Platform Resources and Competitive Differentiation: A Comparative Analysis of Subscription Models in Food Delivery

Marta Marques da Silva Saramago

Dissertation written under the supervision of Professor João Flórido

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the MSc in International Management with a Specialization in Strategy and Consulting, at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 05 January 2026.

Abstract

Title: Platform Resources and Competitive Differentiation: A Comparative Analysis of Subscription Models in Food Delivery

Author: Marta Marques da Silva Saramago

This dissertation looks at how platform-specific resources and capabilities allow food-delivery companies to implement differentiation strategies through subscription models. Subscription programs have become common in food delivery, but existing research treats them as a revenue strategy, offering little understanding of why similar subscription offers perform differently across platforms. To fill this gap, the study integrates the Resource-Based Theory with Porter's Generic Strategies to examine subscription-based differentiation in platform markets.

The research follows a comparative case study of DoorDash and Uber Eats (2019–2024), combining secondary data (company disclosures, industry reports, financial statements) with semi-structured interviews. The analysis looks at differences in resources and capabilities across key areas, including market position, technology, financial position, and overall strategy, exploring how these affect the success and design of subscriptions.

The findings show that the strategic effectiveness of subscription programs depends less on subscription features themselves and more on the underlying resource base of each platform. DoorDash's local networks, operational reliability, and delivery-focused structure support a delivery-centric subscription model that promotes frequent use and leadership in local markets. Meanwhile, Uber Eats used ecosystem-level resources, including multi-service scale and shared technology infrastructure, to implement a cross-service subscription model that boosts platform-wide engagement. Although subscription features converge across competitors, sustained differentiation arises when subscriptions are embedded in valuable and difficult-to-imitate resource configurations.

Keywords: Food-Delivery; Subscription Models; Resource-Based Theory; Competitive Strategy; DoorDash; Uber.

Abstrato

Título: Recursos de Plataformas e Diferenciação Competitiva: Uma Comparação entre Modelos de Subscrição em Food Delivery
Autor: Marta Marques da Silva Saramago

Esta dissertação analisa como recursos e capacidades específicos de plataforma permitem às empresas de food-delivery implementar estratégias de diferenciação através de modelos de subscrição. Embora estes programas sejam generalizados, a literatura tende a enquadrá-los como estratégia de receitas, explicando pouco porque ofertas semelhantes têm desempenhos diferentes. Para preencher esta lacuna, o estudo une a Teoria Baseada em Recursos com as Estratégias Genéricas de Porter para analisar a diferenciação através de subscrição em mercados de plataformas.

A análise segue um caso comparativo entre a DoorDash e a Uber Eats (2019–2024), utilizando dados secundários (divulgações empresariais, relatórios do setor e demonstrações financeiras) com entrevistas semiestruturadas, e centra-se nas diferenças de recursos e capacidades em posição de mercado, tecnologia, posição financeira e estratégia, examinando de que forma influenciam o design e a sucesso de um modelo de subscrição.

Os resultados indicam que a eficácia estratégica das subscrições depende menos das suas funcionalidades e mais da base de recursos de cada plataforma. A DoorDash beneficia de redes locais, fiabilidade operacional e uma organização orientada para delivery, apoiando um modelo centrado no serviço de entrega que reforça a frequência de utilização e a liderança local. Em contraste, a Uber Eats explora recursos de ecossistema como escala multi-serviço e infraestrutura tecnológica para implementar um modelo transversal aos serviços, orientado para aumentar o envolvimento na plataforma. Embora as funcionalidades das subscrições convirjam, a diferenciação emerge quando estes programas estão integrados em configurações de recursos valiosas e difíceis de imitar.

Palavras-chave: Food-Delivery; Modelos de Subscrição; Teoria Baseada em Recursos; Estratégia de Competição; DoorDash; Uber.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

Food-delivery platforms have changed significantly over the past decade, from simple aggregators that connected restaurants with consumers to fully integrated logistics operators that manage their own courier networks (McKinsey, 2016). This change led to improvements in service quality and reliability, but it also needed a substantial capital investment to scale operations. In Q4 2018 alone, $7.3 billion was invested in food-delivery companies (Crunchbase News, 2019). The competitive logic was that rapid scaling to achieve a dominant market position would lead to pricing power and sustainable profitability.

However, this promotion-dependent situation created unsustainable dynamics. Platforms lowered delivery fees and flooded markets with discounts to boost transaction volume, competing on price to gain market share. As offers converged and consumers started expecting discounts, margins remained thin, and growth increasingly depended on restaurant selection, courier availability, and geographic coverage. The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily hid these problems by generating unprecedented demand as lockdowns increased adoption (McKinsey, 2021), but when restrictions lifted and demand normalized, the problems remained. With customers able to switch between rival apps for every single order, promotion-heavy tactics struggled to build long-term loyalty. The strategic response emerged in the form of subscription programs. These programs offer delivery fee waivers and exclusive benefits to lock in users through switching costs and to create a value proposition beyond cost leadership.

Subscription models are becoming common across platform business models; their implementation in food delivery has unique challenges. This industry combines price-sensitive customers with thin operating margins and complex multi-sided network effects. Success depends not only on user numbers but also on restaurant selection, courier availability, and service reliability. In this context, subscriptions represent more than a revenue model, as they can support differentiation strategies when embedded in appropriate resource and capability configurations.

