumultaneously, according to Phung and Crane (2019) it would be more appropriate to refer to human exploitation rather than modern slavery. However, since modern slavery represents "a multifaced continuum" of the human exploitation spectrum (Quirk, 2006, p. 577) and the conditions imply a certain degree of variability (Crane, 2013, p. 51), it is not always straightfoward to distinguish what is and what is not modern slavery. Nevetheless, a situation in which the five outcomes appear in different nuances and intensity still presents the criticalities that found modern slavery.

In order to address this controversial matter and disentangle the occurrence of modern slavery in the real world, especially considering its innovative and unprecedented forms of work, a practice perspective (Blackler & Regan, 2009) on modern slavery can shed light on how modern slavery takes shape. Modern slavery theory framed the issue from an institutional perspective, highlighting, among other elements, the exploiting capabilities developped by firms to exploit an accommodating context for modern slavery. However, different from a structural approach, a perspective focused on practices highlights the essential role of human action in enacting knowledge, viewed as a knowing-how and not just focus on knowledgeability. This perspective implies that modern slavery is not a static embedded capability, but rather a continuous social happening, constituted and reconstituted through practice, as actors engage with the world (Orlikowski, 2002).

Modern Slavery and The Gig Economy

As shown above, the concept of modern slavery or contemporary slavery is increasingly being used as non-legal umbrella term to encompass different forms of exploitation of labour (Scarpa & Cabot, 2018). Modern slavery tends to flourish in the grey zone of unregulated parts of the economy, and in the new business models which profit from old and new forms of slavery (Crane et al.,2018). In this regard, several authors have underlined how the new business models of the on-demand economy are positioned in an unexplored legal area (Aloisi, 2015), which, for instance, makes it difficult to extend forms of labour protection to gig-workers (Cherry & Aloisi, 2016). In addition, it should be considered

that, while traditional forms of slavery such as sex trafficking, child labour, forced labour are carried out within an illegal framework (Quirk, 2006), the new forms of slavery may also occur in formally lawful contexts, making their identification complex and questionable (Crane, 2013).

For instance, in the case of the on-demand economy, it has been observed that flexibility is one of the key values in choosing to undertake this type of activity (Lehdonvirta, 2018). This flexibility is embodied firstly in the possibility of choosing if and when to work, and secondly in the possibility of choosing one's own work shifts (Chen et al., 2019). In this sense, several authors have pointed out that this flexibility is limited either by the possibility of making significant gains (Aloisi, 2015) or by the possibility of seeing future job opportunities reduced (Murphy, 2015). In this perspective, new business models of the on-demand economy could include forms of labour exploitation (Hunt & Samman, 2020).

DATA AND METHOD

Data was collected through an ethnographic active participation conducted by one of the authors, who has carried out the rider activity for several companies active in the Italian market of digital food delivery. Anyway for the purpose of this paper just one experience was considered. The whole experience lasted 162 days and was performed in a medium/large company that will be called Foody Fast (FF) for convenience.

The observed platform used instant messaging services, such as Telegram, WeChat, WhatsApp, Viber etc., to communicate with riders. Therefore, a generous source of data arises from the text messages between the riders and the platform and among the riders themselves. In particular a total of six chats were analysed: three of them concern direct conversations between the ethnographer and three platform managers, for a total of 193 messages and 1.848 words; two concern FF groups chats where both managers and riders are present, for a total amount of 2.764 messages and 29.432 words; while the last one regards a private chat among riders (Riders chat), for a total of 1234 messages and 14.782 words. Other important sources of data were the information material freely downloadable from the platform website and provided during the registration phase, and the quantitative data collected regarding the number of hours worked, kilometers traveled, orders processed and compensation received.

According to Arnould (1998, p. 86) “Ethnography attempts to explicate structured patterns of action that are cultural and/or social rather than merely cognitive, behavioural or affective” by studying people in their everyday contexts or by participating in social interactions with them in order to understand their world. Ethnography is more than just a case study as it implies “full description of a specific world rather than just a segment of it” and in this perspective, “a potential issue in ethnographic studies is to see data everywhere and nowhere, to collect everything and nothing” (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001, p.161). Nevertheless, for the purpose of this paper, the ethnography assumes the function of an “experimental data collection tool” (Moore, 2011, p.655) through which the insider himself gathers information required for a deeper analysis.

