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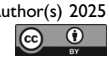
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Informal governance from below: Ride-hailing drivers and platform autonomy in Bogotá's gig economy

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Abstract

This study examines the intersection of digital labour platforms and informal governance in Bogotá, Colombia, with a focus on the adaptive strategies employed by ride-hailing drivers within contexts of institutional fragility and urban inequality. Employing digital ethnography and visual methods, the research analyses the emergence of Drivers Club Bogotá, a grassroots network utilising technologies such as WhatsApp and Zello for coordination, mutual aid and resistance. The findings highlight how drivers created informal governance systems based on autonomy, reciprocity and dignity, effectively responding to institutional distrust and regulatory gaps, particularly intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. The article argues for adopting a 'partner state' policy framework, supporting grassroots innovations without compromising their autonomy, and expanding existing knowledge on platform governance by illustrating informal governance as simultaneously a pragmatic survival strategy and a form of institutional innovation.

Keywords

Gig economy, Global South, informal governance, platform labour, urban resilience

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Introduction

The gig economy has reconfigured how urban labour is organised, mediated and governed. While much of the scholarship on digital platforms foregrounds precarity and algorithmic control, these narratives often overlook how gig work emerges in cities where informality has long shaped the terms of economic life. In such settings, digital platforms are not solely a departure from formality but a continuation of makeshift arrangements, often layered on top of existing socio-economic exclusions. This perspective builds on extensive scholarship that documents how platform economies in the Global South operate within existing informal economic structures (Anwar & Graham, 2019; Graham, 2020). Statistical evidence supports this: in Colombia, informal employment accounts for approximately 55% of the workforce, with platform work increasingly integrated into these informal livelihood strategies (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE), 2025). The current paper focuses on one of these settings: the city of Bogotá, Colombia, where ride-hailing work is officially unregulated, socially vital and structurally informal, yet entangled with a broader landscape of institutional fragility and urban inequality.

Throughout this paper, informality, and in particular informal labour, is understood as an economic and organisational activity that is law-adjacent or extra-legal, lacking statutory recognition, bureaucratic registration, or state-backed sanction, yet often rule-governed by social norms and internal enforcement. By formalisation, it is meant the translation of such activity into state-recognised entities and procedures, for example, licensing, taxation, auditable records and compliance audits. Hence, an 'informal yet enforceable' system, such as the one analysed in this paper, is possible: rules are enforced through community sanctions rather than state coercion.

Amid chronic unemployment and weak state capacity, Bogotá's ride-hailing drivers, many from low-income neighbourhoods, have found themselves operating in legal limbo. Facing harassment from traffic police, exclusion from policy processes and a general absence of protections from either the state or the platform companies themselves, drivers responded by exiting the system and informally reorganising it for their benefit. This paper examines the emergence and evolution of Drivers Club Bogotá (DCB). This extensive, decentralised driver network built alternative systems of coordination, rule-setting and mutual aid through everyday technologies such as WhatsApp, Zello and Blumeter. What began as a survival mechanism during the COVID-19 pandemic gradually evolved into a form of grassroots governance, one shaped by constraints, yet also by the values of autonomy, reciprocity and trust. This was observed at both the organisational level, including rules, sanctions and pricing protocols, and the individual level, specifically risk tolerance and care obligations.

Bogotá provides fertile ground for this analysis. With over 10 million residents in its metropolitan area and a long history of institutional fragmentation, the city is marked by spatial segregation, political capture, and persistent gaps between law and practice. Public transport systems have often failed to meet the needs of peripheral communities. At the same time, the legal status of ride-hailing remains unresolved, caught between ministerial bureaucracy and subject to inconsistent enforcement (Mieles & Pardo, 2022). Within this

regulatory vacuum, drivers must navigate daily threats of fines, vehicle seizures and police extortion, all while being excluded from meaningful participation in labour policymaking.

This paper contributes to a growing body of sociological scholarship on digital labour in the Global South by highlighting how alternative governance structures can emerge from below, shaped not only by necessity but by a collective sense of dignity and autonomy. At the same time, it draws on insights from design theory and political economy to frame the organisational evolution of Bogotá's ride-hailing communities as more than improvised survival – they are situated responses that demonstrate a new form of institutional intelligence.

Understanding digital labour platforms in the Global South

The analysis and conceptual framework behind this paper draws on sociological literature on informal labour, digital platforms and governance, while integrating perspectives from design research and political economy. The latter embeds transdisciplinary processes and systems thinking when analysing wicked problems (Selg et al., 2024), particularly in the context of the Global South (Carey et al., 2023). Here, while the term 'Global South' encompasses diverse territories with different contexts, a commonality among Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia is their relatively low levels of institutionalisation (Carey et al., 2023; Haug et al., 2021), which is significantly related to the issue of informal labour and platformisation.

