Digital comfort amidst precarity: New middle classes' experience of well-being and hardship in pandemic times in Brazil

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Abstract
During the pandemic, digital platforms had a boom in revenue or subscriptions. Despite their increasing relevance, few studies explore how different social strata experience such access. Based on 31 in-depth interviews in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, this article discusses the meanings and practices of digital consumption among the 'new middle class.' By focusing on three platforms—ride-sharing apps, food delivery apps, and audio-visual streaming—we interrogate how digital consumption has shaped experiences of well-being and hardship during pandemic times and how it relates to social mobility. We argue that digital platforms brought comfort amidst precarity as mechanisms for accessing relaxing and fun moments while responding to structural issues of Brazilian megacities. Our data also suggest these digital platforms enhance middle-class symbolic status related to in-dividualised and private practices, though collectiveness is still present in participants' liminal class experience.

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Introduction

In the 3 years before the COVID-19 crisis and into the second half of 2021, a lot had changed in Joaquim's life. He graduated from college, set up practice as a lawyer, became a father, and moved to a two-bedroom apartment in Rio's city centre. These changes would have been 'totally out of [his] league' just 5 years earlier when Joaquim was a cab driver living in his family's home on the 'hill' (of a favela). So, the 32-year-old was both amused and self-critical when acknowledging his digital orders for beers and junk food had 'increased absurdly' since the onset of the pandemic. In a more financially constrained situation, Elisa, a 36-year-old housemaid, also ordered beer for her partner and snacks for their daughter using digital apps. Earlier in the year, she had cut expenses by transferring the child from a private school to a public one in a small coastal town outside Rio. While living there, they had no Wi-Fi and, thus, no streaming platforms. But since they had just moved back to Baixada Fluminense, where her partner found work, she intended to reactivate her *Netflix* subscription to please their daughter. Her biggest concern, however, was that their neighbourhood 'has no public school you can be proud of.' Despite differences in degree and intensity related to their economic trajectories, both Joaquim and Elisa had incorporated digital consumption into their everyday pursuits of leisure and comfort.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital platforms like *Uber Eats* and *Netflix* had a boom in revenue or subscriptions as they became a key channel for services, work, and entertainment (Lozic, 2021; Ziółko et al., 2022). Despite the increasing quantitative and qualitative relevance of different platforms, few studies explore how different social strata experience such access. Based on 31 in-depth interviews with middle and low-income people in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, this article discusses the meanings and practices of digital consumption among the so-called new middle class — a parcel of the Brazilian population that, from around 2001 to 2013, rose above the poverty line through mass consumption encouraged by public policies and economic growth, experiencing some degree of upward social mobility (Kopper and Damo, 2018). By considering three platforms—ride-sharing apps, food delivery apps, and audio-visual streaming, our first aim is to interrogate how digital consumption shapes individual and family experiences of well-being and hardship, especially during pandemic times. As a secondary aim, we seek to understand how such consumption through digital platforms, boosted by the pandemic, relates to experiences of class and social mobility.

The focus on 'new middle classes' is critical to provide novel insights into the consumption of digital applications in the (post) pandemic world. In the 21st century, emerging economies removed thousands of millions of people from poverty, fostering entrepreneurial incentives and state policies of financial and consumption inclusion. In 2012, estimates indicated that nearly half of the Indian population had accessed the middle

class (Krishnan and Hatekar, 2017), and 29 million did in Brazil from 2003 to 2011 (Neri, 2011). As controversial and imprecise as the numbers are (see Kopper and Damo, 2018), various market segments have targeted these groups as potential consumers, labelling them as 'new C class' in Brazil (Klein et al., 2018) or 'black diamonds' in South Africa (Chevalier, 2015). However, emerging 'hungry consumers' (Kaur, 2014) continue facing precariousness in their livelihoods in terms of economic assets (Junge et al., 2022; Krishnan and Hatekar, 2017). In urban Brazil, they experience a liminal condition – no longer 'poor,' not 'middle class' yet – as they have acquired more access to credit, consumption, and education resources though still vulnerable to economic instability, violence, segregation, racism, and other forms of discrimination (Alves, 2018; Fogarty-Valenzuela, 2022; Kolling, 2019; Misse, 2008; Scott, 2021). Their financial, digital, and social inclusion is not fully secured but permanently negotiated. On the edge of social divides, it is imperative to understand how these groups struggle to maintain what they acquired in pre-pandemic times, the role of digital platforms in their capacity to aspire to a better life, and the new challenges these technologies provoke.