At this point, Charmaz & Mitchell (2001) claim that grounded theory strategies can aid ethnographers in gaining a more complete picture of the whole setting than the former approach common in earlier ethnographic works as well as increasing the involvement of ethnographers in their research enquiry. In this sense, grounded theory dispels the positivist notion of passive observers who merely absorb their surrounding scenes. Grounded theory methods provide systematic procedures for probing beneath the surface and digging into the scene, and help in maintaining control over the research process because they assist the ethnographer in focusing, structuring and organizing it. On the one hand, the simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis; the elaboration of analytic codes and categories from raw data and not from preconceived logically deduced hypotheses; theory development during each step of data collection and analysis, and memo-making support ethnographic research toward theoretical development by raising description to abstract categories and theoretical explanation (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). On the other hand, grounded theory methods do not exclusively address experiential data (as the one deriving from ethnographies), but allow to include, for instance, the analysis of structural characteristics of the labour market in the specific sector, as well as, those of the digital platform being adopted.

Adopting a grounded theory method, our findings result from the combined analysis of both experiential and structural data on the working of racers in the digital food delivery business. Data analysis involved an initial "open coding" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) in which the language adopted by informants was used to conceptualize coding, alternatively a simple descriptive statement was used. The final aim of this first phase was to construct a set of first order concepts (van Maanen, 1979) that provided a first description of organizational

working conditions and riders interpretations of them, their interactions with the platform and platform managers. For this first step, the qualitative data analysis software NVivo was implemented.

Subsequently, the relationships between the first order themes were explored independently by the authors and subsequently aggregated into higher second order concepts. Last, "axial coding" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) was explored in which the relationships between and among second order concepts (Gioia et al., 2013) led to the elaboration of 22 practices. Such practices describe the behavior of the organization as a reflection of the actions and conduct of its managers. In this regard, all the managers have indistinctly contributed to their pursuit.

At the end the practices so identified were compared and contrasted to the *slavery management capabilities*, as well as, the *outcomes* of the theory of modern slavery by Crane (2013). This process has resulted in the identification of MSPs that incorporate how modern slavery is enacted in the context of digital food delivery.

THE DIGITAL FOOD DELIVERY BUSINESS AND FOODY FAST

Enabling conditions in the digital food delivery business

According to our analysis of the industry, the enabling conditions of modern slavery (Crane, 2013) can be recognized in the food delivery industry. We interpret them as 'structural' conditions that favour the emergence of MSP.

Concerning the industry context, two factors provide a favourable background for modern slavery (Crane, 2013). First, labour-intensive sectors displaying high elasticity demand are more likely to have firms adopting MSP. This is because in this kind of context, unskilled labour represents a good opportunity to reduce costs and increase profitability. Such dynamics is also known as "value trap slavery" (Crane, 2013 p. 13) according to which, when an industry risks to become uncompetitive because of low market prices and high cost of production, given existing technology, might opt to survive by reducing the cost of labour as close as possible to zero. This dynamic can also be enacted by higher profit targets or inefficient technological adoptions. Second, building on Suchman's concept of legitimacy (1995, p.574), when an industry concerns actions and behaviours that are socially considered undesirable and improper -think for instance of unauthorized mining or black work- they are both illegitimate and illegal, as there are both institutions and laws that banish them. This clear status of outlaws fosters the adoption of modern slavery by organizations, as they

already act in an illegal and socially despicable context. Nevertheless, while this relationship is clearer in illegal sectors, innovations that open new business opportunities for companies that include innovations also in human resources practices (Crane 2013, p. 54), can embed forms of modern slavery that have not yet been openly understood and banned as such by social institutions and legislative actors.

Analysing the first factor, labour intensity, in the digital food delivery industry, Rizzica & Giorgiantonio (2018) define the digital food delivery industry as a labour-based platform business that is labour-intensive and relies on low margins, given a low elasticity of demand. On the second factor, legitimacy, it is important to note that the activity of riders, concerning the delivery service organized by a digital platform, is an innovation providing new working opportunities, as well as, new working interaction patterns in which the platform technology shares the role of job provider with the organization. Such innovativeness is multifaceted, and, as Crane suggested, its dynamic is still to be understood and pondered under the scrutiny of social institutions, and also, of legal norms. For instance, gig work has become a term increasingly associated with precarious employment, and the figure of the gig worker is often socially viewed as a poorly paid and exploited person. Consider for instance the huge number of legal disputes around the world involving some of the giants of the gig economy, such as Uber or Deliveroo. They do not only concern the provision of greater rights and protections to gig workers but also the analysis of the systems with which the platforms evaluate their riders, the promotion systems and the mechanics of the algorithm's operation.