Platform labour, particularly in-place platform labour, refers to digitally mediated work where algorithms coordinate the allocation of tasks, monitor performance and manage payment systems. At the same time, workers provide services in specific geographical locations (Tan et al., 2021). Unlike remote platform work, in-place platform labour (such as ride-hailing) requires physical presence and embeddedness in local urban contexts.

Informal labour underpins economies throughout the Global South, often filling gaps left by weak state institutions (Chen, 2023). This situation worsened in Latin America during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic (Acevedo et al., 2021). In this context, digital platforms have disrupted labour dynamics, offereing alternative income opportunities while also intensifying precarity (Castel-Branco & Dawson, 2023; Surie & Huws, 2023). This contrasts with narratives of gig work in the Global North, where platform labour is typically framed only as a deviation from standard employment relationships, emphasising its precarity and the erosion of worker protections (Ravenelle, 2023; Rosenblat, 2018).

In the Global South, however, platform work often represents one strategy within broader informal livelihood portfolios, rather than a departure from formal employment (Chen, 2023; Hunt & Machingura, 2016). This distinction highlights the importance of contextualising platform labour and societal platformisation within regional historical trajectories and specific institutional landscapes. Related dynamics have been observed among migrant workers in the Global North who draw on informal practices learned elsewhere (Baril, 2024), underscoring that 'informality' is also relational to institutional

context. This aligns with further scholarship on strategies and tactics in platform work (Palacios Crisóstomo & Kaufmann, 2024; Riordan et al., 2023; Timko & van Melik, 2021), where workers weave platform tasks into broader livelihood portfolios.

As Anwar and Graham (2020) outline, platformisation in the Global South can create spaces for worker empowerment and resistance within the gig economy, as workers develop strategies to leverage platform dependencies and assert both personal and collective agency. In Bogotá, gig work has become a critical livelihood strategy for marginalised populations in a context of informal employment and underemployment.

The literature highlights the systematic exclusion of informal gig and platform-based workers from policy dialogues, both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Paredes and Vigiola (2024) observe that gig workers in Colombia have been and continue to be marginalised in regulatory debates. This exclusion, coupled with deep-seated distrust of state and private entities, frames the drivers' preference for autonomy over formal integration. As Mazzuca (2021) notes, Latin American institutions have historically been taken over as private patrimony by crony elites who excluded people from economic growth and welfare benefits, generating informality and precarity.

Evasive entrepreneurship and alternative governance systems

The concept of 'evasive entrepreneurship' (Elert & Henrekson, 2016; Thierer, 2020; Ufere & Gaskin, 2021) is crucial for this paper, as it frames the workers' actions as creative responses to restrictive institutional and regulatory environments. Evasive entrepreneurship refers to the practice of innovating or conducting economic and social activities in ways that circumvent existing regulations, taxes, or institutional constraints, often exploiting legal loopholes or technological advancements to operate in a grey area of the law.

While evasive entrepreneurship is typically framed as an individual action (Elert & Henrekson, 2016), DCB demonstrates collective evasive practice – a shared infrastructure for mutual support that challenges individualistic assumptions of platform corporativism, suggesting that new solidarity forms emerge through collective circumvention practices.

Connecting this concept to sociological theories of structural opportunity and constraint reveals how such practices emerge from specific historical and political contexts (Merton, 2017; Portes & Haller, 2010). Moreover, the recent rise of disruptive 'post-political' movements in Latin America demonstrates how these ideas can evolve from marginal practices to impact societal processes, highlighting the need to understand new behaviours embedded in emerging sociological structures of labour in Latin America (Ferro et al., 2024; Semán, 2023; Semán & Welschinger, 2023).

Complementary concepts, such as 'heterarchy,' also help in this paper to understand the fluid organisational structures preferred by evasive entrepreneurial and socio-political responses among gig platform workers. Heterarchy, a form of organisation characterised by lateral accountability and multiple, shifting centres of authority rather than fixed vertical hierarchies (Chakravarthy & Henderson, 2007), helps to explain the fluid

organisational structures preferred by platform workers. This paper extends these discussions by examining how Bogotá's gig workers repurpose digital platforms to create alternative governance systems, challenging conventional labour paradigms from a multi-level perspective.

Theoretical frameworks for understanding platform governance

Vallas and Schor's (2020) analysis of platforms as institutional 'chameleons' provides an additional theoretical lens for understanding how platforms' meanings and effects vary across social conditions. This perspective helps explain how ride-hailing technologies acquire distinct sociological significance in Bogotá's institutional environment, where drivers view platforms as tools for achieving autonomy and dignity within a historically exclusionary system.

