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"I am against them, but I use them": a qualitative analysis of the social representations of e-consumption and platform economy

"Estoy en contra de ellas, pero las uso": un análisis cualitativo de las representaciones sociales del consumo electrónico y la economía de plataformas

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ABSTRACT

One of the most important challenges in the field of consumption is the impact of new forms of electronic commerce and other services linked to the so-called platform economy, where the consumer experience is strongly mediated by new technologies. Scholarly studies seem to point out that this trend seems unstoppable and has been further reinforced during the pandemic. However, there is not much research on these phenomena from a qualitative perspective that helps to better understand, from a sociological point of view, the existing social representations around this new digital consumption. This article tries to shed light on this topic by presenting the results of empirical research based on qualitative interviews with digital consumers in the Madrid region, conducted shortly before the pandemic.

Keywords: E-consumption, platforms, gig economy, social representations.

RESUMEN

Uno de los desafíos más importantes en el ámbito del consumo es el impacto de las nuevas formas de comercio electrónico y otros servicios vinculados a la llamada economía de plataformas, donde la experiencia del consumidor está fuertemente mediada por las nuevas tecnologías. Los estudios sobre consumo indican que esta tendencia parece imparable,

reforzada además durante este período de pandemia. Sin embargo, no hay demasiada investigación sobre estos fenómenos desde una perspectiva cualitativa que ayude a comprender mejor, desde un punto de vista sociológico, las representaciones sociales existentes en torno a este consumo digital. Este artículo trata de arrojar luz sobre este tema presentando los resultados de una investigación empírica basada en entrevistas cualitativas a consumidores digitales en la región de Madrid, realizadas poco antes de la pandemia.

Palabras clave: Consumo electrónico, plataformas, gig economy, representaciones sociales.

INTRODUCTION

The last decade has witnessed remarkable changes as regards consumption patterns and practices in Spain, associated with profound changes in the organisation of its consumer society. One of the phenomena which is most indicative of this transformation is the increasing impact of electronic or digital consumption. This form of consumption has steadily attracted more and more customers as the years have gone by, in a trend which would appear to be irreversible. The emergence of the platform economy, linked to new organisational, commercial and labour models which in turn are also related to the collaborative and 'gig economy' (see Acquier et al., 2017; Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017; Howcroft & Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2019; Zuboff, 2019; Alonso et al, 2020; Alonso & Fernández Rodríguez, 2021b), has involved the establishment of a new commercial channel. This channel has a number of specific characteristics which have completely overturned traditional consumer practices. For example, shopping via an electronic device and in many cases via a home delivery service has become commonplace among more and more sectors of the population, and the act of consumption has been re-signified. With the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic, these trends have become even more prevalent due to fears surrounding the disease and the need for social distancing (see Alonso & Fernández Rodríguez, 2021a). However, it is clear that even at the end of the last decade, the emergence of new platforms which provided specific services such as accommodation, private transport and home deliveries, together with the hegemony of global e-commerce giants (Amazon, Ali Baba), was already driving consumption patterns which were wholly new. This development had a huge social impact and is worth analysing.

The aim of this article is to explore the spaces where these new forms of consumption take place. This will in turn enable us to analyse the impact they have had on a series of urban, labour and productive transformations which have occurred in recent years and which have led to significant social concern with regard to issues such as rising housing prices and the poor working conditions associated with many of the jobs created in this new platform economy paradigm (see Fleming, 2017; Crouch, 2019; Gil, 2020). Furthermore, we wish to do so, in this case, by examining the perception that consumers had of these issues prior to the pandemic, the arrival of which obviously dramatically altered consumption patterns in Spain. Before the lockdowns and restrictions, e-commerce and/or digital commerce had already grown significantly in volume. It would thus be of great benefit to sociological consumer research to gain an in-depth understanding of how users would have described their consumption practices at the time, in order to recreate various digital consumer profiles. This information will be useful when it comes to placing digital consumption practices within a complex context (linked to a significant change in the status of work in society), thus helping us to understand the emerging social imaginary associated with these new practices. To this end, we have divided this paper into several sections. In the first section, we will present the context of the research and the methodology used therein, and in the following two sections we will outline the questions that were key to inspiring the research itself: firstly, what motivates consumers

to opt for this consumption channel, and secondly, what are the moral contradictions generated by its use once the impacts of these business models on the degradation of employment conditions are well known? The final section contains our conclusions.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

The context of this research is, as indicated in the introduction, Spanish consumer society, which has undergone remarkable changes in recent years. The extensive period of economic growth between the years 1995 and 2007 led not only to the creation of an enormous real estate bubble (Colectivo IOÉ, 2008; López & Rodríguez, 2010), but also to the establishment of a consumerist culture within the country (see Alonso & Fernández Rodríguez, 2009 and 2020; Barbeta-Viñas, 2022). However, the global financial crisis of 2008, the result of poor practices in the global financial sector, triggered an extraordinary recession in Spain, with huge repercussions for its economy (García & Ruesga, 2014; Buendía, 2020). The massive increase in unemployment, the dramatic restrictions on credit, the subsequent public debt crisis and the severe social cutbacks under the policies of austerity which ensued had a considerable impact in the form of reducing household budgets and curbing the desire to consume (Alonso, Fernández Rodríguez & Ibáñez Rojo, 2015). They also engendered a certain pessimism within Spanish society regarding its future (Callejo & Ramos, 2017), as well as social unrest, reflected in new protest movements and the emergence of new political parties which have sought to capitalise on this unrest (Lobera, 2015).