Comparing DoorDash and Uber Eats shows a clear contrast in how different resources influence subscription adoption. DoorDash has established itself as a delivery leader by focusing on market penetration and operational excellence. Meanwhile, Uber runs a diversified platform business model that includes rides, freight, and food delivery (Uber Eats), which creates cross-service synergies but also implies resource-allocation trade-offs. Both platforms have achieved comparable subscriber scale with their subscription programs (DashPass and Wolt + : over 22 million subscribers globally as of Q4 2024; Uber One: over 30 million subscribers as of Q3

2024), and are both present all over the world, with Uber using Uber Eats and DoorDash using both DoordDash and Wolt ever since acquiring 2022, but achieved these results using different resource configurations and strategic approaches (DoorDash 2024; Uber Technologies, 2025).

1.2 Research Problem, Objectives, and Questions

Even though many food-delivery platforms have adopted subscription models, there remains a notable gap in understanding why some platforms are more successful with subscriptions than others. Existing research on platform competition focuses on network effects and pricing strategies but largely overlooks how underlying resource heterogeneity shapes strategic outcomes. This dissertation examines how platform-specific resources, including market position, technological capabilities, financial capacity, and strategic focus, affect subscription performance, using DoorDash and Uber Eats as case studies.

This research aims to explain why subscription programs in food delivery perform differently across platforms by comparing DoorDash's DashPass and Uber One in their global operations. Specifically, it asks: (1) how resource differences enable platforms to shift from cost-leadership (promotional competition) to differentiation strategies (subscription-based retention), and (2) what is the relationship between resource profiles and subscription performance over time.

To address these objectives, this dissertation is guided by one main research question and two sub-questions:

Main Research Question: How do platform-specific resources and capabilities enable food-delivery companies to successfully implement differentiation strategies through subscription models?

Sub-questions:

What are the key resource differences between DoorDash and Uber Eats that influence their subscription strategy performance and overall strategic role?

How do different resource profiles translate into distinct approaches to subscription-based differentiation?

1.3 Significance and Contribution

This research contributes to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it extends Resource-Based Theory into the context of subscription revenue models. It shows how the RBT framework applies to business model innovation in digital platforms. It also connects RBT with Porter's competitive strategy framework, illustrating how resource advantages lead to differentiation strategies. Practically, this research offers platform managers insights into the resources needed

for successful subscription implementation in this industry. It helps firms evaluate whether their resource profile supports subscription-based differentiation or if other strategies might be better suited.

1.4 Structure of the Dissertation

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature and establishes the theoretical foundations in Resource-Based Theory and competitive strategy for analysing subscription-based differentiation in food delivery platforms. Chapter 3 builds on this discussion to develop the analytical framework and research hypotheses. Chapter 4 presents the analysis of the semi-structured interviews and discusses their main findings. Chapter 5 provides the empirical analysis of the two case studies, examining differences in resource profiles and subscription strategies. Chapter 6 discusses the main findings and their implications. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes by summarizing the contributions of the dissertation, outlining its limitations, and suggesting directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

This chapter looks at three areas of literature that frame subscription strategies in food-delivery platforms. First, research on two-sided markets and platform competition shows how prices, multi-homing, and network effects influence competition among intermediaries. Second, Resource-Based Theory explains how differences in asset bases and organizational routines lead to performance gaps. Third, competitive strategy research examines how firms decide between efficiency and differentiation, and how consistent activity systems maintain advantages over time. Together, these streams provide the theoretical basis for analysing how subscription programs such as DashPass and Uber One can support platform differentiation.

2.1 Platform Competition

Research on platform competition focuses on markets in which two or more groups of users interact through an intermediary and each side's participation affects the value to the other side (Rochet & Tirole, 2003; Rysman, 2009). In these two-sided markets, cross-side network effects create interdependencies between participation, pricing, and platform design. As a result, decisions on one side cannot be analysed without considering the other (Rochet & Tirole, 2003; Rysman, 2009). A key takeaway is that platforms may select pricing structures that differ from traditional one-sided cost-plus reasoning. They might subsidize one side to encourage participation while monetizing the other (Rochet & Tirole, 2003; Armstrong, 2006; Rysman, 2009).

Models distinguish between settings in which users join only one platform (single homing) and those in which users join several platforms simultaneously (multi-homing) (Armstrong, 2006). When at least one side is single-homed, platforms can create "competitive bottlenecks" in which locked-in users on one side serve as a basis for extracting surplus from multi-homed users on the other side (Armstrong, 2006). When both sides multi-home, individual transactions become easier to challenge, and price competition increases, since users can switch between platforms with each transaction (Armstrong, 2006). These different homing patterns generate distinct competitive regimes and affect equilibrium prices and margins (Armstrong, 2006; Rysman, 2009).

Research shows that platform design, governance, and the variety of complements are crucial in shaping competition among platforms. (Parker & Van Alstyne, 2005; Cennamo & Santaló, 2013). How a platform structures access, shares information, and assigns decision rights influences the strength of cross-side externalities and how attractive the platform is for each side (Parker & Van Alstyne, 2005). The variety and quality of complements available on a

platform affect user participation and can become a key lever of differentiation and competitive advantage (Parker & Van Alstyne, 2005; Cennamo & Santaló, 2013). Empirical and conceptual work shows that platforms face trade-offs between pursuing "winner-take-all" positions and co-existing with other differentiated platforms, depending on the strength of network effects, multi-homing costs, and user preferences (Cennamo & Santaló, 2013).