It is crucial to distinguish between different types of platforms in this ecosystem. Ride platforms such as Uber and DiDi function as digital marketplaces, using algorithms to match drivers with passengers, set prices and manage transactions. Communication platforms such as WhatsApp and Zello, by contrast, are horizontal tools designed for peer-to-peer interaction. DCB's innovation lies in repurposing these communication tools (not designed initially for economic and social coordination) into governance infrastructure. This transformation illustrates how platform affordances acquire new meanings through situated practice.

Additionally, Ostrom's (1995, 2010a, 2010b) work on collective action and community-based institutions informs the paper's analysis of self-governance. Her research demonstrated how communities solve complex problems through self-organisation without relying on the state or private sector. This framework helps to frame drivers' creation of DCB as a form of collective action aimed at building autonomy in the face of institutional failures.

The 'Partner State' framework also offers a normative alternative governance model that challenges traditional state–market dichotomies and provides insight into potential responses to emergent organisations such as DCB. As conceptualised by Bauwens and Kostakis (2015) and Pazaitis and Drechsler (2020), the partner-state approach envisions the government as an enabler and facilitator of civil society initiatives rather than a controlling regulator or an absent actor. DCB illustrates what such arrangements might look like from the bottom up, highlighting both the possibilities and challenges of implementing partner state principles in contexts with extractive and corporatist institutions.

Finally, the concept from design theory of 'fit–form–context' (Alexander, 1964, 2017) complements this analysis by emphasising how effective governance emerges from alignment with local conditions rather than abstract models. Here, fit–form–context refers to a logic where the form (the structure or organisational pattern) emerges through an iterative process of responding to the demands and constraints of a specific context (Alexander, 1964, 2017). It resists the imposition of top-down blueprints and instead privileges local adaptation, feedback and fine-grained responsiveness.

Connecting theory to methodology

The above theoretical framework informs this paper's methodological approach to studying the organisational practices of DCB drivers in Bogotá. To effectively capture the lived realities of these workers during and after COVID-19 lockdowns, this study employs digital ethnography and visual methods that prioritise the drivers' perspectives. This approach is particularly suitable when examining evasive entrepreneurship and self-governance in practice, as it enables us to observe how drivers translate abstract concepts into concrete digital interactions. By analysing the digital spaces where platform workers coordinate their activities, the way drivers repurpose communication platforms into governance mechanisms was documented. These dynamics resonate with replicative and resistive conjunctures in platform urbanism (Graham, 2020) and with platforms as flexible spatial arrangements (Richardson, 2020), clarifying why communication-first tools could be repurposed as governance infrastructure. The following section of this paper details this methodological approach and its implementation during a period of heightened precarity and institutional change.

Methodology: Digital ethnography and visual methods in platform economies

This study employed digital ethnography and visual methods to explore the lived realities of Bogotá's ride-hailing drivers. Data collection took place during and after the COVID-19 lockdowns (2020–2021), when traditional fieldwork was infeasible. Following the frameworks of Pink (2016) and Leszczynski (2018, 2019, 2020), this research recognises digital ethnography as essential for understanding the mundane engagements with everyday technology, particularly relevant for studying ride-hailing platforms embedded in daily life.

Digital ethnography as methodological framework

The methodology included synchronous online interviews with 28 participants (26 drivers and two founders of DCB). Age was not inquired, and the gender split was approximately 60–40%, skewed towards male drivers, as ride-hailing in Bogotá is a male-dominated industry (Deb, 2021; Paredes & Vigiola, 2024). The methodology also included participant observation in digital spaces (varied digital channels and WhatsApp groups) and analysis of visual materials (governance rules shared online). This approach facilitated deep engagement with drivers' online communities, capturing real-time interactions and organisational practices.

The research adapted Leszczynski's (2018) 'walking ethnography' to digital contexts, conducting interviews while drivers worked. Safety was prioritised, with interviews occurring during waiting periods, capturing real-time decision-making while respecting the mobile nature of platform work. This approach raised specific ethical considerations: driver safety was prioritised by ensuring that interviews only occurred during safe moments (waiting periods or when they were at home); however, some situations in

which the driver accepted the invitation for the pre-arranged call and were driving at the interview moment were unavoidable (and understandable considering that driving is their *modus vivendi*). Customer privacy was protected as no passengers were present during recorded conversations. This method captured real-time decision-making and platform interactions while respecting the mobile nature of platform work.

To address translation challenges, all interviews were transcribed in Spanish first, with key passages translated using a dual approach: literal translation followed by contextual interpretation. For culturally specific terms, both the original Spanish and contextual English meanings were preserved. For example, '*vaca*,' which literally means 'cow' but functions as a colloquial term in Colombian and other variants of Latin American Spanish to mean 'communal fund.'

Digital informed consent was obtained through recorded verbal agreements at the beginning of each interview, and participants sent their signed consent forms via email or WhatsApp before the interviews. In these consent instances, the participants explicitly acknowledged their understanding of the research purpose, confidentiality measures and their right to withdraw.