In the latter half of the previous decade, we began to see a recovery in GDP, albeit against a new backdrop. The social inequality resulting from the crisis was not remedied, and this coincided with the dramatic proliferation of new models in the economy associated with Industry 4.0 and the new electronic platforms that would radically alter existing paradigms of work and consumption (Lahera Sánchez, 2021; Alonso & Fernández Rodríguez, 2021b; Martínez Lucio et al., 2021). Certain elements of the post-crisis context thus remained in place during this period, such as very high structural unemployment, moderation in public finances and a labour market characterised by low wages. However, a new niche which was emerging in the economy began to shake up traditional sectors, bringing about structural changes in areas such as taxi services and home delivery, as well as transformations in terms of skilled jobs (Álvarez-Hernández & Pérez-Zapata, 2021). While the response to the pandemic by both European and Spanish authorities was very different (with a more decisive intervention by the state and European institutions in favour of maintaining employment, promoting models such as the ERTEs [*Expedientes de Regulación Temporal de Empleo* - Temporary Redundancy Proceedings] and a more ambitious rescue package, as well as allowing greater margins of budget flexibility in European governance), it does not seem to have altered, at least significantly, this post-crisis scenario; rather, it appears that new uncertainties related to events such as the war in Ukraine have led to it enduring. Moreover, if any new development has become established since then, it is of course the phenomenon of the platform economy, as we will discuss below.

The de facto emergence of a new model of a collaborative economy took place in Spain around 2010-2014, when the first effects began to be felt. As in the rest of the world, the first experiences were based on the slogan "what's mine is yours" (Botsman & Rodgers, 2010: for a critical reading see De Rivera & Gordo, 2020). However, the truth is that this was soon replaced by a more commercial approach which was in keeping with the principles of the harshest neoliberalism (Martin, 2016) in which "what's yours is mine" (Slee, 2015). Although the basis for a number of these platforms was the principle of solidarity and the sharing of scarce resources (Heinrichs, 2013; McArthur, 2015), the fact is that a section of this complex sector has shifted towards a perspective centred on the exclusive pursuit of financial gain (Schor, 2016; Vallas & Schor, 2020). The platform economy became

established as a model once it adopted this purely market-oriented perspective, even if some purely collaborative models remain. In any case, the popularisation of this new economic model has had extraordinarily disruptive effects in terms of new consumption patterns (Alonso et al., 2020; Brändle & Latorre, 2020) and new forms of work organisation (Fleming, 2017; Álvarez-Hernández & Pérez-Zapata, 2021; Fernández-Trujillo Moares, 2020; Revilla & Blázquez, 2021), as well as indirectly in other areas affected by these platforms, such as the housing market (Gil, 2020; Fernández-Trujillo Moares & Gil García, 2021). In the case of Spain, a series of conflicts have arisen in recent years relating to this new consumption model, and these have been reported on in the press: historic rises in rent due to the growth in tourist accommodation, which also represents new competition for the hotel sector; conflicts between the taxi sector and its new competitors (resulting in strikes and some public disorder); the growth of hyper-flexibility, labour exploitation and the violation of labour and trade union rights in the online commerce sector and certain platforms, with well-known cases such as the Amazon warehouse workers or the case of riders for companies such as Glovo and Deliveroo in large cities; and the impact of these new platforms on the operating accounts of traditional trade, not only in the case of small shops but also large retail outlets.

To understand the growing impact of companies operating within the platform economy, we also need to understand their strategies. These companies, which have achieved total hegemony in some areas (for example, Amazon, Airbnb, Cabify, Glovo, etc.), are portrayed as mere intermediaries between consumers and producers/suppliers of products and services. It is therefore ironic that they actually operate as de facto monopolies or, at most, oligopolies, with few competitors given the enormous entry costs (which are mainly related to needing to achieve visibility among a consumer audience overloaded with information). The platform economy focuses mostly on on-demand services, where it has the potential and ability to exploit a number of "calculative asymmetries" (Shapiro, 2020) which place platforms in a specific position of power (because they have real and immediate knowledge of preferences, appraisals and actual transactions on the platform) vis-à-vis the other participants in the transaction conducted on the platform's computer architecture. Each online transaction generates a digital footprint which is transformed into data which, when aggregated with data from other transactions within the platform, generates an absolutely extraordinary volume of information. This information can then be exploited for commercial purposes, market research and consumer profiling, allowing companies to categorise consumers and to offer them services and products which are more closely tailored to their specific needs (Fourcade & Healy, 2017). How can the large amount of information that emerges in these processes be adequately managed? Through the use of algorithms, which are key to the culture of our digital age (Gillespie, 2014; Pasquale, 2015; Striphas, 2015). An algorithm can be defined as a mathematical programming which is aimed at determining consumer profiles and consumption patterns based on the aggregation of data generated by the digital footprint of consumers (Alonso & Fernández Rodríguez, 2021b). Its impact on the construction of the platform economy is crucial, as it contributes to a remarkable sophistication of both marketing and customer service strategies aimed at personalising the consumer experience. These strategies are used to guide the purchasing process based on accessing sensitive information such as reviews and ratings, histories, comparisons, related products and services, all culled from the digital trail left by the digital consumer as they wander through large internet portals (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Wood et al., 2019).