The literature on platform competition provides a structured framework to analyse pricing decisions, participation incentives, and the role of network effects in multi-sided markets (Rochet & Tirole, 2003; Armstrong, 2006; Rysman, 2009). By modelling how platforms balance subsidies and charges across user groups, this stream clarifies why price competition may intensify in environments characterised by widespread multi-homing and low switching costs (Armstrong, 2006). It also highlights how governance choices and the variety of complements influence platform attractiveness and competitive positioning (Parker & Van Alstyne, 2005; Cennamo & Santaló, 2013).

At the same time, this literature usually takes a simple view of platforms, treating them as simple intermediaries, with competitive outcomes driven by pricing structures, user behavior, and the strength of cross-side network effects, rather than by firm-specific capabilities (Rochet & Tirole, 2003; Armstrong, 2006; Rysman, 2009). As a result, performance differences between platforms in similar market conditions are not a key focus of these models.

Moreover, while platform competition theory shows how pricing can change user incentives and limit multi-homing, it provides little insight into how long these strategies can last. Pricing structures can often be rapidly matched by competitors, particularly in digital markets characterised by high transparency and low marginal costs (Rysman, 2009; Cennamo & Santaló, 2013). This suggests that pricing alone may not be enough to explain lasting differences when competing platforms use similar strategies.

2.2 Resource-Based Theory

Resource-Based Theory (RBT) explains persistent performance differences between firms by the heterogeneity of their resources and capabilities (R&C) and by the imperfect mobility of these assets across firms (Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 1991). Firms are described as bundles of resources, defined broadly to include physical, human and organisational assets that are under the firm's control and that can be used to conceive of and implement strategies (Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 1991), and capabilities, defined as the firm's capacity to deploy, combine and coordinate these resources through organisational processes and routines to perform activities and implement strategies (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991; Barney et al., 2021). Within RBT,

competitive advantage arises when a firm controls R&C that contribute to economic value creation and that competitors find difficult to replicate or substitute (Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 1991). Early formulations operationalised this logic through the VRIN criteria, which hold that R&C must be valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable to support sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). Later developments refined this perspective, introducing the role of organisational backing in enabling value capture (VRIO) and, more recently, shifting attention toward how R&C jointly support the creation of economic value, rather than serving as a static checklist of attributes (Barney et al., 2021).

Within RBT, resources go beyond physical assets like plants or equipment. They also include intangible factors such as brand reputation, technological know-how, organisational culture, routines, and relational ties with suppliers, customers, and other stakeholders (Wernerfelt, 1984; Grant, 1991). These intangible resources are especially important for gaining a competitive edge because they are often tied to specific firm contexts, making them harder for competitors to see or copy (Grant, 1991). However, the presence of such resources alone is not sufficient to generate superior performance. Their strategic value depends on the organisational capabilities through which they are deployed and coordinated in practice (Grant, 1991). Capabilities influence how organizations integrate their intangible resources and turn them into effective strategy execution, which creates a link between resource endowments and performance outcomes (Grant, 1991; Barney, 1991).

A key contribution of Resource-Based Theory is the argument that many strategic assets are accumulated over time, rather than acquired instantaneously through firm-specific investment (Dierickx & Cool, 1989). Such gradual accumulation creates barriers to imitation, allowing competitive advantages to persist over time (Dierickx & Cool, 1989; Barney, 1991). Three main factors contribute to imperfect imitability: path dependence, causal ambiguity, and social complexity (Barney, 1991). Path dependence shows that R&C are shaped by historical investment patterns, meaning that current positions come from lengthy sequences of previous decisions and cannot be easily copied without taking a similar path (Barney, 1991). Causal ambiguity occurs when competitors find it hard to see the connection between certain resources, capabilities, and performance outcomes, making it tough to identify which elements lead to superior performance (Barney, 1991). Social complexity involves how R&C fit into relationships, organizational culture, trust-based interactions, and informal routines. These elements are hard to define or share (Barney, 1991). Together, they limit competitors' ability to copy successful resource-capability setups and explain why differences in performance

continue, even when details about companies' strategies are widely known (Dierickx & Cool, 1989; Barney, 1991).

RBT also emphasises that advantages often rest on systems of complementary resources rather than on isolated elements (Grant, 1991). Individual assets may be relatively easy to imitate. Still, the specific way in which they are combined into integrated configurations of technology, human skills, organisational processes, and external relationships can be substantially more difficult to reproduce (Grant, 1991). Complementarities suggest that the value of a resource relies on the presence and interaction of other resources. Imitating a single part without copying the entire setup is unlikely to produce similar performance results (Grant, 1991). In this setting, capabilities are vital as higher-level groups of organizational routines that coordinate several resources, connect activities, and support effective strategy execution throughout the firm (Grant, 1991).

The emphasis on complementarities and capability-based coordination has been extensively illustrated in the information systems literature, which applies RBT to the analysis of IT-related R&C as sources of competitive advantage (Bharadwaj, 2000; Wade & Hulland, 2004). This work distinguishes between IT infrastructure, human IT skills, and more advanced customer- or supplier-oriented applications (Bharadwaj, 2000; Wade & Hulland, 2004). While basic infrastructure may be necessary to support operations, it is generally insufficient on its own to generate sustained advantage. In contrast, more firm-specific and relational IT resources are more likely to contribute to superior performance when they are embedded in organisational capabilities that enable coordination, learning, and integration with non-IT resources (Wade & Hulland, 2004). This application reinforces the RBT argument that competitive advantage arises from interconnected bundles of R&C rather than from isolated technological assets.