Visual methods and digital artefacts

Visual methods (Crang, 2010; Pink, 2004) were also crucial for documenting informal governance systems. Following Leszczynski's (2019) approach to digital-visual artefacts as objects of study, the analysis of participant-provided screenshots provided tangible evidence of drivers' governance and organisational mechanisms.

Beyond formal interviews, drivers often also shared images via WhatsApp that either reinforced their narratives or introduced new elements not covered in conversations. As Leszczynski (2019) argues, these digital-visual artefacts interrogate politics, contestation and hidden meanings that might not emerge in verbal exchanges alone.

Language and cultural context

The research was conducted in Spanish, acknowledging that language significantly impacts analysis and interpretation (García Negroni, 2008). As the author of this paper shares participants' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, this facilitates understanding of cultural nuances (Karra & Phillips, 2008).

This approach reflects what Wong-Villacres et al. (2021) recognise as a tension between formal research structures from the Global North and the realities of fieldwork in Latin American contexts, where informality and trust-building often follow different dynamics – the author's positionality as a Colombian provided valuable cultural competence while requiring reflexivity about potential biases.

Data analysis and further ethical considerations

Finally, data were thematically analysed following Saldaña's (2021) coding approach, using qualitative analysis software to organise codes from verbatim transcriptions and

visual media. The analysis focused on how drivers articulated their motivations, justified their practices, and navigated tensions within their self-organised system, allowing for a nuanced understanding of drivers' agency and intentions.

Ethical protocols were adhered to, meeting institutional requirements while remaining sensitive to the local context. Participants' anonymity was protected using pseudonyms, and informed consent was obtained digitally. Given the legal grey areas where many drivers operated, particular attention was paid to confidentiality. The following findings illuminate how these drivers navigated institutional voids, established self-governance mechanisms, and pursued autonomy in their quest for dignified livelihoods amid precarious conditions.

Findings: From WhatsApp to governance – the evolution of DCB as a digital commons

The origins and operational structure of DCB

Drivers Club Bogotá emerged in October 2017 when two drivers met at the activation office of a multinational platform. Drivers complete security checks or resolve issues that cannot be addressed through the app interface, in this physical location. Recognising shared challenges, they established a WhatsApp group to build community and contest platform control. As one of the founders explained:

> We wanted to create a community of mutual help and security because driving on the platforms has its complications… many times it becomes difficult. The conditions on the platforms are sometimes not ideal, so it occurred to us that we could do something different and, well, help each other. ('DAVID')

This community formation represents a clear example of what evasive entrepreneurship (Elert & Henrekson, 2016) entails, where workers respond creatively to restrictive institutional environments by innovating outside formal structures. The organisation grew exponentially from its initial 70 members to encompass 24 WhatsApp groups with approximately 4,000 subscribed drivers, a Facebook page with 2,200 followers, and a private Facebook group with more than 6,000 participants. This growth necessitated structural evolution.

The operational model of DCB works through multiple coordinated channels. Passengers typically encounter DCB after ordering a ride through a multinational platform and being referred by that driver, who is also a DCB member, to join a 'riders' WhatsApp group. Additional recruitment occurs through person-to-person referrals and intermediaries such as security guards who receive commissions for referring potential passengers.

When passengers request rides through WhatsApp, group administrators coordinate the service and contact available drivers through 'Zello,' a push-to-talk application that functions like a digital walkie-talkie. Drivers pay membership fees to participate in these

groups and use 'Blumeter,' a customisable fare meter app that implements the group's pricing policies, including minimum rates per kilometre and surge pricing during peak times.

The DCB membership reflects Bogotá's diverse urban workforce. Although comprehensive demographic data were not systematically collected to protect participant anonymity in legally precarious conditions, interviews revealed a heterogeneous composition, comprising Colombian nationals from various regions and workers transitioning from other informal and formal sectors. Many drivers described platform work as one element in diversified livelihood portfolios, combining ride-hailing with delivery services, informal commerce, or periodic formal employment.

Self-governance and informal structures

The DCB's governance structures underwent significant evolution before and during the COVID-19 crisis as a grassroots response to institutional shortcomings, including the lack of regulation of platform work in Colombia (Mieles & Pardo, 2022). While initially relying solely on WhatsApp, the growing complexity of coordinating rides and managing communications across thousands of members prompted a shift. DCB began utilising Zello not just for coordination but to establish and enforce governance rules – banning non-work posts and penalising disrespect – creating an informal yet enforceable system. In DCB, communication channels *are* the site of rulemaking and enforcement.