Under a favourable socio-economic context for modern slavery, poverty, poor education and structural unemployment are among the main factors that lead individuals to accept or fall victim to forms of slavery (Crane, 2013). According to Plant (2007) it is extremely likely to find slavery practices where there is a low level of GDP, and this is because poverty creates the social conditions that make it easier for companies to perpetrate abuses, not only economic ones, against individuals. These abuses involve physical or psychological violence, deception, and exhausting working hours. Closely linked to the concept of poverty is the concept of unemployment, since the lack of employment favours the emergence of poverty and constantly aggravates its repercussions (Crane, 2013). To mitigate the proliferation of slavery practices, the spread of more education among individuals appears to be a desirable solution as it could lead individuals to become aware of their condition and thus help them to repudiate it (Andress, 2008).

A conducive geographical context for modern slavery builds on a high physical/political/psychological distance of workers from the usual home place of workers has two implications. First, the language barrier, and/or cultural distance can lead to a flattening of knowledge, causing people educated in their own country to become illiterate in another; second, it lowers employers' coercion costs as individuals end up feeling like a socially non-person (Cruz-Uribe, 1986). The latter mechanism complicates the awareness that the worker is undergoing a slavery practice and the probability she rejects it. At this point, the lowering of coercion costs also has the effect of making it more complex to identify the practice of slavery because it is actually formally accepted by those who undergo it. In this regard, it has already been pointed out that migrants with a low level of education and income are more likely to fall victim to forms of modern slavery (Andrees, 2008), as they may find it more difficult to find and/or keep a job also because of the discomfort due to the geographical context (Crane, 2013). So, considering the digital food delivery industry, it seems reasonable to claim that a job that is apparently easy to obtain and has a low level of required skills may be attractive to those who are struggling to enter the labour market. With reference to migrants employed in the food delivery sector in Italy, research conducted by Rizzica & Giorgiantonio (2018) showed that foreign (non-Italian) workers employed are 23% of the total, practically a quarter of the total.

Finally, the cultural context, understood as the set of informal norms and beliefs, could support the emergence or perpetration of modern slavery, especially in a weak regulatory environment through three factors (Crane, 2013): traditions, entrenched inequalities and religious beliefs. In the context of the gig economy, entrenched traditions and inequalities take on particular relevance. Traditions are the repositories of a community's norms, and they also concern the way in which work activity itself is understood or construed. Neoliberalism that characterizes the Western culture, where the gig economy has become more widespread, has both encouraged entrepreneurship, and increased job insecurity. From this point of view, gig workers represent the highest expression of neoliberalism, as for precarious employment (Bejwin, 2018). In addition, the gig work represents the utmost expression of freedom both for workers, who can decide when and if to work, and for job providers, which consider themselves as mere intermediaries between demand and supply of labour.

The FF Registration & Recruitment Process

Moving from the sector to the organizational level of analysis, FF is a digital food delivery company which operates on the Italian market. At the time of the study it was active in many cities in Italy. It provides food delivery services connecting riders and customers through a technological platform and other ICTs.

In order to perform as a rider, the candidate needs to register on the platform's website. The registration phase consists of two phases. In the first phase, they are asked to provide their personal details, the means of transport available for carrying out the activity and their work availability in terms of weekdays. They are also informed that this availability is just indicative and is in no way binding. In the registration process, there are several elements that explicitly suggest that the more days of availability are indicated, the more likely it is that the application will be accepted. As a matter of fact, there is a face/emoticon that smiles more and more as the days of availability increase, especially when weekends are selected. Therefore, the candidates who aim at becoming a rider, can easily adjust their answers to comply with the expectations. As further evidence, it is possible to navigate the process backwards and change the answers to increase the likelihood of matching the profile of "the perfect rider". At the end of this first phase, if answers are as expected, a message will be shown claiming: "It sounds like you are our perfect rider!". When the application section is concluded, some videos explain how the activity will take place. In one of these videos, the rider is represented as a university student who, when describing his activity to another guy interested in the job, claimed as "I like to think of us, riders, as superheroes". At the end of the video the concept of rider is reinforced by a message: "A Racer is a great little contemporary hero. Your mission is to complete the service with punctuality and precision. You have to be organised, agile and courteous. You are the one who makes our service human, and your role is very important."