In sum, we argue that (a) digital platforms brought about comfort amidst precarity as mechanisms both for accessing relaxing and fun moments and responding to structural issues of Brazilian megacities. Getting an *Uber* ride, ordering food, and marathoning TV series are new 'luxuries' offering a horizon of possibilities that consumers do not want to give up. However, these new habits also bring about a series of problems related to the intensity, economic viability, and quality of such consumption. Furthermore, (b) our data collected in the second year of the pandemic suggest that digital platforms enhanced symbolic status and middle-class aspirations while enabling forms of socialisation. In other words, if the literature agrees that people leaving poverty in emerging economies tend to acquire more individualising consumer habits, changing their distinction pattern (Dorschel, 2022; James, 2017; Zhang, 2010), our study indicates consumption through digital platforms fuels that sociological trend while adapting forms of collectiveness still present in their liminal class experience.

Literature review

Consumption among the poor and the former poor

For the poor in the global South, status goods provide microspheres for empowerment, visibility, and pleasure (Hamilton, 2014; Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco, 2022) and new urban identities and citizenship (Friedman, 1990; Newell, 2012) in realities marked by several forms of precariousness, including lack of public services and food. Consumer studies have also highlighted the importance of such objects for well-being and coping mechanisms against suffering and stigma (Hamilton, 2012; Hill and Sharma, 2020). Status goods are visible and public signs of distinction. Not fully included in the financial system, informal markets trading cheap, second-hand, or fake goods are conventional channels for consumption among the poor (Hansen, 1999; Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco, 2012). Yet, in Brazil, the recent expansion of formal credit has also provided the poor with new possibilities for accessing consumer goods (Muller, 2014).

Economic discourses and business media often define middle-classness according to entrepreneurial values, focus on human capital accumulation and savings, and consumer status (Banerjee and Duflo, 2008). Although so-called new middle classes are transitioning and, therefore, unstable groups, they have experienced a shift in consumer patterns related to well-being and comfort. Studies note their inclination towards more individualised, privatised, and nuclear family-oriented forms of consumption (Chevalier, 2015; James, 2017). The ideal of private property shapes new class subjects and individualistic modes of living (Kopper, 2016; Zhang, 2010). Additionally, individual means of transportation (Krishna and Bajpai, 2015), eating out, and diversifying food tastes (Chevalier, 2015) are other markers of upward mobility indicated in the existing literature. In this context, distinction becomes more attached to the pleasure of the self, in which private comfort and a sense of ordinariness acquire significance in everyday lives (Dorschel, 2022; Pertierra, 2015).

Though the 'new middle class' aspires to break with patterns associated with poverty, pursuing individualisation and more formal consumer channels, the line between the *poor* and the *former poor* is blurred. For one, the increase in internet connectivity and smartphones in global South countries contradicts assumptions of the poor's virtuous and utilitarian digital practices (Arora, 2019). Furthermore, to a lesser or greater extent, the precarity of the livelihoods is a transversal phenomenon across these differing low-income groups (Junge, 2022; Krishnan and Hatekar, 2017; Pinheiro-Machado et al., 2023). Sectors emerging from poverty try to find a balance between the search for individual comfort through aspiring middle-class consumption patterns and their routines marked by several vulnerabilities, such as low wages, employment instability, indebtedness, a lack of education, public service deficiencies, segregation, and urban violence. Since the new middle-class status responds to economic growth in emerging countries (Krishnan and Hatekar, 2017), its sustainability is fragile, especially considering economic, political, and social volatilities.

Our study contributes to the literature on the new middle classes' consumption, focusing on digital platforms among the symbolic rewards of social inclusion and upward mobility. Digital platforms notably gained a user boost during the COVID-19 health crisis, consolidating their role as vehicles for several forms of consumption and strengthening the formerly poor's lifestyle of ordinariness. Understanding the impact of the pandemic on class experiences and aspirations for a better life is an urgent question, given the rapid and profound transformations of the crisis have repercussions on consumers' horizons of possibilities. Hence, analysing how the health and economic crises affected the new middle classes' consumption is another empirical contribution of our study. In the following pages, we examine how interviewees struggled to negotiate, improve, maintain, or give up consumption standards they associate with comfort and well-being.

Consumption of digital apps during the pandemic

Recent interdisciplinary scholarship confirms the rise of the use of digital applications globally during 2020-2021 lockdowns and 'stay at home' recommendations as part of the

digital transformation caused by the pandemic (see Baker et al., 2020). Here, we look at three forms of digital consumption that recurrently emerged in our conversations with research participants: ride-sharing apps, food delivery apps, and audio-visual streaming.

Before the pandemic, consumers in several parts of the world already perceived ride-sharing apps as a cheaper, safe, and convenient solution for transportation (Benjaafar, et al., 2019; Benoit et al., 2017). During the pandemic, the lack of passengers hindered app drivers (see Wang et al., 2022), but consumers remained positive about the service, which they saw as a way of avoiding public transportation crowds. In some cases, perceived economic benefits, convenience, and social influence contributed to consumers' intention to continue using ride-sharing apps (Gaber and Elsamadicy, 2021). A survey sponsored by 99, a Brazilian ride-sharing app, found an expressive increase during the pandemic of users from the so-called C class and peripheral neighbourhoods pushed by health concerns (itforum, 2021).