Administrators moderate Zello dispatch channels: non-work content is redirected to designated groups; and repeat infractions trigger graduated sanctions (temporary expulsion; re-entry fees). Operational decisions (e.g., surge fares in Blumeter, activation points and police checkpoints) were established through administrative deliberation and communicated as pinned rules; members could appeal via administrative chats. Drivers described a consensus-first practice where rule changes were trialled and adjusted based on channel feedback. This underlines the framing of Zello/WhatsApp as governance mechanisms rather than mere communications tools. This structure also exemplifies 'heterarchy' (Chakravarthy & Henderson, 2007), balancing collaboration and authority in a somewhat horizontal formation. As noted by one of the interviewed drivers:

> Zello was a change because… one knows what the rules are and what happens if one has a problem… it turned the system into something more structured and fairer. ('Susana')

This emergent governance structure aligns with Ostrom's (2000, 2009, 2010b) observations about communities solving complex coordination problems through self-organisation. The drivers' ability to establish enforceable rules without relying on the state or formal organisations also demonstrates the emerging potential for collective action in digitally mediated spaces.

The Zello channel's rules, outlined in Figure 1, prohibited memes, unpaid commercial posts and disrespectful behaviour, with violations leading to expulsion and fines.

The rules translate to:

Figure 1. Sample of governance rules practised in the Zello channels.
Source: Provided by the interviewees during contact and online interviews in Bogotá.

'*Congratulations! You have been accepted into the largest support network in the city; your permanence in the group is subject to compliance with the following rules*:

- Memes, jokes, forwarded messages, and religious posts are not allowed. Only themes that are related to our work are allowed.
- Commercial publications on sales, workshops, carwash, etc., have a cost, which is channelled by the administrators.
- Our main report channel is Zello. Through WhatsApp, we will announce activation points.
- Any lack of respect or the use of foul language will be the cause of immediate expulsion. Any non-compliance with the norms will cause IMMEDIATE expulsion, and an economic penalty will be charged for being allowed back.'

Zello, in this case, transformed from a mere communication tool into a governance mechanism, fostering a structured organisation perceived as equitable due to collective oversight. With approximately 6,000 members, however, tensions arose as some drivers found the rules overly restrictive, clashing with the group's initial informality. This highlights the challenges of scaling informal governance while maintaining its grassroots ethos.

These tensions were most evident and increased in the case of PROTOURS, an initiative developed by the founders of DCB before the COVID-19 crisis. This idea

(PROTOURS) sought to formalise the organisation into a registered tourism transportation company. The founders, David' and 'Mauricio,' aimed to legitimise DCB by registering this informal organisation as a simplified stock company that would operate within legal parameters by leveraging a regulatory grey area in Colombian tourism transportation legislation. The latter would have, *de facto*, legalised the activities of DCB (Drivers Club Bogotá, 2022; Ministry of Commerce, 2020). As 'David' explained, 'The alternative to registering the company in the Bogotá Chamber of Commerce is to structure ourselves more conventionally and stop worrying about being caught by the police.'

However, this push toward internal formalisation directly conflicted with drivers' desires for autonomy. While the founders promoted PROTOURS as a path to greater legitimacy, promising better working conditions and digital payment options, drivers interpreted it as a threat to the very characteristics that made their platform valuable. As 'Mateo,' one of the drivers, expressed: 'I'm worried that the freedom and the flexibility, and that we are autonomous, and that we work together and each one on his own will be lost if we become a normal company.'

The resistance to PROTOURS revealed a fundamental conflict of rationalities between the founders' imported desire for formalisation and the drivers' attachment to their organisational creation. Drivers feared that formalisation would impose entry barriers (such as requiring newer vehicles), increase costs through taxation, and, most importantly, erode their community's hybridity and open characteristics. As 'Julian David' argued, 'I think our model is better since we work outside of that entire system… We are more competitive with our alternative.' Here, drivers resisted formalisation not because they reject rules, but because they prefer community-enforced rules over state-recognised compliance that would raise entry costs and reduce autonomy.

The evolution of the DCB reflects what organisational theorists call a process of spontaneous order, with no centralised planning or interventionism (Horwitz, 2001). As the organisation grew, it underwent a tension between maintaining its original horizontal structure and adopting more hierarchical elements (Chakravarthy & Henderson, 2007). This evolution aligns with the 'iron law of oligarchy' (Michels, 2019), which suggests that even the most democratic organisations inevitably develop hierarchical structures as they grow.

Yet, the widespread resistance to PROTOURS demonstrates that democratic structures can be more resilient than anticipated, particularly when members value autonomy above formalisation. The drivers' resistance to PROTOURS also exemplifies what Semán (2023) and Semán and Welschinger (2023) describe as emerging perceptions of social agency in post-pandemic scenarios, where workers openly criticise traditional economic relations in favour of more autonomous and 'liberating' arrangements.