The second phase starts after an assessment of the application. If that is passed, a platform manager calls the rider; the first words they pronounce are: "Congratulations, your application has been accepted!". Then, he/she provides the User ID and a password to access the platform side that is dedicated to riders (the FF riders' app) and adds the rider into two FF group chats. As soon as the rider is listed in the two FF groups, the other riders will also include him/her into a private Riders' chat where no platform manager is present.

Registration is free of any charge, but it is mentioned that the potential rider requires a smartphone, and one means of transport between car or motorbike, and these are implicit

costs on the rider. The company provides a thermal container against payment of a deposit of 20 euros, if the rider does not have one.

The structure of the FF Platform

FF's activity takes place seven days a week and is divided into two daily rounds: the lunch round, which runs from 12:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m., and the dinner round, which runs from 7:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. Time frames are organised in 'slots' of half an hour each (e.g., 7:00 p.m.-7:30 p.m. / 7:30 p.m. – 8 p.m.). So, the lunchtime period has six slots and the evening period eight slots. Racers can apply either for the entire round or for individual slots (e.g., from 07:00 p.m. to 09:30 p.m.) through the FF riders' app. Generally, FF managers ask riders to fill in the weekly plan by the end of Thursday of the week before the ones of interest.

For the first months of observation, the FF riders' app showed two digits next to each round: one indicated the number of riders who had signed up for that round; the other indicated the number of riders needed for that round, estimated by the platform managers based on past requests (e.g., "(1/4) 7:00 p.m. - 11:00 p.m." means that only one racer applied for a round for which 4 are requested). Once requests were saturated, and the riders could clearly see it, racers might not apply for that round. So, the fastest the riders took the shifts, the more likely they were to select their favourite ones.

However after a couple of months, the system was changed: riders could apply for any round, with no restriction and no indication of previous riders' availability, and the platform managers decided to accept or reject each proposal, working on the back end of the app. The only thing that signalled the need for more racers in a slot was the indication 'recommended shift' next to the time slot. Criteria by which one availability was refused or accepted were never specified. In addition, in comparison with the previous version of the system, it was much more complex to sign up for certain slots within a round, as riders who were already covering other slots in the same round were preferred. Theoretically, in both systems, the rider could always withdraw his/her availability also during the single shifts, without giving notice to the platform.

All racers who have given availability for a given day are automatically enabled to view the orders placed by customers on that day. As soon as a customer places an order in a certain time slot, the fastest racer to accept the order will be the one in charge of the delivery in that slot. When all racers have saturated the slot of a certain time frame, customers will no longer be able to request a delivery for that slot. The system is therefore structured in such a way that it only accepts orders that racers can fulfil. For instance, if there were four riders for

an evening round, once all four riders had accepted an order for the 07:00 p.m. - 07:30 p.m. shift, other customers would not have been able to place an order for that time slot.

Typically, the rider is responsible for calling the restaurant and ordering what the customer has asked on the FF platform and for advancing the cost of the meal. Upon delivery, the rider will receive the cost of the meal plus delivery, which varies from 2.50 to 4.90 euros, depending on the distance travelled, calculated between the customer's home and the restaurant. This means that after a certain limit the remuneration is the same. If there were differences in the price paid, since prices of meals were not constantly updated on the FF app, the rider had to take a picture of the receipt and was entitled to a refund by FF in the following month.

ANALYSIS

Table 1 reports the MSP that derived from our first order and second themes. Our first level coding grounds into the conversations held within both the FF group chats and the private Riders chat, as well as, on the process and structure of the FF platform work described above. To comply with space constraints, the process of elaboration of each practice will not be explored individually but we will illustrate in the following the MSP of the “Extorting labor supply”, “Building a community of riders" and “Building trust for exploitation”.

As for the first MSP, one of the most frequent codes, mapped into several excerpts from the FF group chats, display that manager often reprimand riders, even forcefully, because the company had lost the opportunity to deliver more orders especially at weekends, and this was imputable to riders low supply of working hours. . The opportunities to earn money are there, they are obvious, there is a demand for the service that is more than tangible. We need a more consistent availability because no matter how much publicity the competitor may do, we have been in the field for longer and the customers are looking for us.” . This kind of reprimand is sometimes followed by the removal of some riders from the FF group chats and the contextual inclusion of new riders. Such behavior of managers inhibits riders and pushes them to ensure FF with more work availability. This also conveys an implicit threat to the riders, that is: “if you don't work more, we will delete you from the platform, and add new riders". These kinds of excerpts have been coded as ‘Veiled Threat’ at the first level. In this and other similar cases, the progression from first-order codes to the identification of MSP proceeded by aggregation of similar interactions occurring in different situations, within different chats, as well as, across chats and other material, such as the