The new forms of consumption associated with this new economy thus have a series of specific characteristics which distinguish them from previous experiences, and which we have explained in previous publications (Alonso et al., 2020; Alonso & Fernández Rodríguez, 2021b). The internet emerged as the new and increasingly prominent channel that gives us access to a market characterised by limitless abundance. This trend has, in purely quantitative terms, been unstoppable over the last decade: according to Eurostat statistics, the percentage of people who had shopped online in the previous twelve months in Spain rose from 22% in 2009 (where 32% was the average among the

27 EU countries) to 58% in 2019 (60% in the EU) (see Eurostat, 2022). This new type of consumption emphasises the availability of a huge catalogue of products and services at the click of a button, eliminating physical and geographical barriers to their access and use. This is the "death of distance" predicted by a number of authors (Cairncross, 1997), and one of its distinguishing features is the perceived immediacy of the consumer experience: many of the products and services of the platform economy are delivered at high speed (sometimes even on the same day, if a particular premium is paid). This significantly reinforces the consumer's perception that practically all of their desires can be satisfied immediately, strengthening a *habitus* of hyper-consumerism which is electronically isolated from all events outside virtual reality, and creating an image of maximum personalisation and mastery of the world of networks on the part of the buyer (Alonso & Fernández Rodríguez, 2021b). The large platforms have the resources to satisfy these infinite desires and needs: on the one hand, they have the technical and capitalisation capacities to handle countless economic transactions, as they have unlimited labour, financial and technological resources which enable them to maintain a 24-hour business operation; they have the power to reduce downtime and waiting times thanks to innovations in their applications (which allow for direct mediation between consumers and producers, thus exercising a certain control over the latter); and they have the logistical infrastructure to facilitate home delivery. Moreover, all e-commerce transactions leave the aforementioned digital footprint, which will form the basis of data that will serve to enable the personalisation of marketing and sales strategies (Alonso et al., 2020). One aspect of particular interest is that these new applications allow users to review the goods and services they have consumed. These reviews are hugely important, and not only as a guide for other consumers who, based on these comments, will decide whether or not to purchase the product (Cohn, 2019). Most significantly, reviews of the service received act as a key means of regulating the behaviours and practices of workers involved in the provision of these services in the platform economy (Fleming, 2017). This has a major impact on workers who are employed in this sector, many of whom are self-employed, as they need to make a significant effort to provide the customer with a satisfactory service. This in turn leads to strict management of themselves and their skills, with varying degrees of use of their personal brand or, at least, of obtaining sufficiently positive reviews to ensure they are not left out of the algorithm. Drivers, riders, couriers and other workers have to adapt to particular dynamics in the context of these platforms that favour the most business minded. They are inevitably obliged to make themselves available 24/7 so as to be able to provide the hyper-flexibility that is crucial to this very particular process of interaction between work and consumption. This puts immense pressure on employees in this sector, who have to deal with highly erratic workloads (sometimes very heavy, sometimes very light) and strict deadlines for the completion of tasks, which are in turn often organised according to a demanding and intense just-in-time schedule (Moore, 2017; Huws et al., 2018; Crouch, 2019).

In the research work presented here, we will analyse the results of the qualitative empirical research carried out based on interviews with digital consumers in the Madrid region during the months of June and July 2018. A total of fifteen interviews were conducted with people who were selected on the basis of their level of online consumption (i.e., the frequency of their purchases), income level, age (restricted to the 25-56 age range, as in Spain in the pre-pandemic period this experience was mostly confined to these age groups) and gender. The sample is exploratory in nature and assumes that, in this case, regional differences would not be particularly significant for the purposes of the analysis. Due to the restricted nature of the sample, it was also considered best to homogenise (relatively speaking) age profiles, focusing as much as possible on interviewees aged between 30 and 50 to ensure that we could get a sense of the personal history of digitalisation. Finally, and given the purposes of the research, heterogeneity was introduced not so much through class profiles as through type and frequency of online consumption. This obviously hinders our ability to analyse experiences according to the socio-economic status of the interviewees, something that will have to be set aside for further research. The table below provides an overview of the profiles of the interviewees:

Table 1. Interviewee profiles.

Interview	Profile	Frequent digital consumption
E01	Male, 41 years old	Transport
E02	Male, 29 years old	Trade
E03	Male, 30 years old	Trade
E04	Female, 42 years old	Transport
E05	Male, 30 years old	Restaurants
E06	Female, 47 years old	Transport
E07	Female, 48 years old	Restaurants
E08	Male, 32 years old	Transport
E09	Male, 40 years old	Restaurants
E10	Male, 41 years old	Trade
E11	Female, 56 years old	Trade
E12	Female, 36 years old	Trade
E13	Female, 38 years old	Restaurants
E14	Male, 48 years old	Transport
E15	Female, 36 years old	Trade

Interviewees were asked about a number of things, such as their relationship with the new technologies, how often they use apps and internet platforms, their interactions with riders and other employees, and their general opinion as regards this new economic model. The conversations lasted between an hour and an hour and a half and were conducted following the basic rules of qualitative interviewing (see Vallés, 2009; Alonso, 2016). All the interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed and they were analysed following the principles of socio-hermeneutic analysis to which the authors of this paper have traditionally adhered and which we have used throughout our previous research (for example, see Alonso et al., 2015, 2016 and 2017). In the following sections, we will present some of the main findings of this research, focusing primarily on two aspects.