Delivery apps became a prominent means of ordering food during the pandemic (Kumar and Shah, 2021). While most household expenses declined during the economic and health crises in the United States, these apps were an exception to the trend (Baker et al., 2020). For a practical reason, perception of risk reduction was a decisive factor among Brazilian users (Zanetta et al., 2021).

Although it is well-known that *Netflix* had increased numbers of subscribers, studies on the consumption of TV and streaming platforms during the pandemic, in turn, are scarcer. From the perspective of consumers, a few studies seem to agree that users significantly increased their hours of binge-watching TV series—and this was a source of self-indulgence and concern alike (Rahman and Arif, 2021).

Promises of overcoming inequalities through digital inclusion have been among the propellers of financialization and digitalisation (Arora, 2019; Maurer et al., 2018; Scott, 2021), which are the basis of the spread of ridesharing, delivery, and streaming apps, as the mentions to credit cards and online banking apps in our interviews also suggest. Spyer's (2017) ethnography among emerging Brazilian classes in pre-pandemic times demonstrates that digital access is always limited and negotiated but also creatively reinvented in everyday consumption, networking, and learning strategies. In a critical approach, Scott (2021) argues the market advertising that has fuelled Brazil's new middle classes promotes a digital utopia, actively shaped by everyday understandings of urban exclusion and privilege, that maintains the socially reproductive nature of class-inflected consumer practices. Although still little investigated, the possibilities and limitations of digital inclusion among these sectors of society were dramatically impacted by the pandemic when smartphones and digital apps became one of the main tools to access services, goods, and leisure — as our research shows.

In sum, recent literature has analysed the frequency and the motivations of consumers of digital apps during the pandemic. However, little is known about the class dimensions of such digital transformation. This paper adds to the existing literature on digital platform consumption by offering an in-depth picture of the Brazilian new middle class's everyday strategies, calculations, and emotions in their liminal digital and financial inclusion. We seek to understand the role of applications in a practical and symbolic sense and in terms of reinforcing individualising and privatising aspirational trends.

Methods and context of research

This work is part of a multi-site project on new consumer cultures among the former urban poor in Brazil, Mexico, China, and the Philippines. We present the results of the Brazilian fieldwork, which took place in Rio de Janeiro from July to December 2021. This article draws from 31 in-depth interviews conducted over videoconferences on *WhatsApp* and *Zoom*. Participants' familiarity with smartphones worked to our advantage as we could not meet them in person per the project's health protocols.[1] Albeit the distance, we maintained the ethnographic inspiration of the interviews, which lasted between 90 and 150 min, encouraging interviewees to show their houses and preferred objects by using their smartphone cameras or sending us pictures. Additionally, in 2022, we observed and took photos of places and practices in Rio recurrently mentioned in the interviews – for example, supermarkets, department stores, and delivery workers on the move. We asked descriptive and comparative questions about participants' recent, most expensive, and unplanned purchases, groceries list, cell phone use, household appliances, regular expenses, neighbourhoods, and everyday habits. Here we focus on ridesharing, food delivery, and audio-visual streaming apps as these were among the most repeatedly mentioned in participants' answers, revealing to us forms of acquiring comfort. However, we understand these apps also go together with other services and consumption practices.

The group of participants comprised 18 women and 13 men; 60% of them had a higher education degree or an active college enrolment; 60% were self-employed workers. In terms of occupation, there were street vendors, delivery workers, housekeepers, manicurists, pensioners, micro-entrepreneurs, taxi drivers, waiters, bartenders, schoolteachers, personal trainers, audio-visual pros, and lawyers. Most of our interviewees (22) were 25-39 years old.

In terms of recruitment criteria, most participants, 17, had an average household income over R$ 2,000 and up to R$ 6,000 per month, the strata most associated with the so-called 'new middle class' (Pochmann, 2014; Scalon and Salata, 2012). Five interviewees had slightly higher household earnings, over R$ 6,000 and up to R$ 10,000. For comparative purposes, we also interviewed five people with an average income between R$ 1,000 to R$ 2,000 and four earning over R$ 10,000. Since defining new middle classes based only on income is controversial (Scalon and Salata, 2012; Pochmann, 2012), we looked at other aspects symbolically relevant in Brazil to select our participants, following sociological discussions that consider occupation, lifestyles, and status disputes in the labour market (see Erikson et al., 1979; Goldthorpe, 2000; Wright, 1989; Wright-Mills, 1951).