analysis of the registration process described above or ethnographic experiences. For instance, in the registration process, the several elements explicitly suggesting that the more days of availability you indicate, the more likely it is that your application will be accepted, as mentioned in the Recruitment and Registration Section, have been coded under the same second-level code 'Threat'. Eventually, this has pointed to the "Extorting labor supply" modern slavery practice. This practice describes all the behaviors and actions pursued by FF to extort greater work availability from the riders.

Table 1: Data structure

FIRST ORDER THEME	SECOND ORDER THEME	PRACTICES
- Tolerated/facilitated self-management - Self-management and chat purposes - Autofire - Collaboration of riders in favor of the system - Fear of riders in favor of the system - Riders update other riders on the status of the evening's demand - Fired - New Racers - Freeriding among riders & role of a company framework - Reprimands among riders - Competition - Free rider infamous	• Self-management for the system • Riders' compliance • Self-management & resistance • Market vs hierarchy • Riders as commodity • Cooperation vs. competition	**• Avoiding to disregard "the system "** **• Building the workers' community for resistance and survive** **• Commoditizing workers** **• Exacerbating workers competition** **• Morally legitimizing work practices**
- Complexity of the evaluation of the business/work situation - Business risk: fines, km, accidents... - Costs for riders: petrol - Low wages - Inclusion of restaurants into the network - Rider substitutes for FF in dealing with restaurants - Rider shield to competition - Fake assistance - Requests for rider assistance ignored - Payment arrangements by restaurants (& fake assistance) - FF assistants not on duty - Payment arrangements by customers (& fake assistance) - Payment ambiguity - Riders' awareness of working conditions	• Complexity/acceptance/reassignment • Business risks • Riders as FF business manager • Business risk on the rider	**• Accepting to be underpaid** **• Denying compensation for risk** **• Offering low compensations** **• Passing workers the management role** **• Surrendering to exploitation**
- Apps as a work allocation system - Lack of transparency on orders - No answer for sharing info on workload and for sharing the role of coordinating work - Kindness in language - Team language - Exclusive use of company chat - Private control of participation and attendance - Participation of FF observers to the chat - Customer management procedures - Slots are taken away if you don't work - Exacerbated competition - Advice on activities - Call to respect agreements	• Technology as apparently neutral equalizer • Feeding/maintaining information demand asymmetry • Lack of transparency • Dark kindness • Controlling • Direction of work • Punishment • Market vs hierarchy • Call of duty	**• Building an obscure technological medium** **• Building opacity for exploitation** **• Building trust for exploitation** **• Controlling the workforce** **• Providing working procedures** **• Punishing** **• Providing working procedures** **• Morally legitimizing work practices**
- Riders are 'free' to work, but under certain conditions - Veiled Threatt	• Threat • • Blackmail, bullying, power...	**• Extorting labour supply** **• Pushing for labour supply**

- Striking and regulating platform managers - Intentional exploitation of asymmetry between FF and rider - Stated purpose chat - Actual purpose of business groups - No flexibility of labour - Requests for shifts on personal chats - Requests for shifts on FF chat - Requests for double slots on FF chat - Requests for work during shifts	• • Pushing	
- Reprimands from platform managers for not putting in a shift or withdrawing availability for work - Hours of doing nothing	• Labour management	**• Reprimanding for work freedom** **• Constraining movement, denying availability**

As for the second MSP, “Building a community of riders”, other widespread codes, mainly gathered from riders’ private group, testify the riders' willingness to build their own community that runs in parallel to FF groups. Whenever one or more riders are added to the private group, one of the older members always forwards the same welcome message in which it was pointed out how no platform manager was present in that group and it could be useful both to arrange shift swaps and for discussing work-related issues.