MOTIVATIONS: THE PURSUIT OF CONVENIENCE

As noted above, interviewees were selected and contacted based on the fact that they were online consumers of different products and services. Moreover, it became clear from the interviews that they were very familiar with what the internet can offer them as a consumption channel. In fact, many of the interviewees described themselves as regular users of the internet and said that they carry out transactions in areas such as banking and taxation via digital platforms, and that they have not visited government or bank offices for many years. The internet shapes their lives, as it is essential for their jobs (some of the interviewees were IT consultants, people who worked remotely or people who teleworked) and their social lives (many of them have profiles on social networks). In general, they make significant use of e-commerce platforms and large e-commerce shops. Almost all the interviewees said that they were regular customers of the famous e-commerce portal Amazon (some had also bought products on other platforms such as the Chinese retail service AliExpress), where they shop with varying degrees of frequency. Some of them also stated that they use food delivery services (citing companies such as Deliveroo, Just Eat and Glovo) or private transport services such as Uber or Cabify as

an alternative to taxis. The conversations also included references to numerous other applications which the interviewees use in their daily lives to access certain products or services, with the most frequently mentioned being Airbnb for accommodation, Blablacar for sporadic travel within Spain, and Wallapop for buying and selling second-hand goods. In terms of purchasing products and services, the interviewees said that they mainly buy low-cost electronic products, preferring to go to a physical shop if they need to buy a piece of equipment of a certain value. Purchases of various non-perishable goods (e.g., make-up, car accessories) were also mentioned. E-commerce has become their first choice for buying almost anything:

> My first choice, before going down to the local Chinese shop, unless it's urgent, but yes. One of the first things I do is look on the internet, and in fact for cheap things too, but…well, for me, maybe €20 isn't so cheap, so I would compare it with Amazon and see if it's better value…if I save €5. Although sometimes it's not just to save money: sometimes it's because they deliver it to my home. (E2)

> Except for household products and fresh produce, whenever I can get it online, I usually do. (E13)

> I have bought…, for example, a projector…, what else…one of those smart TV boxes, a robot…, things…, household utensils, a cleaning robot, and kitchen appliances, for example, oil-free fryers, mobile phones as well. (E11)

> In online shops it's usually for technology. But I have also bought clothes, shoes…, and it's usually technology: mobile phones…; parts for mobile phones, cases, etc.; wireless mice, I don't know. (E10)

> While you're there, you take advantage of it (laughs), as I say, "you fill the cart". (E5)

In almost all cases, the interviewees described their progressive access to different forms of online consumption as a natural and mostly smooth process. As one would guess from their age profile, the interviewers had begun using computers and the internet at an early stage for day-to-day business (several of them specifically mentioned access to online banking and various official procedures), and they even used to buy online from e-commerce portals when they were only distributing from abroad. The role played by Amazon in memories of their first experiences of electronic consumption is significant, especially what it represents in terms of making this new consumer habit normal. In this regard, the e-commerce giant plays a symbolic central role in the normalisation of online shopping. Although certain people embraced online shopping early on as a way to purchase books, records and games, for those who came later, Amazon represented trust and security, and was able to combine all of the characteristics which are key to explaining the basic motivations driving online shopping. In our interviewees' accounts of their experiences, the term that encapsulates these different motivations is convenience. Nevertheless, it is worth spending a little time identifying and analysing the different facets contained within this notion, which are almost always described by the interviewees in terms of the particular features of Amazon.

The most significant feature is perhaps the security that it projects in the consumer's imagination. The shopping experience is risk-free, both from the point of view of personal data and because returning items is simple. None of the interviewees recall having had any negative experiences. However, another significant aspect is Amazon's ability to function as a virtual shop window, very similar to a search engine. Although the interviewees say that they search for products on Google first, they are immediately taken to Amazon because it contains all the possible variations of the same product:

> Yes, a bit, yes. It's interesting, I don't know if it's in Spain or worldwide. I think it's in Spain that there are more product searches on Amazon than Google. Of course, when people want something, they go to Amazon and they have more searches. It's very interesting. (E14)

No, I think it's more to do with variety. Above all, variety. I don't know, right now I'm looking at backpacks for the children's nursery and you go to a shop and they have two backpacks, but I go on here and I see a hundred thousand, so it seems to me to be like a big shop window. It's super convenient, where you see 14,000 models and…, I find it very useful. (E15)

This allows Amazon to create the impression of maximum efficiency in the purchasing decision, by providing virtually all possible options for each product, and an accurate assessment of their features and the differences between each of them. While it is not uncommon for some consumers to show a preference for being able to touch and try on products, it is no less true that Amazon is able to convey the user experience of the product through shoppers' ratings and reviews:

Of course. Sometimes I've done that too. That is to say, I see that… for example, with the GPS, it's true that I went to the Corte Inglés [a Spanish department store] to see it, or when I want to buy a mobile. Well, I went to the shop…, because now we're also thinking of buying an iPad; so it's true that I went to FNAC [a French retail chain with a presence in Spain] or the Corte Inglés to see it physically. Like I know what an iPad is like, but it's more or less that you go the shop…, and then you go online. And if you find it cheaper on the internet, for whatever reason, on a trusted website, yes, I'd buy it. (E05)

The convenience of home access has meant that price competition has become a secondary consideration in certain cases. Either because of the time saved, or because consumers prefer to avoid physical interaction ("going to a shop is uncomfortable for me. I find it a drag", as E04 claims), platforms such as Amazon attract consumers because of the feeling of *sovereignty* and control they get when they are in front of a screen and the entire consumer interface is immediately available to them:

The price and the convenience. Doing it from home, that's what it is. But it's true that it's almost always because of the price and the range of options as well. In the end, at the beginning I looked at prices more and then when I discovered that Amazon was the cheapest, I almost didn't look at all. But that's it, the range of options, they really have almost everything. But yeah, price and convenience, and in that order too. (E06)

Of course. You can find the same thing in a hundred thousand different formats. I don't think the price varies that much either, it doesn't seem as cheap as in the shop, but there are a lot more options. (E15)

Therefore, in discourse concerning the experience and evolution of online consumption, Amazon always occupies a central place. However, in many cases it continues to occupy the same space as the street market, i.e., the place you go to buy products which are "Cheap, economical… you spend maybe 20, 50, 60, at most 70 euro, but to buy something expensive I go to a physical shop or to the brand's official platform" (E09). Although the narrative of calculation and efficiency in the selection of products on the basis of concrete needs predominates, the fact is that practically the only negative experience reported by interviewees has to do with the way compulsive buying can be encouraged. Several interviewees describe a time when they had to take a step back from online shopping precisely because of the ease of access to a myriad of cheap products:

Yes, because there came a time when it got a bit out of hand. I said: "this… it has to stop". It's really crazy because they have all kinds of brands and all kinds of products at half price and of course, you go nuts. You go in and you start to see dresses at €5, pans at €5. I mean, it's not that I buy a lot of pans, but when you need pans, you go in there to poke around and see if they have any. And there came a time when I was receiving packages every month, twice per month, and I decided it was starting to get a bit unhealthy, because I don't really need to buy so many things. (E04)

While this may be largely due to the particular characteristics of our sample, online consumption of culture is not particularly significant: only a few of the interviewees said they bought books and only one cited sporadic purchases of music. A number of interviewees said that, at the time, they had started to buy food online (not from Amazon, but from grocery shops such as Mercadona and Carrefour). As regards buying clothes online, the replies varied: some do so but others prefer not to. Nonetheless, some interviewees admitted to trying on clothes in physical shops and then buying them online:

> You go and have a look at it and if it convinces you in physical form, you take the leap and buy it online. (E5)

> I have unintentionally become a Prime customer. I pay €20 a year, so I'm enjoying…, not enjoying, I'm taking advantage of a service that I paid for. So, things that I see in the shop I then look for online. (E12)

A number of interviewees described themselves as users of food delivery services (Glovo and Just Eat in particular):

> Yes, yes. Because although I like cooking, sometimes a friend comes over and we're like: "come on, let's order in", and we use the Burger King app. I also have the Rodilla [a Spanish food company] app. Well, I have a few of them because as well as cooking, we like junk food (laughs). (E15)

In terms of transport platforms, freelance professionals seemed to be more inclined to use Uber/Cabify rather than taxis. As one interviewee points out, "…if I'm working in Alcobendas, to come here, if I'm really tired, I take a…, and Uber and Cabify drivers generally don't try to chat with you, which I know sounds terrible, but when you're so tired or you're thinking: 'today the project has to go well', maybe you don't want to chat" (E8). In any case, having more options to choose from is seen as an advantage:

> I'm neither pro-taxi, nor pro-Uber, nor pro-Cabify; I don't care. It's a service that I believe has to coexist and that's there to cater for everyone and for them to make a living. Whoever gives me the best service, that's where I go…, it's sad, but that's the way it is. (E4)

Most of the interviewees said that ease and convenience were the main reasons for their online consumption. They made particular mention of the fact that you can avoid queues, you do not have to travel to the city centre, and, above all, you can receive the product at home almost immediately. Thus, reference is made to the convenience of having things delivered to your home:

> The price. Also, the fact that they bring it to me so that I don't have to go looking for it, because in the end, Madrid has everything, but that's it, the distances. I want it in my house and they bring it to me. (E02)

> The whole idea of going shopping in the mall makes me anxious, it makes me feel uneasy. So, if I can buy my shoes from home and I don't have to try on seven different pairs… pfff, it's a huge weight off my mind. (E03)