For instance, participants had to have experienced some upward mobility vis-à-vis their orientation family or accessed social programmes (*Bolsa Familia* cash transfer programme, affirmative action quotas, student loans, or *Minha Casa Minha Vida* housing benefit) or private financial programmes (loans, mortgages). Also, we selected participants considering the junction between their ways of inhabiting the city and creating and exercising economic functions in it (Machado da Silva, 2018). Place of residence and occupation were crucial in selecting interviewees, as we focused on a consumer profile

marked by the insecurity of informal earnings and the symbolic character of urban territories, particularly the 'suburb' and the 'favela,' in Cariocas' social imagination.

In Rio, 'suburb' refers to neighbourhoods in the North and West Zones and municipalities in Baixada Fluminense that are physically and symbolically distant from 'downtown' and the coastal South Zone, linked to hardship, subordination, and popular classes (Fernandes, 2011). 'Favelas' are historically marginalised informal settlements that expanded and multiplied, mostly up hills, receiving limited urban improvements only in recent decades. Self-built favela communities generally bustle with dense resident populations that participate in the broader city life but suffer under stigmas of poverty, violence, and crime (Misse, 2008; Scott, 2021). Many research participants lived in these areas that concentrate most of the lower-income strata in Rio (SEBRAE, 2015), and some had recently moved to more 'central' neighbourhoods. It is worth stressing that Rio de Janeiro was the city where the number of informal workers grew the most during the pandemic in Brazil, reaching the highest level ever recorded (Neri, 2021).

In another paper, we will discuss participants' emic understandings of social class belonging, their life trajectories, and the intergenerational differences they recognise within their families. In brief, most perceived themselves as climbing the social ladder, especially when reflecting on their parents' past, childhood, or current neighbours' struggle during the pandemic. They faced economic constraints during the research period as they reduced or eliminated meat consumption—especially beef—and replaced favourite brands with cheaper ones. On the other hand, as the next section will show, the use of digital applications' services has increased and become a new necessity.

Findings

Private and safe rides to and from home

When arriving in Brazil just before the 2014 World Cup, the tech company *Uber* initially facilitated private executive transportation by connecting passengers to a pool of luxury car drivers (Uber, 2020). One year later, the company significantly expanded its service by launching the *uberX* category, which provides a low-cost alternative to taxi rides through self-employed drivers of popular cars (Higa, 2015), inciting growing questions about its mode of operation and the deterioration of labour relations at the base of its business model (Firmino et al., 2019). Our analysis of participants' consumption of ride-sharing apps, especially *Uber*, addresses two main points. First, we analyse how comfort is related to the urban context in which participants use these apps, looking at the relationship between consumption and the city's dynamics and infrastructures (Bria and Morozov, 2018). Second, we examine the range of financial and creative practices associated with these social strata (Muller, 2014) by describing economic considerations for the use of these platforms in everyday lives.

The analysis of participants' quotes on ride-sharing apps allows us to recognize how such technological devices compensate, to some extent, for urban infrastructural deficiencies, especially for those users residing in the peripheries of Greater Rio, which spreads over 7500 km^2. Overall, participants regarded Uber as a solution to move around,

commute to work, and participate in leisure activities with more freedom and comfort, avoiding public transportation troubles such as crowds, delays, commute transfers, old vehicles, longer journeys, and robberies. In this sense, ride-sharing apps emerge as a mechanism that mitigates the failings of the public transportation network and the uneven concentration of commercial and cultural facilities in specific parts of the metropolitan region through individual practices that produce new urban circulation dynamics (Bria and Morozov, 2018: 23).

In terms of a pandemic-induced boost, interviewees discussed *Uber* and similar digital services as an alternative to buses to minimize contagion risk, including uses of the app through and for others. Elsa, a 48-year-old house cleaner, mentioned her employers began requesting and paying for her rides from home to work and back. Born and raised in the favela of Rocinha, 36-year-old William, who today lives with his wife and daughter in a wealthier South Zone neighbourhood, requests *Uber* for his mother, a retired housemaid, whenever she needs one because she did not finish elementary school and 'has trouble using apps in general.'

But more than an alternative amidst Covid's restrictions, participants saw using ride-sharing apps broadly as a form of relieving themselves from the discomforts and limitations of public transportation. Yara, a 28-year-old schoolteacher, talked about how *Uber* enables people in her neighbourhood in Baixada Fluminense to enjoy consumption options unavailable near their homes, such as restaurants and cinemas – 'Mobility has improved a lot with app drivers. I have seen people […] consuming in other places they didn't consume before.' Living with her father, a self-employed bricklayer, and sister, a freelance math tutor, with whom she split bills and groceries, was not an issue. But poor access to cultural consumption options like cinema, worsened by deficient public transportation, upset Yara deeply. In her words, missing Ava Duvernay's *Selma* is a trauma, and 'if it were not for *Uber*,' she could not have gone to see Kleber Mendonça's *Bacurau* in downtown Rio.