In rejecting formalisation, drivers viewed regulation as a threat to their livelihoods. Another driver explained, 'If they legalise platforms… that will add many things, and many people will lose their jobs again… they will want newer cars, take our income for social security' ('Angelin'). This aligns with evasive entrepreneurial processes of actors innovating to bypass restrictive systems. However, unlike the individualistic framing often associated with this concept, DCB's response represents what Semán and

Welschinger (2023) and Ferro et al. (2024) have also identified as emerging forms of collective social agency in post-COVID-19-pandemic Latin America, where platform workers develop decentralised governance systems as alternatives to both state and corporate control.

Digital platforms as tools of coordination and resistance

During the COVID-19 lockdowns in Bogotá, the platforms used by DCB facilitated real-time coordination, outpacing corporate apps such as Uber, which were not very helpful to drivers. DCB members shared updates on road conditions whenever allowed to circulate (and sometimes even circulating without authorisation) and police activity, enhancing survival strategies. This technological adaptation proved crucial as mobility restrictions and police enforcement intensified during 2020, and access to income became scarce; therefore, the possibility of working outweighed the fear of both disease and sanctions.

Mutual aid via platforms also emerged, with drivers pooling resources and resisting harassment. Unlike Uber or DiDi, two-sided labour marketplaces designed to minimise lateral communication, WhatsApp and Zello are communication-first tools optimised for horizontal coordination. This functional non-equivalence clarifies that apps such as Uber are not always helpgful to drivers, whereas DCB's channels sustained real-time mutual aid and collective decision-making.

'Rocío' contrasted this with corporate platforms: 'The applications [referring here to Uber, DiDi and similars] are not interested in the wellbeing of drivers… with Zello, we help each other in Drivers [Club Bogotá],' underscoring empowerment through solidarity. This mutual support was particularly evident when drivers faced fines, vehicle confiscation, or other situations linked to the lack of regulation and lockdown-related restrictions. In these situations, the community would mobilise resources through their rescue 'cow' system (collaborative fund to raise money for recovering the car – 'Cow' in Spanish colloquial) – a communal fund to which members contributed small amounts regularly and could draw from in times of need, also mediated through WhatsApp. These practices align with what Anwar and Graham (2020) identify as workers developing strategies to leverage platform dependencies while asserting collective agency within the gig economy.

Drivers Club Bogotá's effectiveness in facilitating coordination and mutual aid starkly contrasted with the corporate ride-hailing platforms, which drivers described as impersonal and unresponsive to their needs. These findings challenge dominant narratives about platform economies, which often frame gig workers as atomised individuals competing in a digital marketplace rather than as potential communities of solidarity.

Exclusion from policy debates

Despite their significant economic role in urban mobility and their recognition that corporate platforms do not meet their expectations, ride-hailing drivers are, however, also sidelined in Colombia's national policy discussions on gig work. 'Andrés Felipe' remarked, reflecting his frustration with power imbalances rooted in institutional

corruption: 'All that *caste* of politicians has been bought, and for Uber and DiDi, it suits them to stay unregulated… at the end of the day, we only have ourselves.'

The drivers' use of the term 'caste' to describe political elites echoes emerging critiques across Latin America, where platform workers increasingly view traditional politics as captured by special interests and crony capitalism – a perspective that Ferro et al. (2024) have linked to the recent rise of contrarian and anti-establishment political inclinations, preferences and movements in the region. For example, evidence for this political realignment in the Colombian case can be found in the logic of the 2022 presidential election. In that election, left-wing populism confronted right-wing anti-politics, excluding the traditional centre-left and centre-right political establishment (Kajsiu, 2022; Torres Alfonso, 2023).

In the case of DCB, efforts from drivers to engage with the 'Greens' (centre-left) Party faltered, reinforcing distrust. 'David' (founder) noted, 'They told us they were interested… but it was not very clear if we were even invited to the commission and meeting…as citizens even'. This exclusion was not merely a matter of oversight but reflected deeper power dynamics in Colombian politics. Drivers perceived regulatory discussions as serving the interests of powerful actors (both multinational corporations and traditional taxi unions), rather than addressing their needs and realities. A history of corruption and institutional capture in Colombian governance reinforced this perception.

Proposed regulations, such as aligning ride-hailing with taxi standards, were deemed impractical by DCB members. 'Hugo' questioned, 'How is it that we are going to have to apply for another licence… pay more insurance if… compulsory insurance covers many things'? This exclusion and misalignment underscore the drivers' reliance on informal systems, as formal debates and potential regulations failed to reflect their realities. As Paredes and Vigiola (2024) argue, the systematic exclusion of gig workers from policy dialogues before and after COVID-19 has only perpetuated socioeconomic inequities and reinforced drivers' (and, by extension, citizens') distrust of formal institutions.