> …we live in a society in which we're very busy with work, when it comes to…, we're very convenience-oriented. When you want to get something to eat but you don't want to get the kitchen dirty…, you'll have to tidy up after, so you don't bother. What I said before, when it comes to shopping; if, at the click of a button, they can bring a book to your home and you don't have to go to the shop to buy it, it takes you a while. If you like doing that, fine. But I couldn't be bothered…, so I order it and they bring it to me. We're very convenience-oriented, and we're becoming more so. (E07)

Some interviewees (those who do the most online shopping) said that reviews were another of the main reasons, and not so much price, which rarely appeared as a decisive variable in the purchase. Others pointed to the availability of very specific products,

which were not available in shopping centres or shops, as a reason for using Amazon and other sites. There are no substantial gender differences in terms of the various forms of consumption, and the interviewees consider their consumption via this channel to be moderate. However, they occasionally worry that it may lead to a certain addiction to shopping and a tendency towards hyper-consumption:

> I think it's rampant consumerism; it's buy, buy, buy. Because you don't come home carrying a huge weight, you don't realise what you're buying. (E12)

> Yes, especially young people. Young people. Me, for example, I have nephews and nieces who order deliveries, well, not every day but almost every second or third day. (E7)

There is broad agreement that online shopping represents the future of consumption, and that this model of the platform economy will not only remain, rather it will dominate. This will occur at the expense of a physical commerce which is already in crisis and whose only chance for salvation lies in catering to certain specialised niches (for example, vinyl shops) or in the form of large shopping centres. The imaginary of future consumption will be based on an acceptance of the inevitability of technological progress:

> Not right at the moment, but I do see my daughter buying Fairy via a website. I don't, for example, but my eldest daughter, I know she buys Fairy online because she doesn't go to the shop to buy it. Yes, I see her doing it. (E7)

> We're going to end up buying everything online because that's how you get the best deal, as long as you know how to look for it, of course, and it's the most convenient and fastest as regards delivery... (E9)

> Using drones. What most people buy fits in small parcels, so they'll be delivered via drones. It'll come directly to your window, you'll stick your hand out and plop! (E9)

MORAL CONFLICTS IN RELATION TO ONLINE CONSUMPTION

Some of the interviewees (mainly the more knowledgeable ones) were aware of the ethical implications of certain of the practices of the new platform economy, especially given the track record of some of these companies with regard to labour issues. They were well informed with regard to the various conflicts (at the time of the interviews protests by riders, and a number of strikes at Amazon's production plants, were taking place). They saw the labour model of some of these platform economy companies as a paradigmatic example of contemporary exploitation:

> You see the person who delivered it to us, sweating because he had left his bike downstairs in the doorway and almost died after having cycled so many kilometres and climbed four floors, well... we decided, well, I personally decided that I don't think this form of transport is ethical. They also pay them badly, they hire and fire them at will... (E4)

> In my opinion, it's like a new form of slavery. In some respects, it's like a new form of slavery. (E13)

Generally speaking, however, interviewees were unable to identify limits to current consumption practices. Narratives regarding technological development continue to feed the idea that current changes are part of an unstoppable process, a process which will follow its own evolutionary course regardless of material limits and the social conflicts it may generate. In fact, the material and ecological impact of these new forms of consumption does not come up unbidden in the interviews. No mention is made, for example, of the impact in terms of logistics and transport that these new habits could be having on the environment. This is in line with the general perception identified in

other research, i.e., that consumer discourse very rarely recognises the environmental consequences of consumption via the internet (Elgaaied-Gambier et al, 2020). It is only the labour and social issues that are mentioned, and only in some interviews, although it should be borne in mind that during the months in which the fieldwork was carried out, there was considerable media coverage being given to various labour conflicts related both to Amazon (successive strikes in its logistics centres) and to the situation of the riders. Moreover, conflict surrounding the regulation of taxis and private hire vehicles was already a regular news item. This often highlighted the ethical conflicts, and the relative sense of guilt as regards how advantages for the consumer can often result in disadvantages for the worker:

> Yes, that's where… yes, of course. If it's cheaper for me, it means that someone is being paid too little, right? […]

> Anyway, it's just that sometimes you think about these things and sometimes you don't. For convenience; you value convenience more than people's dignity (laughs). (E04)

> Of course. If you don't feel conflicted, you're a fool. Yes, yes. Life is complicated, but at least keep it in mind. Put simply: the rights of the consumer are all very well, but you also need to think about the rights of the worker and of the people who provide you with the service. You look at the experience and you have to know under what conditions it is produced, not just: "Oh, it's so convenient!" Yeah, but…, it's something that I do consider, doing what I can. (E8)

> That's where the problems are, but of course. I feel a bit guilty sometimes, but it's true that, if it's much cheaper and the terms and conditions are better, it's difficult to say: "I'm going to spend the money here in the corner shop". (E10)

In any case, however, these boundaries are interpreted as a kind of pressure that can only alter or slow down what is an ongoing structural trend:

> They're not going to allow it to be regulated. If normal employment is being made more precarious, they're not going to allow it to be… They'll standardise it, but they'll still be earning shit money. Maybe they'll manage to have hours…, well, it's a personal opinion, I'm not a fortune teller, but maybe they'll manage to have more decent or more reasonable working hours, but they're not going to raise anyone's wages anymore. That's the trend, that's what's happening in the USA, in Europe, in Russia, that's what's happening. (E04)