RBT provides a coherent framework for analysing how differences in firm-specific R&C can give rise to performance differences among firms operating in similar market environments (Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 1991). By emphasising the role of valuable and difficult-to-imitate resources and capabilities, isolation mechanisms, and the complementarities that arise from their combination, RBT explains why competitive advantages may be sustained over time rather than eroded through competitive imitation (Barney, 1991; Dierickx & Cool, 1989; Grant, 1991). At the same time, RBT mainly provides a firm-level explanation of performance outcomes. On its own, it does not explain how firms turn their resources into specific strategic positions or competitive choices in market settings (Porter, 1980; Grant, 1991).

2.3 Competitive Strategy

Competitive strategy research looks at how firms position themselves in industries and how they organize their activities to achieve and maintain superior performance (Porter, 1980). A key contribution is the idea that firms can pursue cost leadership, differentiation, or focus strategies (Porter, 1980). Cost leadership relies on achieving a lower cost position than rivals while offering similar benefits. In contrast, differentiation involves offering a product or service that is seen as unique along attributes valued by customers, allowing the firm to command a premium (Porter, 1980). Focus strategies apply these logics to a smaller segment, concentrating resources on a specific niche (Porter, 1980). A central implication of this framework is that effective competitive positioning requires internal consistency between activity and strategic position, meaning that firms failing to commit to either cost leadership or differentiation risk becoming "stuck in the middle," lacking both cost efficiency and meaningful differentiation, resulting in inferior performance (Porter, 1980).

Subsequent research challenged the strict interpretation of Porter's generic strategy framework, suggesting that competitive advantage does not derive solely from commitment to a single, pure strategic position. The feasibility and performance of generic strategies depend on firm size, resource availability, and industry conditions, and the original framework is overly restrictive if strategies are assumed to be pursued in complete isolation (Wright, 1987). The implied mutual exclusivity between cost leadership and differentiation is therefore too rigid, as differentiation strategies may, under certain conditions, incorporate efficiency-oriented elements when supported by coherent configurations of activities and organisational arrangements (Wright, 1987; Hill, 1988). From this perspective, hybrid strategies are possible, and their viability depends on the firm's ability to manage the organisational and operational tensions associated with pursuing multiple strategic logics in a coherent manner (Hill, 1988; Wright, 1987).

Porter's own work later shifts the focus of competitive strategy away from generic labels and toward the concept of fit among a firm's activities, emphasising that strategy is fundamentally about making trade-offs that distinguish one position from others (Porter, 1996). From this view, performance problems come not from having multiple strategic elements, but from incoherent configurations in which firms try to balance conflicting positions without properly coordinating their activities (Porter, 1996).

Empirical reviews of competitive strategy typologies support the importance of coherence, as evidence suggests that firms with clear and consistent configurations aligned with cost leadership or differentiation tend to outperform those without a distinct strategic orientation

(Campbell-Hunt, 2000). This reinforces the central role of activity fit rather than strict adherence to ideal-type strategies (Campbell-Hunt, 2000; Wright, 1987).

More recent contributions extend competitive strategy thinking to settings where value creation and capture depend increasingly on networks and ecosystems rather than on single firms (Parker & Van Alstyne, 2005; Cennamo & Santaló, 2013). In these settings, value creation refers to the generation of benefits for users and complementors, while value capture concerns the mechanisms through which firms appropriate a share of that value (Parker and Van Alstyne, 2005; Cennamo and Santaló, 2013). In such environments, strategic positions are shaped not only by internal activity configurations but also by governance choices that structure interactions among ecosystem participants (Parker & Van Alstyne, 2005; Cennamo & Santaló, 2013). This stream of work adapts traditional concerns with positioning and strategic trade-offs to multi-sided and platform-based markets, while remaining consistent with the core insights of competitive strategy theory (Porter, 1980; Porter, 1996; Cennamo & Santaló, 2013).

Taken together, competitive strategy research provides a structured framework for understanding how firms achieve superior performance through positioning, activity configuration, and internally consistent strategic choices (Porter, 1980; Porter, 1996; Wright, 1987). By emphasising strategic trade-offs, activity fit, and internal coherence, competitive strategy research explains why certain strategic positions are difficult to imitate and why firms pursuing poorly aligned configurations may underperform (Porter, 1980; Porter, 1996; Wright, 1987).

At the same time, competitive strategy theory has well-recognised limitations. Its focus is on explaining how companies choose and maintain strategic positions within industries, rather than on the firm-specific resource and capability conditions that determine the feasibility and effectiveness of those positions (Porter, 1980; Porter, 1996; Wright, 1987). As a result, while competitive strategy frameworks clarify what types of positions may lead to advantage, they offer limited insight into why firms operating under similar competitive and technological conditions differ substantially in their ability to implement, coordinate, and sustain such strategies over time (Wright, 1987; Campbell-Hunt, 2000).

These limitations become particularly salient in contexts characterised by complex interdependencies and rapid competitive dynamics, such as platform-based and ecosystem-driven markets (Parker & Van Alstyne, 2005; Cennamo & Santaló, 2013). Competitive strategy theory, therefore, benefits from being complemented by firm-level perspectives that explicitly address differences in underlying resource configurations, organisational capabilities, and implementation capacity (Wright, 1987; Grant, 1991).

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

3.1 Framework Overview

Building on the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, this thesis creates an integrated conceptual framework to examine subscription-based strategies in food-delivery platforms. The framework combines ideas from platform competition theory, resource-based theory, and competitive strategy research, and looks at how subscription programs are designed, implemented, and used within larger platform strategies.