The emerging regulatory proposals, still not implemented, failed to recognise the alternative governance mechanisms that drivers had developed through DCB. Instead of acknowledging these grassroots innovations, policymakers approached regulation from top-down perspectives that either sought to ban ride-hailing services entirely or formalise them in ways that would undermine the drivers' autonomy (Congreso de Colombia, 2020, 2021). This finding highlights a significant disconnect between formal policy processes and the lived experiences of gig workers in Bogotá.

This policy disconnect also helps to explain and clarify the widespread resistance to PROTOURS discussed earlier. Much like government regulation, the founders' attempt to formalise DCB through a tourism transportation company challenged the heterarchical structure (Chakravarthy & Henderson, 2007) that drivers had created. As 'Julian David' argued, 'I think our model is better since we work outside that entire system… We are more competitive with our alternative.' This resistance demonstrates how drivers valued their hybridity precisely because it emerged from their lived experiences rather than being imposed from above – embodying the Alexander (1964, 2017)concept of 'fit–form –context,' where effective governance emerges from alignment with real local conditions.

The quest for autonomy

It was evident in this study that platform drivers prioritised autonomy, rejecting both state and corporate oversight. 'Juan Manuel' proposed a communal fund: 'We need someone to watch over us, but that cannot be the government or the "yellows" [colloquial way to refer to taxis in Colombia] union… why not make a social security "cow"?' This contrasts with Global North contexts, where unionisation is often sought, reflecting Colombia's distrust of corrupt unions. 'Angelin' scoffed: 'Imagine paying the salary… to one of those fat unionists for them to buy an apartment in the "*Mayamis*" [a colloquial way to refer to the city of Miami, Florida, in the United States of America].'

This contrast highlights the importance of context-specific analyses of platform economies rather than assuming universal patterns of worker mobilisation. In Latin America, where unions have historically been associated with corruption and clientelism (Bensusán & Santos, 2021; Bensusán-Areous, 2019), workers are looking for alternative forms of collective organisation that preserve their independence. This finding supports observations that in the Global South, platform work frequently represents one strategy within broader informal livelihood portfolios (Anwar & Graham, 2020; Chen, 2023).

Autonomy involved trade-offs, such as exposure to fines and police persecution, yet drivers remained steadfast. 'Federico' asserted, 'Platforms gave me freedom… if they regulate them, we'll stop having the freedom… Let us work in peace!' This fierce independence highlights their rejection of imposed structures, favouring self-governance rooted in local practices.

Finally, for many drivers, platform work and DCB also represented not just an economic necessity but a form of dignity and empowerment. 'Manuela' (driver) explained, 'The platforms and, especially, when I started with Drivers [Club Bogotá] to do all the passenger strategies… allowed me to go back home to see my daughter for lunch and to be able to pay and send her to private kindergarten… what the platform gave me was dignity.' This testimony highlights how the flexibility and autonomy afforded by platform work, particularly within the community structure of the DCB, enable workers to balance family responsibilities and achieve a sense of personal dignity often lacking in formal employment contexts (Hunt & Machingura, 2016).

Reimagining platform governance in the Global South

From fit–form–context to situated governance

Drivers Club Bogotá exemplifies the idea that the most effective structures emerge from the iterative alignment between form, for example, organisational arrangements, and context, or socio-political realities. Rather than being imposed from above, DCB's governance model – rooted in WhatsApp groups, Zello channels and informal mutual aid systems – arose through continuous adaptation to the drivers' lived realities. The result was a governance form that 'fit' the constraints, possibilities and aspirations of marginalised urban workers navigating informality and state absence.

This alignment is not incidental. As Alexander argued, systems that fail to emerge from context risk being alien or dysfunctional (Alexander, 1964, 2017). In the case of DCB, the attempt to formalise the group through PROTOURS, despite good intentions, was perceived as a rupture in this situated alignment, triggering resistance not because drivers opposed the organisation *per se*, but because the proposed form no longer reflected their shared values, rhythms, or autonomy. In this way, fit–form–context operates as a diagnostic tool: governance arrangements either evolve in synchrony with the social fabric or risk being rejected.

Post-COVID-19-pandemic agency and the rejection of traditional economies

The dynamic mentioned above also directly connects with what Semán (2023), Semán and Welschinger (2023) and Ferro et al. (2024) describe as the emergence of new social imaginaries and political agencies in post-COVID-19-pandemic Latin America. Workers are increasingly articulating critiques of both the state and the market – not from a place of abstraction, but from the very ground of survival. The case of DCB reflects an expanded perception of social agency, characterised by a growing capacity among precarious workers to construct alternatives to the failed promises of both neoliberal and socialist-statist paternalism and centralised, corporatist control.