This tendency to describe it as "that's what's happening", as if it is something which cannot be stopped, helps to make the ordinary citizen feel less responsible for the consequences of his or her actions. In fact, when asked about potential developments in electronic consumption, all those interviewed imagined an expansionary trend and a growing generalisation of these new habits. Only in some cases, in a more critical discourse, does this evolution at least make clear the collective paradoxes to be faced. In these cases, interviewees even foresee a possible collapse, a future marked by social conflict:

> But obviously, there's a conflict, which I think many people experience, between the drive for what is cheap, easy, accessible, for variety, etc.; and, on the other hand, the awareness of working conditions which are deteriorating rapidly. I'm one of those who think that, in the long term, as a system, it has no future. But of course, this is a very rapid collapse of working conditions that…, worries me a lot. […]

> Yes, delivery vans for everything in general. And I think it's all going to go that way, but it's normal, because obviously, what we were talking about before, I don't know what balance there's going to be here. In other words, what salaries are going to allow us to sustain this consumption, of products produced outside Spain, by salaries of people who no longer work. You can no longer say that those who manufacture this buy other products; almost none of this is manufactured in Spain, but people from Spain have to buy it. (E10)

There is a general perception that people are aware of this situation and of these contradictions, but this does not alter their behaviour. The practical, material distance between individual consumption habits and the social dynamics and relations that they require (from the point of view of the social organisation of production) allows people to avoid taking responsibility and means that a logic based purely on the survival of the fittest dominates:

> …a lot of people think that Amazon is going to bring about the end of all other shops and yet they still shop on Amazon. (E1)

> It's my personal opinion, but it's true that…, well, I think it's a bit…, if they go in one direction, they'll have to make cutbacks somewhere else; as my father used to say: "nobody gives a penny for a nickel" (laughs). (E05)

> We know what's happening. Even more so today, with all the social networks, and we know what the working conditions of these people are like. But are we going to stop buying from them? I don't think so. (E12)

At the same time, this adaptationist stance underpins the fact that the current situation, where awareness of the social and ecological limitations of our model of consumption is becoming dramatically embedded in everyday life, has a very modest impact as regards changing consumption habits. The self-destructive drive seems to fuel an argument that accepts with a certain cynicism the increasingly obvious contradictions between our needs as a society and our desires (and needs) as individualised consumers. This is not simply an offensive cynicism of a classical liberal kind (we all look out for our own interest; if I don't do it, others will) (Odou and de Pechpeyrou 2011), but rather a cynicism based on moral relativism, which assumes a certain self-criticism, but at the same time avoids the anguish of guilt. Moreover, this precarious balance, which involves a contradictory discourse, is only sustained, as is usually the case in social discourses regarding consumption, through the depoliticisation of any discussion of basic or collective needs and the impossibility of proposing alternatives to the general model of capitalist development (although for the interviewees themselves, this development is evidently self-destructive).[1] Thus, in some cases, the systematic use of e-commerce is justified simply by the belief that the market model cannot be changed:

> Let's see. I feel bad about it, but I'm not… I don't have strong feelings on the subject. It's true that if someone comes up to me and tells me about it, it'd make me more aware and it'd make me feel really bad, but… in the end it's as if, I don't shop at Zara because a black child in Africa made it for me… (E2)

> What they told me about JustEat and Deliveroo was so fucking bad, excuse the expression, that it was like…: "I don't like this…, I don't like it…, I'm not going to use it as much, I think it's shit!"; and then you also say: "How can it be the guy's fault that he had to take that job and that's probably his only income?" We come back to the same thing, there's no perfect way to… (E8)

> The funniest thing is that I'm sure the people who work these jobs get home after work and order things online. So, it's like a snowball, which I might criticise, I don't know, I defend traditional retail trade, but I go home and I buy something online. But the snowball has become so big that we can't fight against it; we can, but on a small scale. (E12)

Given this absence of alternatives, the resistance to engaging in particular consumption practices that we can glean from our interviews stems from direct knowledge (or via people we know) of the working conditions under which certain platforms operate. Rather than leading to a global rethink, such knowledge or personal experience can result in a partial boycott, but one that maintains online shopping patterns on other platforms. It

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1 Perhaps it could be argued, following authors such as Jappe (2019) or Sadin (2022), that this relativism is at the service of the individual themselves, who acts as a tyrant in a market that is the only institution capable of fulfilling the desires of subjects characterised by a hyperbolic narcissism.

is easy to understand resistance to using Uber or Cabify among people who have family members working in the taxi sector, or resistance to buying through Glovo among people who, for whatever reason, are familiar with the riders' working conditions.