Participants' remarks concerning the precariousness of the public transportation network show how their use of *Uber* interacts with the urban fabric. That is precisely why social representations of violence in Rio de Janeiro (Misse, 2008) imprint ambiguous meanings on *Uber,* which oscillate between safety and danger depending on users' situations. Paulo, a 52-year-old waiter, expressed frustration with *Uber's* refusal to go to his address in Rocinha, a densely populated community covering the hills between the expensive neighbourhoods of São Conrado and Gávea in the South Zone of Rio. Because favelas are hard-to-navigate spaces, filled with narrow labyrinthine passages, and perceived as unsafe, many service providers consider them off-limits. So, ride-sharing apps become entangled in images of exclusion and violence that characterize life in Rio even while mitigating the precariousness in urban mobility.

Having grown used to *Uber* in recent years, Raquel and her mother 'stopped taking the bus altogether' since the onset of the pandemic. Living in a social housing neighbourhood turned into a favela (Kolling, 2019) in Baixada Fluminense, alongside a major highway but unserved by trains or metro lines and precariously so by buses, she 'must have a curfew for everything,' seen as drivers from 'outside' are afraid to enter her community at night. To return home late, she must arrange for an *Uber* from 'inside' the neighbourhood

to pick her up. Feeling insecurity also makes long walks to and waiting in bus stops worse. So, Raquel started going everywhere by *Uber*, including places like the gym, the Pilates, and thrift stores. That is, she incorporated ridesharing apps to experience 'ordinariness' by easing transportation to such self-care and leisure activities (Arora, 2019; Dorschel, 2022). The 28-year-old, then unemployed with a postgraduate degree, talked about the ride-sharing service as a necessary 'luxury':

> I use *Uber* a lot. I'm VIP *Uber*, I'm diamond *Uber*. Because where I live, there is no good public transportation. I live in a poor neighbourhood. So, for us to go out, it's better to take an *Uber*, and that's also one of the luxuries my mother thinks we must have too.

However, 'luxury' has its price. As *Uber* enters the range of activities accessible to lower-income strata in Brazil, it also introduces its users to new financial rationalities and practices (Muller, 2014; Weber et al., 2003). Participants understand they should have moderation using the service to avoid overburdening their budget. But when comparing the fares of ridesharing apps and public transportation, they also factor in such aspects as journey duration, time pressure, safety, and comfort on each occasion. For instance, 32-year-old filmmaker Leandro explained his rationale when commuting over 30 km between Campo Grande, West Zone, and Mesquita, Baixada Fluminense, for work: 'If I went by train, seriously, it would take 2 hours. So, I called an *Uber*, and it took 40 min […]. If I'm in a rush, I order *Uber*.'

The lack of attention to the cost and frequency of rides during the month can lead them into debt, especially if the app charges automatically to their credit card. Raquel once found herself with R$ 2,500 worth of *Uber* rides on her credit card bill from a digital bank and could not afford it. However, she found it hard to stop using the app or give up on 'banal' things, like having a casual beer with snacks. Such hard-to-give-up things are not about conspicuous status displays but everyday pleasures and comfort (Dorschel, 2022; Pertierra, 2015), which turn into 'luxuries' when costs exceed earnings. As Raquel put it, 'I have this thing of wanting luxuries that I can't have, see? And I can't give them up.'

Food and cold beverages at the door

Another 'luxury' participants incorporated with a push from the pandemic are food and beverage delivery apps. Specifically, *Uber Eats* became the most popular app worldwide (Ziółko et al., 2022). However, in Rio de Janeiro, our participants opted mostly for national and Latin American apps such as *iFood*, *Rappi*, and *Zé Delivery*. Our interviews show that participants' use of this digital service intensified and changed as they began using apps to try a 'different' meal, alleviate their cooking obligations, arrange cold drinks for a barbecue, or simply enjoy a moment of relaxation.

Although these apps existed before the pandemic, participants did not order as much, and some were not even aware of this digital service. Caio, a 26-year-old souvenir street vendor, did not know about work in app deliveries until the pandemic forced him to find an alternative source of income. By working for *iFood*, he could pay rent and groceries. Later, when tourist sites reopened, he quit delivering and went back to selling souvenirs.

That, however, was not the end of his relationship with delivery apps, for he continued to use them daily, as a consumer, to order lunch – 'Yeah, almost every day I order my meal on an app because there's always discount.'

The pandemic suddenly upended routines and disrupted habits such as the one Joaquim had of eating some skewer and having a beer on the way back home. Unable to engage in social and leisure activities outside, participants ordered meals and beverages as an alternative to enjoy themselves and find comfort in exceptional circumstances. As Katia, a 28-year-old personal trainer living in Campo Grande, explains, 'before, I liked going out to restaurants much more. Then, with the pandemic, it was no longer possible. So, you access *iFood*, see something very different to eat, and order it.' By 'different,' Katia and other participants usually meant skipping food they cooked themselves for the week – for instance, rice and beans, which were among the most cited groceries items – or the instant noodles to have freshly prepared meals or snacks, like hamburgers with chips, pizzas, and acai bowls.