In this light, DCB should not be viewed simply as a pragmatic workaround but rather as part of a broader reconfiguration of what work, autonomy and governance mean in the Global South. This reconfiguration signals a shift from stasis toward proposition. Rather than waiting for reform, workers are designing institutional forms that reflect their own needs, values and conceptions of dignity. The rescue 'cow,' the Zello rules and the rejection of traditional unions – these are not just survival tactics; they are forms of critique made material.

Autonomy, heterarchy and institutional distrust

Drivers Club Bogotá's heterarchical organisation (Chakravarthy & Henderson, 2007) illustrates how collaboration, mutual support and authority can coexist without relying on rigid hierarchies. The community's ability to enforce norms, embrace internal disputes and scale its operations – all while resisting formalisation – underscores the viability of alternative governance modes. These structures emerge not in a vacuum but within a context marked by deep institutional distrust, where unions are perceived as corrupt (Bensusán-Areous, 2019), and regulatory processes are viewed as serving the interests of elites or corporations (Mazzuca, 2021; Paredes & Vigiola, 2024).

This institutional distrust, however, has not resulted in atomisation. Instead, DCB demonstrates how shared distrust can catalyse solidarity. Platforms such as Zello became tools of both coordination and resistance, used not only to schedule rides but to track police checkpoints, raise emergency funds and enforce community norms. In contrast to the individualising logic of corporate gig platforms, this reappropriation of technology reveals the capacity of informal communities to produce order, fairness, and even care.

Beyond the state–market binary: Toward a partner state

This case invites us to rethink governance not as a top-down process of control or service delivery, but as a co-produced and evolving practice. Elinor Ostrom's (2010a, 2010b) work on collective action offers a valuable lens here: communities, when given the space, often develop robust systems for managing shared resources or coordinating labour, without state or market intermediaries.

In response, the partner state model (Bauwens & Kostakis, 2015; Pazaitis & Drechsler, 2020) offers a promising alternative here. Rather than seeking to formalise or dissolve informal innovations, this model suggests that governments should act as facilitators, supporting grassroots initiatives without absorbing or diluting their autonomy.

Informal innovation and the future of work

This study challenges both techno-optimistic and techno-dystopian framings of platform economies. While corporate platforms often exacerbate inequality, the DCB case demonstrates that platform technologies can also be repurposed to serve the goals of autonomy, care and resilience.

Ultimately, this study contributes to broader conversations about the future of work, specifically regarding the use of technology, by demonstrating how digital platforms, when embedded in supportive community structures, can foster not only income but also governance, agency and innovation. The challenge, then, is not to formalise these systems out of existence – but to learn from them, and to design governance models that are flexible enough to follow the wisdom of the street.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how Bogotá's ride-hailing drivers created an alternative governance model that challenges dominant assumptions about platform economies and platform labour. DCB represents neither mere adaptive survival nor a transitional phase toward formalisation, but a substantive alternative to both state regulation and corporate control. By transforming communication platforms into governance infrastructure, these drivers-built systems of mutual aid, pricing coordination, and rule enforcement that centre autonomy and dignity in contexts marked by institutional distrust and economic precarity.

These findings suggest a need to rethink how governments approach informal digital innovations. Rather than imposing conventional regulatory frameworks that drivers actively resist, policymakers should consider a 'partner state' approach that facilitates without formalising. Concretely, this could mean creating regulatory sandboxes where worker-led platforms operate with basic protections – recognising DCB's dispatch system as valid for insurance claims, allowing their pricing mechanisms to coexist with corporate platforms, or exempting their mutual aid funds from specific tax requirements. Such frameworks would acknowledge the governance capacity already present in these communities rather than assuming formal structures must replace it.

The DCB case also illustrates how platform technologies can become politicised when reappropriated by workers. This is not merely resistance to algorithmic control but the active construction of alternative forms of economic coordination. When drivers use Zello to enforce community standards or WhatsApp to mobilise emergency funds, they demonstrate that platform infrastructures can serve collective welfare rather than extractive logics. This pattern extends beyond Bogotá: Bargain-Darrigues and Schor (2025) identify similar 'Informal Matching Groups' operating through Facebook and WhatsApp for services from childcare to home repair, featuring organic scaling and non-extractive logics. Together, these cases suggest a third organisational form emerging in platform economies and labour: neither a corporate monopoly nor a traditional cooperative, but rather contextual, flexible and embedded in existing social relations.

Rather than treating informal governance as evidence of state failure, this research shows it as creative institutional innovation. The drivers navigating Bogotá's streets possess crucial knowledge about which governance structures work in conditions of precarity. Respecting this knowledge means moving beyond the formal–informal binary to recognise the plurality of ways that communities organise care, labour and survival. The lesson from DCB is clear: effective governance emerges not from imposing abstract models but from supporting the solutions that marginalised communities have already built for themselves.

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