Platform competition theory provides the market-level foundation for the framework by explaining how a multi-sided platform's structure prices, manages network effects, and influences user participation under conditions of multi-homing and competitive rivalry. From this perspective, subscription programs are conceptualised as pricing arrangements that modify the balance between per-transaction charges and recurring payments, thereby shaping user incentives, transaction frequency, and platform loyalty. While this literature does not specifically theorize subscription models in food delivery markets, it provides tools to examine how these arrangements interact with network effects and competition. RBT adds to this view by concentrating on differences in resources and capabilities among firms. In this framework, subscription programs are viewed as organizational outcomes whose feasibility and sustainability rely on the resources available and the capabilities of the organization. Instead of directly pulling specific resource categories from the literature, this thesis explores resource differences in food-delivery platforms. It looks at factors that are important for subscription-based strategies, such as financial capacity, technology and data assets, operational and logistical skills, brand strength, user base density, and the nature of relationships with restaurant partners. These dimensions represent an application of general resource-based principles to the empirical setting under study, rather than claims explicitly advanced in the RBT literature.

Research on competitive strategy adds more insight by explaining how subscription programs connect to wider positioning choices and activity systems. From this perspective, subscription programs help create a competitive advantage only when they fit with a clear strategic direction and are integrated into a consistent set of activities. Depending on how they are embedded within the platform's overall strategy, subscriptions may support efficiency-oriented positions focused on increasing order volume or differentiation-oriented positions based on bundled benefits and reduced switching costs.

Taken together, this framework conceptualises subscription programs as an interface between platform-level competitive forces and firm-level resource configurations. By bringing these views together, the framework allows for a comparison of how platforms in similar market

environments and with similar subscription terms can have different outcomes due to variations in resources, capabilities, and strategies.

3.2 Research Questions and Hypotheses

Guided by the conceptual framework outlined above, this study adopts a comparative case study approach to examine how subscription programs are used as strategic instruments on food-delivery platforms. The hypotheses developed in this section seek to test the research questions introduced in Chapter 1 by specifying how differences in platform R&C are expected to manifest in subscription strategy design, performance, and persistence of differentiation. They therefore serve as an organising device for the empirical analysis, clarifying the dimensions along which the comparative cases are examined.

H1: Differences in platform resource and capability profiles are reflected in distinct subscription strategy designs and strategy-consistent performance outcomes.

Building on the RBT, this hypothesis suggests that differences in platform resources and capabilities affect both performance outcomes and strategic decisions about subscription design and implementation.

In the comparative analysis of DoorDash and Uber Eats, this examines whether platforms with contrasting organisational focus and subsequent resource configurations deploy subscription programs in systematically different ways, and whether subscription performance is interpreted in a manner consistent with each platform's strategic orientation. Evidence consistent with this hypothesis would be reflected in observable differences in subscription structure, scope, and performance interpretation that align with underlying resource and capability profiles, rather than convergence on a uniform subscription model.

H2: Inimitable resource advantages support more persistent forms of subscription-based differentiation compared to strategies relying primarily on easily replicable resources.

This hypothesis puts into practice an essential idea of the RBT. Competitive advantages are more likely to last when they are based on resources that competitors struggle to copy. When applied to subscription strategies, the hypothesis looks at whether subscriptions based on deeper, harder-to-replicate resource setups last longer over time compared to those that depend mainly on visible, easily matched subscription features.

In the context of this comparative case analysis of DoorDash and Uber Eats, persistence is understood in relative terms. It refers to the ongoing significance and success of subscription

programs, even in the face of competition and converging features. Evidence supporting this idea would appear in instances where subscription-based differentiation continues to be linked to unique resource advantages over time. In contrast, strategies that depend mainly on easily copied elements tend to show reduced differentiation as competitors start to offer those same features.

3.3 Methodology

3.3.1 Research Design and Case Selection

This research follows a comparative case study approach, examining DoorDash and Uber Eats' subscription strategies from 2019 to 2024. This design combines systematic analysis of secondary financial and operational data with semi-structured expert interviews, enabling interpretation of findings across multiple sources.

While secondary data provides objective performance metrics and resource investments, primary data serves essential complementary functions such as contextualizing quantitative patterns within competitive and operational realities, validating interpretations of strategic intent derived from public communications, and identifying mechanisms through which resources translate into subscription outcomes that may not be evident in financial data alone.

The study follows a longitudinal design, tracking platform performance and the evolution of subscription strategy over six years. This timeframe captures the complete transition from promotion-led competition to the introduction and maturation of subscription models. Beginning the analysis in 2019 allows observation of platform strategies before widespread subscription adoption and COVID-19, while the extended horizon is necessary to assess whether observed advantages are sustained over time.

The analysis is conducted at a global platform level rather than focusing on individual national markets. This approach is justified for three reasons. First, both DoorDash and Uber Eats operate subscription programs across multiple countries, making platform-level strategy the appropriate unit of analysis. Second, financial and subscription metrics are reported on a consolidated basis, limiting the feasibility of market-level decomposition using publicly available data. Third, core resource-based advantages such as technology infrastructure, brand, and organisational capabilities operate primarily at the firm level. While market-specific conditions matter, this research focuses on how platform-level resource configurations shape subscription strategy and outcomes across global operations.

Case selection followed four criteria. First, platforms needed to reach a significant scale to ensure that the outcomes observed showed actual strategic execution instead of just the effects

of market entry. Second, subscription programs needed sufficient operating history to allow assessment of performance over time. Third, both firms needed to be publicly listed to ensure data availability and comparability. Fourth, the cases needed to exhibit meaningful differences in resource profiles. DoorDash focuses on delivery, while Uber Eats is part of a broader multi-service platform, creating a clear difference suitable for comparative analysis.