The sheer recurrence of mentions to *Zé Delivery*, an app designed for cold beverage orders, throughout our interviews is an indicator of how Cariocas adapted their outdoor socializing habits to the pandemic. Although *Zé Delivery* had begun operating in Rio a couple of years earlier, the app only caught Joaquim's attention during the pandemic, when he, his partner, and their roommate started ordering beers frequently. According to the company's recruitment website, *Zé* delivered more than 44 million orders in Brazil through its partner distributors in 2021. 'Zé Delivery (2021) is rich now. For anything, just call *Zé*,' said Ricardo, a 34-year-old college student residing in the favela of Manguinhos, about how his use of the app had increased during the pandemic.

From the perspective of a worker in the sector, Alberto, a 22-year-old bartender who earns extra money through deliveries, felt the health crisis led to an expansion of the network of providers. In fact, *iFood Brazil* solidified its position as Latin America's largest food delivery platform in 2020, increasing its partner base by 32% and registering 48 million orders delivered per month in December (Nunes et al., 2021). Joana, 63 years old, also observed how *iFood* orders to her soup shop in Baixada Fluminense increased with the pandemic. She uses apps both as a small business owner and as a consumer. In her words, 'At the store, we deliver orders from *iFood*. There's a laptop just for the app. But I usually use *Zé Delivery* on my phone when I need a cold beer [laughing out loud].'

Pandemic restrictions drove businesses of all sizes and neighbourhoods in Rio to enter the delivery market and act digitally. Adriana, 36 years old, says delivery services had not been previously available at her place in Complexo do Alemão, a group of compactly populated adjacent favelas with imprecise borders stretching a vast area in the North Zone. The unfamiliarity with the spatial logics of favelas by companies and workers 'outside' them causes fear, reinforcing the segregation of these communities (Fogarty-Valenzuela, 2022; Misse, 2008). But, according to Adriana, the COVID-19 crisis helped to expand access to food and beverage delivery services as providers had to broaden their coverage, and even local businesses in Complexo do Alemão joined apps like *Zé Delivery* and *iFood*. Further amplifying access, *WhatsApp* also emerged in our interviews as an alternative for directly ordering pizza and meals from restaurants or self-employed cooks.

Still, we must note that, like in the case of *Uber*, the interaction of food and beverage delivery apps with the dynamics of Rio attaches them to social representations of violence. Though her parents order beer on *Zé Delivery* every weekend, Lya, a 29-year-old telecom engineer, mentioned having trouble using *iFood*. The sheer lack of restaurants near her home in Pavuna, North Zone, is a factor, but the growing presence of organised crime in the neighbourhood also scares deliverers away.

If during the months of social distancing restrictions, *iFood* and *Zé Delivery* allowed participants to have a semblance of social life, transporting themselves elsewhere without leaving their homes, later, app orders became embedded as tools for a more comfortable life. Leonardo, a 39-year-old barber from Tijuca, acknowledged the ingraining of the app-order habit in his family's everyday life. After businesses reopened, he continued using delivery apps, even if less frequently, not to avoid contagion risks but to release himself and his wife of household chores after their long work hours:

> I work 12 hours a day, my wife works on average 10 hours a day. We get home and we're dead. We look at the kitchen, and there're dirty dishes. So, we order *iFood*. By the end of the month, the bill is 'this big.' But now we're using it more to have a gastronomic craze once a month, see?

Katia also recognizes that she and her partner incorporated the habit of ordering meals through *iFood*, doing so even when it seems 'unreasonable' because they are tired and do not want to cook. With the excuse of weariness, they dodge dull homecooked meals, like frying an egg and reheating the week's rice in the microwave, leaning on the acquired 'habit' of food delivery apps.

Since the impetus of ordering in has become more habitual, participants expressed concern about their growing expenses with this kind of service. Some tried reducing the frequency of orders through strategies like uninstalling at least one delivery app option from their phones. Nevertheless, *iFood*, *Zé Delivery*, and the like became a part of their repertoire of consumer activities, offering them the possibility to release themselves from chores like running to the supermarket, cooking, and washing piles of dishes. Agreeing with previous studies (Arora, 2019), our work shows how pursuits for more leisurely time, with a boost from the pandemic, contributed to the widespread adoption of food and beverage delivery apps among consumers with supposedly limited financial means.

Accessing and sharing entertainment

The digital service that goes along with food and beverage delivery apps in providing comfort are video streaming platforms. Diverse studies explore the impact of streaming platforms on viewing habits and taste, delving into notions such as binge-watching and algorithmic personalisation (Frey, 2021; Jenner, 2018; Weingartner, 2021). Our research points to the expressive access of lower-income consumers in Rio to services such as *Netflix,* stimulated not just by social distancing restrictions but, above all, by their modes of sociability and relationship networks that extend beyond their households.