> …the Uber and Cabify thing is the same; I have two cousins who are taxi drivers and they tell me stories about those two companies, that they don't pay for licences, that they don't respect shifts, right? There are some issues that like I see my cousins killing themselves in their taxis, so it'd be difficult for me to use those two companies to… well, I'd think more about the consequences of it. (E3)

> Yeah. I have a friend who was working there. I asked twice and I don't know if…, I think one at Deliveroo and one at JustEat, and I think he was working at both of them. […] he told me about the working conditions, and I found them so appalling that I uninstalled them and I haven't used them since. (E08)

> Yes, yes. When I was young, I worked as a pizza delivery boy and, damn it, I have a certain awareness regarding certain sectors of the labour market and, seeing the conditions they were working under, working as so-called "freelance workers", killing themselves on their bikes without even being assured of a day's work. It makes me think twice. (E10)

In this regard, and as we have sought to highlight above, the pivotal ideological role which Amazon occupies is highly significant. Its own corporate power represents the power of this inexorable trend which underpins the expansion of e-commerce. At the same time, its size (both actual and symbolic) enables the dilution of responsibility and the consequences of individual acts. On the other hand, looking at Amazon's own development as a corporation allows us to retrace the evolution of these new consumer practices both in general and individual terms. Most of the interviewees remember the first purchases they made through Amazon, but more importantly, the habit was established and developed by means of its website or app. They can thus also use the Amazon empire to represent the future of a dystopian city full of vans and drones continuously transporting all kinds of consumer goods.

CONCLUSIONS

The interviews with consumers of different types make it clear that the last few years have seen significant changes in terms of consumption within Spanish society. At the time these interviews were carried out, online consumption had already been widely embraced, at least in the context of a large city such as Madrid and its surroundings. Most of the interviewees argued that this is mainly due to changes in work practices: instead of the fixed working hours we had in the past, we now have flexible working hours. Many of them complained that they do not have much free time and therefore need to shop online.

However, the role of desire should not be overlooked. Fast delivery and infinite product availability are key factors in the shift towards online shopping. The creation of a digital consumer, individualised to the maximum and modelled almost down to the millimetre by a range of products governed by algorithms, is the clearest contemporary expression of a representation of acquisitive desire which is imposed in a compulsive manner over and above any form of collective reasoning or conscious addressing of social needs (Alonso and Fernández Rodríguez, 2021b). The world of online commerce operates within a constellation of social representations which render it a comprehensive social phenomenon with the capacity to materially and symbolically permeate everyday life, deploying a long list of associated concepts which are widely accepted by the public: the way in which it is complemented by what are known as social networks; the success of the forms of recommendation via YouTubers and influencers; the idea of inevitability and

progress, the supposed power of the buyer-decision-maker; how it fits in with modern life; its contribution to general wellbeing and the formation of images of acceptable practices and bodies.

The absolute hegemony of large supranational platforms such as Amazon and the image of consumption they project leads to the creation of what the classic critical thinker Ivan Illich (2006: 347) called a radical monopoly. This refers to a monopolistic situation derived not so much from the position of a specific company or product, but from the control induced by a commercial system that not only fixes prices, but is able to induce, modify or radically construct the lifestyles and daily habits of large population groups, restricting their options, reducing the diversity and autonomy of the social, as well as hiding or delegitimising any way of life that occurs outside this commercial system. This way of shaping life based on the market offering makes any potential competition disappear and converts what is a strategy of maximum business performance into a condition of inclusion and social normality (Sadin, 2018). The platform economy is thus perceived in our interviews as natural and powerful, as a way of life from which it is now impossible to disengage or withdraw except at the cost of significant social disconnection.

In many of the interviews, however, the issue of the poor quality of the jobs associated with the platform economy comes up frequently. This is not without difficulty, however, as it involves overcoming the implicit censorship of the dominant discourse of modernity and the inevitability of positive and functional electronic consumption. The hegemonic tendency to view the gig economy from the point of view of the satisfied consumer and the technological superiority of online shopping does not succeed in obscuring the labour costs of this model of procurement and distribution; costs and abuses that most often come to light through the accounts of friends, family members or even personal experience of poor working conditions in delivery services or in the logistics sector in general. Thus, the accounts of our interviewees show that there is hardly any critical discourse circulating with regard to the impact of the new forms of consumption, and that this only emerges when there is more or less direct exposure to the material dynamics (especially in terms of labour) that these new practices entail. This in turn leads to an ambivalent position that combines criticism with the perceived inevitability of the changes that are taking place. *Emotional ambivalence* - in the classic sense of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (Freud, 2011) - is still a hallmark of discourse regarding electronic consumption among the working classes who, based on close daily experiences, are familiar with the harshness of the manner in which the work process is organised. Thus, they also have contradictory impulses regarding this type of consumption, which is both an object of desire and of rejection, the desire being unconscious and projective and the rejection conscious and limiting.

This ambivalence is resolved in the final discursive unfolding, in the acceptance of the symbolic violence which the established discursive order is capable of exercising based on the dominant narrative of inevitable digitalisation, technological determinism, and the universal advantages attributed to the platform economy by the global companies themselves and their circles of influence (comfort, ease, savings, consumer sovereignty, generation of wealth, employment, etc.); an order of discourse which the interviewees have no choice but to accept in order to not be symbolically excluded from their peer groups. We can thus see how the discourse around digital commerce is exercised as a form of power that appeals to the norms of rational communication and is established "through the (forced) compliance of those who, because they are dominated products of an order which is dominated by the forces of reason (such as those which operate through the dictates of educational institutions or the impositions of economic experts), have no choice but to give their consent to the arbitrariness of the rationalised force" (Bourdieu, 1999: 112).

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