3.3.2 Data collection

3.3.2.1 Secondary Data Sources

The analysis relies primarily on publicly available secondary data. Financial and operational information was collected from SEC filings (2019–2024), including annual 10-K reports and quarterly 10-Q reports. To track changes in performance, investment intensity, and the strategic role of subscription programs. Annual reports were used to assess longer-term resource configurations and strategic priorities, while quarterly filings were used to identify the timing and progression of subscription adoption and to disclose performance-related metrics.

Additional qualitative context was drawn from investor communications, including quarterly earnings call transcripts, shareholder letters, and investor presentations. These sources provide management perspectives on competitive positioning, subscription strategy, and resource allocation. Industry reports and market research from sources such as Bloomberg and McKinsey supplement firm disclosures with industry-level context. Company websites and press releases were used to document subscription program features, pricing structures, and significant strategic announcements.

3.3.2.2 Primary Data Sources

The primary data consists of three semi-structured anonymous interviews with industry experts currently employed in food-delivery platforms in strategy, operations, or finance roles. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow for a balance between comparability across respondents and flexibility to probe platform-specific insights, making them suitable for exploring strategic processes, organisational capabilities, and managerial interpretations that are not directly observable in secondary data.

Each interview lasted approximately 30–40 minutes and was conducted via video call. The interview guide was organised into four thematic blocks aligned with the analytical framework: (i) Competitive Environment; (ii) Resources and Capabilities; (iii) Role of Subscription Programs; and (iv) Expected Evolution of Subscription Models.

Interview data was analysed using a structured block-based note-taking approach consistent with the interview guide. Recurrent points of convergence were then compared across interviews and used to interpret and contextualise patterns observed in the secondary data.

4. Interview Discussion

This chapter summarises insights from semi-structured expert interviews with managers from major European food-delivery platforms. To preserve confidentiality, interviewees are referred to as Interviewee A, B, and C.

#	Years in Industry	Functional Background	Platform
A	2+ Years	Strategy and Operations	Bolt Food
B	4+ Years	Finance and Operations	Glovo
C	6+ Years	Logistics and Operations	Wolt

Table 1: Overview of Industry Experts

4.1 Competitive Environment

Across interviews, food delivery was described as a highly competitive and structurally low-margin industry, particularly in mature European markets. The sector was consistently characterised as scale-driven, with profitability dependent on achieving sufficient demand across consumers, restaurants, and couriers. According to the interviewees, the COVID-19 period sped up user adoption and market growth. It also increased competition, making scale and operational efficiency more important as markets matured.

As competitive intensity increased and the effectiveness of broad price promotions declined, interviewees perceived a shift in the basis of competition. Rather than relying primarily on discounting, platforms have increasingly focused on supply-side differentiation, particularly through exclusivity and relevance of restaurant offers. Exclusive partnerships with large or well-known restaurant brands were described as central to competitive positioning. Interviewee A noted that, in recent years, market share in mature markets has become more dependent on securing these exclusivities than on offering the lowest prices, especially given that consumers already have access to multiple platforms.

This view was further reinforced by Interviewee C, who described the market as increasingly ‘deal-driven’, with platforms relying heavily on price promotions to attract demand.

Within this competitive environment, multi-homing was seen as a key part of consumer behavior. Interviewees noted that users often use multiple delivery platforms simultaneously. They switch between these platforms for each order based on price, availability, or restaurant choice. However, with increased competition and lower returns from promotions, subscription models appeared as a solution. By encouraging users to focus their orders on one platform to

maximize subscription benefits, subscriptions were seen as reducing the intensity of multi-homing.

4.2 Resources and Capabilities

When discussing resources and capabilities, interviewees emphasised the central role of financial capacity in a scale-driven business. Access to funding was described as essential for sustaining operations, financing customer acquisition, securing exclusivity agreements, and absorbing short-term losses during expansion phases. Financial resources were therefore framed as a necessary condition for competing effectively and for reaching the scale required to support subscription strategies. Interviewee C further emphasised that substantial financial resources are needed to absorb losses over extended periods to secure long-term market presence. This strengthens the idea that size and financial stability are key factors in deciding which platforms will stay successful over time. Access to capital does not provide lasting advantages, as it can be easily copied.

In addition to financial resources, the interviewees highlighted the significance of local market density and restaurant selection. High city-level density of orders and couriers was associated with shorter delivery times and greater service reliability, while a broad, relevant portfolio of restaurants, particularly well-known local and national brands, was associated with greater perceived value of subscription benefits. Operational capabilities were viewed as equally central by all interviewees. Reliable courier availability and efficient last-mile logistics were described as prerequisites for delivering consistent service quality to subscribers. Subscriptions were seen as difficult to sustain when service quality is volatile or delivery times deteriorate, especially as customers become “more and more impatient”.

Technology capabilities were seen as important tools instead of independent sources of advantage. Interviewees mentioned operational systems, data analytics, and user-interface design as essential for handling complexity on a large scale, personalizing offers, and improving pricing decisions. Interviewee A highlighted the advantage of operating “one subscription model but two applications,” using shared infrastructure across apps to maximise touchpoints, coordinate communication, and exploit data for pricing and segmentation. This backs up the idea that subscription success relies not just on pricing but also on integration, analytics, and coordination capabilities within the platform.