Forms of televisual entertainment are not in itself new for lower-income Cariocas. Television has been a characteristic feature of domestic comfort in Brazil since the steep rise of local commercial networks in the 1970s and 1980s (Mattelart and Mattelart, 1990) and the device's ever-growing presence in homes throughout the country over the past three decades. In 2021, 96.2% of households had television sets. Interestingly, though, the market penetration of free-to-air television and digital media was already roughly the same in 2019, respectively, 87% and 88% (Grupo de Mídia de São Paulo, 2021), calling attention to how Brazilian consumers now have alternative means of acquiring information and entertainment.

Ernesto, a 56-year-old cab driver from a favela near downtown Rio, told us, 'If I'm home, the TV is on.' However, he already distinguishes between the sort of content he consumes through watching television – news and sports – from what he seeks in a digital platform like *Netflix*. When we met, Caio had just purchased a new smart TV for his home in the favela of Mangueira because his previous one had broken. The appliance was heavy on his budget, but it was important for his family to have the distraction: 'Since my wife doesn't work, she stays at home without a television, with nothing, taking care of the kids, the kids asking to watch *YouTube*. So, I said, "Help, my Heavenly Father, I need to buy a television.".' Access to digital platforms through a smart TV has already become a part of their notion of domestic comfort (Pertierra, 2015).

However, consuming video streaming services does not depend on smart TVs. Some participants adapted their TVs with a *Chromecast*, while others watched films and series individually or in couples on the smaller screens of their smartphones, tablets, or laptops. Renato, a 29-year-old driver for a major e-commerce company, says he uses his smartphone much more than his television. When he moved to live alone in the Baixada during the pandemic, his mother gave him a second-hand television, which he felt necessary only to be prepared to entertain occasional guests: 'To be honest, I don't watch television. I have one because sometimes you have visitors over, so not having a television is complicated; maybe you want to watch a film, some *Netflix* [giggles].' A fan of Japanese animation, Renato accesses specialized anime streaming apps besides *Netflix* and *YouTube* in his spare time.

When asking participants about their smartphone apps, the recurrence of mentions of streaming platforms and the variety of providers was remarkable. While *Netflix* was the most popular among our interviewees, they cited many others, including global platforms like *Amazon Prime*, *Disney+*, and *HBO Max*, the more niche option *Mubi*, and the Brazilian *GloboPlay*. Participants were amazed by the long list of streaming services they had been accessing. Katia, for example, felt she and her partner perhaps had too many subscriptions, mentioning, self-critically, they had acquired *Paramount +* to watch *The Handmaid's Tale* and nothing else.

Having access to multiple services does not always mean subscribing to all of them. Many participants pay for one or another service, if they do so for any, and swap passwords with other people who subscribe to different platforms. Among our interviewees, account sharing occurs not just between same-household members but is a widespread practice between friends and relatives living in different homes as well. In Bruna's words, 'it's all socialized.' The 27-year-old schoolteacher, who lives with her

boyfriend in Encantado, subscribes to two services but has access to at least six. Looking at her smartphone screen, she listed her streaming apps and how she accessed them:

> I pay for *Netflix*, *Amazon Prime* because of shipping – in fact, I'm seriously considering cancelling *Netflix*, because I don't know if you saw this, but the price is rising, and that's too expensive [giggles]. I have *Disney+,* someone gave me the password. I have *HBO* because my aunt has cable TV, including the subscription, so I access hers. And someone also gave me a *GloboPlay* password. Oh, I have my boyfriend's *Mubi*. That's all.

As Bruna's remark about *Netflix*'s price increase indicates, participants did not necessarily perceive streaming services as cheap. Besides password-sharing, some split subscription costs between all people using the same accounts. Joaquim and his partner still shared the costs of most streaming services they had with their former roommate: 'He's so stingy that it's R\$ 10, and every month we split it in three.' Paulo was splitting *Netflix*'s cost with his 21-year-old daughter, whose recent admission to an internship had relieved the father from some of her expenses. Paying for a streaming subscription can also be a small sacrificial gesture to please loved ones or a way of gifting them. Isabel, a 65-year-old pensioner from Complexo da Maré, an area of favela groupings entwined with formal social housing developments, subscribes to *Netflix* to entertain her grandchildren despite her difficulty paying credit card bills. In a more stable economic situation, Lya acquired two new streaming subscriptions during the pandemic, *Amazon Prime* to watch *This Is Us*, a series her friend recommended, and *Disney+* so she and her little cousin could watch *Disney* films.