Despite this chat appearing at a first glance as a simple chat among work colleagues, it had the specific function of facilitating the coordination of riders autonomously and without the supervision of FF. In fact, FF explicitly contrasted this private chat among racers, in particular company managers were upset that riders managed shifts among themselves. In this regard, more than once the platform managers remarked, in the FF groups, that it was essential for them to know who was leaving a shift, and consequently advised riders against exchanging shifts privately.. In addition, FF wanted riders to enter their working availability into the company app and notify any changes on the FF chat. As this interpretation was elaborated across the steps of analysis, during the first coding phase, such extracts have been coded as "Self-management and chat purposes". However, across the axial coding step, the comparison with other first-order themes, made it clear that the private group was an attempt to create a community of riders in which they could agree on who was taking an order, for instance, considering the geographical position of the rider in the city at the moment in which the order appeared on the platform. This community had peculiar rules that in some cases differed from those set by FF, and in other cases enforced FF rules. Regarding the first case, racers exchanged orders during a shift without notifying FF. Regarding the second case, while FF insisted that racers had to maintain working availability they had inserted the platform, racers considered any change in availability a challenge to their possibility to work and such behavior by racers was despicable. In fact, if FF observed that present racers were not reliable

on working availability, they would add new racers to the platform, increasing in this way the competition among old and new racers, and making racers' possibility to earn from this job, lower and more uncertain. As evidence, a rider was forced to leave the Riders chat because he had withdrawn his availability and was accused by others of "ripping off" other people's jobs. This deeper understanding of riders' motivations resulted in the codification of the second level code "Self-management & resistance". Such an analysis process allowed the identification of "Building a workers community for resistance and survival" modern slavery practice. This practice describes the set of actions and behaviors through which riders resist the platform constraints and survive despite them.

The last illustration of the analysis that led to the MSP concerns "Building trust for exploitation". During the registration phase on the platform, so before becoming a rider, expressions used to describe the rider's activity mirror typical team language and describe the job as a shared mission between rider and platform. For instance, banners containing phrases such as "you are the one who makes our business human" or "helps us fulfill our mission" seem to aim at creating team complicity. When reading the chat messages this interpretation is reinforced and it becomes clear that team language is adopted purposefully. For instance, the numerous requests for supply of working hours are often preceded by sentences such as "we need help this weekend" or "could you help us guys?". In addition, platform managers often use emoticons to help smooth out the conversation. During the first coding phase these kinds of remarks have been gathered into the first level code "Kindness in language". The examples described above highlight how the managers' polite and collaborative linguistic expressions were used especially to make certain requests to the riders. In this direction, managers use this message: "a couple of tips to make the best deliveries" to introduce a series of eight points that actually seem to be directions on how to carry out the activity. For example, one of these points required in uppercase letters that, in case of delay, the customer be contacted before delivery.. Also, for the use of uppercase letters, this message seems more a direction than a simple tip. In other cases, the kindness of managers appears to be just aseptic and an end in itself. For example, during a discussion on the official FF group, a platform manager cordially invites riders to give their opinion on new restaurants to be added showing an apparent appreciation for the riders' cues. However, after a couple of minutes the manager dismissed the discussion despite the fact that most riders did not have time to reply. Under this line of interpretation, excerpts concerning the platform's linguistic register of this kind were aggregated within the second-level code "Dark Kindness", and then, the modern slavery practice "Building trust for exploitation" was identified. This practice includes the

whole of actions through which managers by using a particular linguistic code create a clime of trust that is functional to a context in which their demands are met.

Following the analytical steps outlined above, other practices were identified, making a total of 22. At the end of the analysis process, the different practices identified were linked to the different outcomes of the theory of modern slavery developed by Crane (2013) and then grouped together. An overview of all the practices identified is provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Description of MSP and relationship with modern slavery outcomes identified by Crane (2013)