4.3 Role of Subscription Programs

When asked about the growing importance of subscription models such as DashPass or Uber One, interviewees converged on two primary objectives: generating more predictable revenue and strengthening customer retention. Subscriptions were described as providing a more stable revenue stream while improving user retention, whereas reliance on price promotions alone was associated with fragile and short-lived loyalty.

Subscribed users were perceived as ordering more frequently and remaining active for longer periods, even after occasional negative experiences. Subscriptions were therefore viewed as a mechanism for repositioning competition away from pure promotional rivalry. By paying a fixed monthly fee, customers perceive lower per-order costs and are incentivised to concentrate demand on the platform where they hold a subscription. This creates a softer form of lock-in in an environment where multi-homing remains prevalent.

Several strategic motives were identified, including securing customer exclusivity, increasing order frequency, stabilising margins over time, and deepening data availability on high-value users. Interviewee A emphasized that platforms aim to position themselves as a "one-stop shop" by integrating food delivery with other services, such as grocery or mobility, to create cross-service synergies and reinforce subscription value. In such multi-service configurations, stronger verticals can be leveraged to support growth in weaker ones, highlighting how differences in platform scope and resource composition shape subscription design and feasible benefit structures.

4.4 Expected Evolution of Subscription Models

Interviewees anticipated ongoing consolidation in the market. They believe that mature markets are unlikely to support many players. Interviewee A suggested that, in the long run, "a maximum of two players" will gain most of the volume, while a third competitor might find it difficult to achieve adequate scale and eventually exit. Although new entrants may still appear in less saturated markets, mature markets are becoming more challenging to enter without substantial financial support and operational scale. Thus, consolidation is viewed as a form of competition in food delivery, not just a temporary trend.

Interviewees pointed out three related risks tied to subscription strategies. First, interviewees B and C stressed the challenge of maintaining competitive subscription offers amid rising cost pressures. Inflation, higher courier costs, and labor constraints were viewed as limiting platforms' ability to raise subscription prices without losing customers. Second, interviewees A and B noted the fragile nature of the courier supply chain, as dependence on flexible, often non-

contracted couriers makes it difficult to ensure service quality and delivery times that subscribers expect. Third, interviewee A highlighted the quick imitation of competitive offers. Subscription benefits were said to be rapidly matched by competitors, which reduces differentiation and implies that long-term success in subscriptions cannot rely solely on prominent features. Interviewees consistently suggested that ongoing success depends on stronger resource and capability foundations, such as local market density, operational routines, and integrated platform structures.

Despite these risks, interviewees expect that subscriptions will continue to develop rather than fade away. They expected more intense competition around the value offered, including the addition of more services within subscriptions. They also foresaw continued consolidation among a few large players in mature markets. Therefore, subscriptions were likely to remain crucial competitive tools, with success relying on how well they connect with essential resources, operational capabilities, and overall strategic positioning.

5. Data Analysis and Results

5.1 Resource Profile Analysis

5.1.1 DoorDash Resource Profile

Market Position Resources

DoorDash's market position resources consist primarily of its restaurant network scale, geographic coverage, local market density, consumer base, and delivery partner base. In 2019, which represented the beginning of an extraordinary growth period for the entire industry, DoorDash reported operations across several U.S. cities, as well as internationally, and a rapidly expanding restaurant network, supported by a strategy that emphasised penetration of suburban and mid-density markets in addition to major urban centres (DoorDash, 2020 Form 10-K). At that time, this resource base already differentiated DoorDash from major competitors such as Uber Eats and Grubhub, whose early U.S. expansion strategies were more heavily concentrated in large metropolitan areas.

Between 2019 and 2024, these resources expanded substantially. During COVID-19, DoorDash reported record order volumes and revenue growth (Bloomberg, 2022). Total orders increased from 263 million in 2019 to approximately 2.58 billion in 2024, corresponding to a compound annual growth rate of about 58% over the five-year period (DoorDash, 2020 Form 10-K; DoorDash, 2024 Form 10-K).This corresponded to a revenue of USD 885 million in 2019 compared to a revenue of USD 10,722 million in 2024 (DoorDash, 2020 Form 10-K; DoorDash, 2024 Form 10-K). This was accompanied by an improvement in operating profitability. In 2019, DoorDash reported a negative adjusted EBITDA of approximately USD -475 million, with an adjusted EBITDA margin of -54%, reflecting heavy investment in growth and network expansion. As scale increased and order density improved, adjusted EBITDA progressively strengthened, turning positive by 2020 and reaching approximately USD 1,900 million by 2024, with an adjusted EBITDA margin of 2.4% (DoorDash, 2021 Form 10-K; DoorDash, 2024 Form 10-K).

DoorDash has developed capabilities to generate high order frequency, sustain strong two-sided network effects, and reduce user multi-homing through local relevance. High restaurant density allows the platform to deliver reliably, which is particularly important for subscription users who seek frequent usage to maximise membership value. DoorDash management has repeatedly linked local scale and density to improved delivery efficiency and higher consumer engagement, showing how market position resources are actively leveraged through operational capabilities (DoorDash Q3 2024 earnings call).

Technology and Data Resources

DoorDash's technology and data resources include its digital platform infrastructure, accumulated data on orders and delivery patterns, and proprietary software systems for managing last-mile logistics. In 2020, the company already reported significant investment in logistics technology, including systems for dispatch, matching, and routing (DoorDash, 2020 Form 10-K). These resources formed the technological foundation required to manage rapidly growing order volumes.

By 2024, DoorDash's disclosures will place greater emphasis on expanding its data assets and analytics infrastructure. The company reports using machine-learning models to forecast demand, balance courier supply, improve estimated delivery times, and personalise user experiences, including subscription-related offers (DoorDash, 2023 Form 10-K).