Gifting children with streaming is not necessarily a selfless act. Leonardo's household already had access to *Netflix* and *Amazon*, but he had recently acquired two more services, *HBO Max* and the child-pleasing *Disney+*. He granted that having a kid at home was a good excuse for him to enjoy the latter service as well – 'I am also kind of a kid. I like cartoons and stuff. We pretend it's not for us [laughs].'.

It is worth mentioning that *Disney+* and *HBO Max* started operations in Brazil after the onset of the pandemic. Raquel, self-described as a cinema lover and streaming 'addict,' had these and multiple other video and music streaming apps on her smartphone. She pays for some, including *YouTube Premium*, but 'the ones I don't subscribe to, I get from my friends, and we exchange.'. Neither Raquel nor any other participant expressed any concern or awareness that their practice of sharing passwords with people outside their households could be infringing the terms of use of certain streaming platforms (Long, 2022).

Hence, our research points to the incorporation of streaming services among the digital consumption practices of 'new-middle-class' Cariocas as an alternative for domestic entertainment. Though designed for an individualised viewing experience, encouraging autonomy and seclusion aspirations (James, 2017; Kopper, 2016; Zhang, 2010), streaming platforms become socialized and gain ever-more consumers through such acts as sharing accounts, exchanging recommendations, and pleasing others. We find the pervasive access to streaming platforms among our participants significant considering that many of them live in peripheral neighbourhoods that limit their options for outdoor leisure and cultural consumption.

Conclusion

This article analyses how everyday consumption of digital platforms among emerging social strata in contemporary Brazil—the 'new middle classes' (Klein et al., 2018; Kopper and Damo, 2018) – produces experiences of comfort amidst precarity during pandemic times. We focus on ridesharing, food delivery, and audio-visual streaming platforms as consumer practices recurrently mentioned by our Carioca interviewees, who are among the parcel of the population that had experienced a degree of upward mobility before the pandemic lockdowns. Notably, these services became more embedded in participants' everyday lives and, thus, presented an expansion to peripheral zones, making local businesses act digitally to maintain ingrained habits—like beer drinking— or incite new ones, like ordering meals, riding on *Uber*, and watching films and series as a distraction.

In this concluding section, we summarise three main findings discussed throughout the paper. Firstly, *digital consumption operates as a source of pleasant experiences of comfort, but we can only understand such comfort vis-a-vis the perpetuation of precariousness in everyday life*. Rio de Janeiro faces profound structural problems related to inequality, segregation, and urban violence (Fogarty-Valenzuela, 2022; Misse, 2008). This context blurs the divisions between practical and symbolic usage. Ridesharing and food delivery apps make sense as practical and creative tools to circumvent deficient public services and unequal urban infrastructures, besides the health risks of crowded places. Still, we cannot disassociate this practical motivation from their pursuit of ordinary comforts (Dorschel, 2022; Pertierra, 2015) and related feelings of well-being, pleasure, and privacy. Likewise, streaming platforms were a coping mechanism against pandemic isolation and a form of leisure that introduced and expanded participants' access to cultural content.

Secondly, *digital consumption is secured through creative and collective manners yet introduces new concerns and challenges*. To access these digitally mediated services, most participants reported relying on their social networks, splitting costs, borrowing credit cards, and sharing passwords among friends and family, besides looking for special offers or discount vouchers. Digital consumption was also a source of anxiety, originating mainly from compulsion and indebtedness. Some participants admitted that they were worried about the increased amount of junk food in their routines. Indebtedness with credit cards was vastly mentioned in the interviews as a source of concern, whether because they could not pay the bill or see themselves giving up on the newly acquired habits, which would mean a step back. As Raquel explained, 'I can't give up some things that should be banal, right? But, for me, they are luxuries, and I end up getting into [financial] trouble.'

Finally, *new digital habits have the potential to transform the understandings of social mobility or at least shuffle distinction and taste patterns*. By consuming ridesharing, delivery, and streaming apps, new-middle-class interviewees are acquiring more individualised habits, to some extent, and private everyday comforts while creatively counterweighting precarity. They resort to these digital services to avoid boredom and enjoy a broader range of products as sidestepping risks and deficiencies of the urban context in Rio. Significantly, their ways of consumption may contradict the implied

autonomous upper-income user in global North tech companies' business models and product designs (Anderson and De Paula, 2006; Arora, 2019), for instance, when they share passwords and place orders for others.

In this paper, we explore forms of digital consumption described by participants as learned or intensified due to the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. Compelled by stay-home policies and health recommendations, 'traditional' and 'new' middle classes consumed the same digital platforms in a highly segregated society. These groups that overcame poverty acquired, even if limitedly, private comforts and a new sense of ordinariness that transformed their lives.

Author statement

All authors have agreed to the submission of this article, which currently is not being considered for publication by any other print or electronic journal.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

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Note

1. For some participants, internet access was, however, unstable, slow, or heavy on their budget.

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