MSP	DESCRIPTION	MS OUTCOMES (Crane, 2013)
Avoiding to disregard "the system“	The set of actions through which riders show themselves to be compliant with the platform to avoid negative repercussions.	Dehumanization and commoditization
Building the workers' community for resistance and survive	Riders build their own community riders to resist the platform constraints and survive despite them.	
Commoditizing workers	The platform frantically "fires" and "hires" riders. A testament to the enormous replaceability of this work.	
Exacerbating workers competition	Extreme competition leads the riders to compete.	
Diffusing moral conformism	Inducing riders to conform to a moral code according to which some behaviours are to be condemned and other exalted.	
Surrendering to exploitation	Having gained awareness of their condition, riders surrender to the platform's policies.	
Accepting to be underpaid (riders)	Rather than not earning any wages at all, riders accept to pay that they themselves deem low.	Economic exploitation through underpayment
Denying compensation for risk	The platform denies compensation for certain business-related risks, such as fines or accidents.	
Offering low compensations	The platform offers low fixed fees that increase, in relation to distance, only up to a certain limit after which the fee is always the same.	
Passing workers the management role	The platform makes it so that riders have to take on responsibilities that are not theirs to take on.	
Building an obscure technological medium	The platform uses technology to create an intermediary in the relationship with riders and thus limit complaints.	Ownership/ control through abuse
Building information opacity	The platform does not provide the information requested by riders, especially during shifts, to avoid requests and abandonments, thus limiting the flexibility of the work.	
Building trust for exploitation	The platform managers are always very careful to use polite and affable language to win the trust of riders and facilitate work requests.	
Controlling the workforce	The platform implements workforce control mechanisms.	
Providing working procedures	The platform provides, often in the form of tips, directions on how to perform the activity.	
Punishing	The platform punishes riders who don't show full work availability.	
Morally legitimizing work practices	The platform leverages the moral qualities of riders to demand that an activity be performed as if it were a due action and not an action dependent on a work relationship.	
Stimulating workers competition	The platform stimulates competition between riders to reap the benefits in terms of the amount of work on offer.	
Extorting labor supply	By prospecting for new riders, the platform extorts greater availability from riders.	Forced work through threat
Pushing for labor supply	Through the exasperated request for work, the platform obtains greater availability of riders who, to avoid recalls or reduce the possibility of	

	working in the future, agree to work shifts for which they had not booked.	
Reprimanding work freedom	The platform reprimands riders who independently leave a shift because of low orders receipts.	Constraints on freedom of movement
Constraining movement, denying availability	The platform requires riders to cover an entire 4-hour shift even if no orders come in for a couple of hours and riders are forced to wait without doing anything.	

FINDINGS

Our analysis leads to the identification of 22 MSP (Table 2) that are associated to Crane's (2013) five modern slavery outcomes. This association shows that within the digital food delivery platform business, it is possible to observe a new for of modern slavery; our practices describe how modern slavery is enacted in everyday actions and interactions among riders, between riders and platform managers, and between riders and the technological platform.

The first group of practices refers to Crane's (2013) outcome "Dehumanization and commoditization", including organizational behaviors that commodify work and make it less humane. It not only describes the platform behaviors but also the riders' responses to those behaviors. For instance, riders always show compliance with the company directives, even when they disagree, and this is because "Avoiding to disregard 'the system' " reduces the chances of suffering negative repercussions, particularly reducing the chance of not being accepted for the following week's shifts rounds. Another response of the riders consists in the already mentioned "Building the workers' community" practice through which riders try to survive inside the organization.. As for the other practices associated with dehumanization, namely "Commoditizing workers", "Exacerbating worker competition", "Spreading moral conformity", these are enacted by the company. The commodification of workers and labor is a typical trait of modern slavery, which in the case analyzed is materialized by the continuous replacement of riders, 31 in about six months. This practice also has the effect of showing riders the enormous substitutability of their work, and of pushing them to accept the directives of the company. Competition is also a typical trait of modern slavery, and exacerbating competition pushes riders to conflict with each other and consequently contributes to the dehumanization of work. The dehumanization process is also fostered by the company's willingness to spread a code of conduct that leads riders to disregard the values that are condemned by the organization and to appreciate those valued by the organization.

The second group of practices refers to “Economic exploitation through underpayment”. This group includes all practices that promote the economic exploitation of riders, and includes both the behaviors promoted by the organization and the riders' responses. First, the organization offers low and fixed wages regardless of the distance traveled, but also denies providing extra compensation that takes into account the risks of the activity. Furthermore, riders take on the business risk, for example when a customer does not respond after ordering a meal or when restaurants require a higher amount of money because the organization did not update the prices on the app. Even in these cases, this type of risk is not rewarded in any way and is on riders. Regarding the riders, because of the difficulties they have in finding other kinds of employment and their low bargaining power, they surrender to the economic policies of the platform.

The third set of practices concerns “Ownership/control through abuse”. This group of practices describes all behaviors through which the platform exercises control power over the riders. This group presents practices that are clearly pursued by the organization and others which are more underhandedly addressed. For instance, at the first level, the company directly controls the workforce by monitoring how long a rider has been inactive or by pushing riders also to use company chat for communication with each other. Furthermore, the company goes beyond this and provides guidelines on how to carry out the company's activities, however, defining them as "riders tips", and punishing those who do not meet the expectations of the platform, reducing the likelihood of being accepted for round shifts. By considering a deeper level of control, it has already been highlighted how the company, through a preparatory use of language, creates a climate of trust aimed at maximizing labor supply from the riders, but this is not the only means through which the platform exercises an underhanded control. Indeed, throughout the experience, it became clear how the platform was trying to build an obscure technological intermediary, namely "the new app algorithm", between riders and the platform itself, so as to constrain riders' complaints with round managers, as well as suppress their issues . In addition, the company progressively reduced the information provided to riders during a shift, regarding the number of active riders and the overall orders. This practice decreases the probability that riders abandon a round because they observe an excess of active riders or a shortage of orders and consequently helps the platform control its workforce.

The fourth group of practices addresses “Forced work through threat”, and refers to the psychological threats through which the platform succeeds to extort supply labor from riders. In this regard, it has already been shown how the platform, through the threat to

expand the workforce, manages to get more work supply from riders. In addition, the constant requests for work by the platform managers exacerbates the pressure, because, if riders do not respond accordingly, they will see their possibility to work in the future dramatically reduced, since their work requests will be refused without any sort of explanation. This causes riders to comply with managers' requests, and supply work even when they had not spontaneously inserted their availability.

The last set of practices refers to “Constraints on freedom of movement”. This set of practices refers to the ways in which the platform restricts riders' freedom of movement. Specifically, the company accomplishes this through two practices. First, it requires riders to be available for an entire round even when there is no work, forcing riders to spend hours "twiddling their thumbs". To this, the platform adds reprimands for those who abandon a work round suddenly, requiring them to ask for permission to leave within the company chat.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we elaborated MSP that display how the innovative context of gig work plays across the boundary of exploitation, enacting a new form of modern slavery. This study constitutes the first attempt to identify MSP in the digital food delivery sector. In particular, it provided 22 MSP on how digital food delivery companies translate Crane’s (2013) "exploiting capabilities" i.e., the firm’s ability to gain advantage from specific conditions that create the opportunity to perpetuate a form of modern slavery into practices.

Our analysis shows that platform work implies practices that lead to new forms of modern slavery. While the literature has grown the concept of modern slavery in relation to traditional forms of work under threat, it has also acknowledged that innovative working relationship might entail new forms of slavery, especially in those grey areas in which the legislator and society have not yet elaborated mature forms of regulation and legitimacy.

Considering modern slavery outcomes, Crane (2013) himself claims that for modern slavery to exist, all outcomes must be present simultaneously, albeit with different 'degrees of variability (pag.51). However, determining the minimum degree appears to be a very challenging exercise because it is difficult to establish a reference point below which a specific practice is not slavery and above which it is. In addition, a threat of violence is a crucial factor in the recognition of modern slavery because without it an individual always

has the possibility to “walk away” (p.59). However, leaving the context of traditional slavery, it is complex to adopt violent threats as a discriminating factor for assessing modern slavery.

For example, consider the "silence breakers" movement, also known as #metoo. This became globally known by the testimony of several actresses who told their stories of sexual violence. While typical sexual harassment occurs under the threat of life, and women cannot “walk away”, actresses formally had the possibility to walk away from their perpetrator. Nevertheless, the women of the #metoo movement have been widely recognized as victims of a threat of violence, concerning the impediment to continue a career or in some cases to begin it. Therefore, in some cases, violence is deployed into forms that hamper the physical possibility to “walk away”, as in traditional harassment, or hamper the possibility to decide otherwise, because of professional personal fulfillment, as in the #meetoo cases, or of economic conditions, as in the rider’s case.

Our analysis shows that all the outcomes of modern slavery theory are present in the case of digital food delivery platform work. Nevertheless, riders accept to be subject to the platform's practices for a long time. In our perspective, enabling factors of modern slavery such as socio-economic, geographic, or cultural factors lower coercion costs and push the victims to give themselves up voluntarily. Under this framework, we should ask how a rider is actually free to walk away and what concrete possibilities he/she has to find a better job. For some individuals that remain trapped in such a situation with no better alternatives, there is the risk that the freedom advocated by the gig economy becomes a true paradox, as it takes the shape of the freedom to be exploited under the constant threat of unemployment.

This study is not without limitations. The most critical one is that it only reflects the riders' perspective and does not consider the platform's point of view. In that sense, future studies should present the perspective of companies organizing platform work, and offer a different understanding of interactions and digital structures. A further important direction that deserves the attention of future research should shed light on whether MSP is adopted also in other sectors of the gig economy, such as transportation.

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