These technology resources are particularly relevant in the context of subscriptions. As DashPass encourages higher order frequency, pressure on logistics systems increases. DoorDash management highlights investments in dispatch efficiency and delivery reliability to the platform's ability to support frequent users without disproportionate cost increases (DoorDash Q2 2024 earnings call). In this way, technology and data resources function as complementary assets that enable the scalable delivery of subscription value rather than as standalone innovations.

Financial Resources

DoorDash's financial resources include its cash holdings, access to capital markets, and overall balance-sheet capacity. In 2020, the company operated at a loss and relied heavily on external financing to fund growth and incentives, including early subscription initiatives and customer acquisition (DoorDash, 2020 Form 10-K). Despite negative margins, access to capital constituted a critical resource that enabled continued investment.

By 2024, DoorDash reported approximately USD 2132 million in net cash provided by operating activities, a far better position than the USD 467 million in net cash used by operating activities. This metric turned positive in 2020 and has grown steadily since, excluding a slight decrease in 2022 due to an increase in net loss. (DoorDash, 2020 Form 10-K; DoorDash, 2022 Form 10-K; DoorDash, 2024 Form 10-K). Although food-delivery margins remain thin, this financial metric shows the platform has the flexibility to sustain delivery fee waivers and invest in service improvements for both regular users and subscribers.

Building on these financial resources, DoorDash has developed the capability to absorb short-term profitability struggles and to pursue subscription growth with a long-term horizon.

DashPass is consistently framed as a strategic investment in retention rather than an immediate profit driver, indicating an organisational willingness to allocate financial resources to support subscription-based differentiation (DoorDash Q3 2024 earnings call).

Strategic Focus and Organisational Resources

DoorDash's strategic and organisational resources include its focused delivery-centric business model, brand positioning in food delivery, organisational structure, and long-standing relationships with restaurants and delivery partners. In this context, "focus" refers to the company's sustained emphasis on on-demand local delivery as its core activity, rather than diversification into unrelated digital services. In 2020, the company's disclosures already identified food delivery as its core business, with managerial attention focused on restaurant acquisitions, courier supply, and last-mile execution (DoorDash, 2020 Form 10-K).

Building on its established delivery infrastructure and dense U.S. market presence, DoorDash progressively expanded beyond restaurant delivery into adjacent categories such as grocery, convenience, alcohol, and retail. By 2024, DoorDash management characterised delivery as increasingly embedded in everyday consumption patterns rather than as a temporary substitute and reported partnerships with tens of thousands of non-restaurant merchants, including major grocery and convenience chains such as Walmart, CVS, and 7-Eleven, as well as its own DashMart operations, reflecting a deliberate strategy to sustain order frequency and everyday relevance (DoorDash, 2023 Form 10-K; CNBC, 2021).

This expansion leveraged existing market position and logistics resources while requiring the development of new capabilities related to assortment management, retail partner integration, and category-specific fulfilment. Meanwhile, DoorDash's expansion remained closely aligned with its core delivery focus, suggesting a depth-oriented adjacency strategy rather than broad ecosystem diversification.

DoorDash has developed organisational capabilities that tightly integrate subscription design with its delivery-centric operating model. These include the ability to align incentives across consumers, restaurants, and couriers by prioritising high-frequency local usage, dense market coverage, and predictable demand flows. For consumers, DashPass lowers marginal delivery costs and rewards repeat ordering within a single category. For restaurants, subscription-driven demand increases order volume and visibility within local markets, supported by data insights on menu design, operating hours, and local expansion decisions that strengthen long-term partnerships rather than short-term promotional spikes. For couriers, higher order density improves utilisation and delivery efficiency. These capabilities are cumulative and scale-

dependent: as more orders flow through the platform, operational learning and data-driven optimisation improve outcomes for all three constituencies simultaneously. DashPass is embedded in a coherent activity system centred on data insights, delivery reliability, and local scale, rather than functioning as a cross-product bundling tool.

5.1.2 Uber Eats Resource Profile

Market Position Resources

Uber Eats' market position resources derive from its integration into Uber's global platform ecosystem and consist primarily of its extensive geographic coverage, large merchant base, broad consumer user base, and shared delivery partner network. In 2019, Uber Eats already operated across dozens of countries, leveraging Uber's existing international footprint and brand recognition to scale food delivery rapidly across regions (Uber Technologies, 2019 Form 10-K). However, this expansion resulted in substantial heterogeneity in local market positions, with varying levels of restaurant density and competitive intensity across geographies.

Between 2019 and 2024, Uber Eats significantly expanded its merchant base and geographic reach, as well as its revenue. Delivery revenue increased from USD 1,401 million in 2019 to approximately USD 13,750 million in 2024, corresponding to a compound annual growth rate of about 58% over the five-year period (Uber Technologies, 2020 Form 10-K; Uber Technologies, 2024 Form 10-K). In 2019, Uber's delivery segment generated a negative adjusted EBITDA of USD -1,372, with a negative EBITDA margin of -97.9% reflecting aggressive investment in market expansion, consumer incentives, and logistics capacity. Profitability of the delivery segment improved over time as scale increased and cross-service synergies with Uber's mobility platform were realised, turning positive for the first time in 2022. By 2024, Uber's delivery segment reported positive adjusted EBITDA of USD 2,471 million, with an EBITDA margin of 17.9% (Uber Technologies, 2023 Form 10-K; Uber Q4 2023 earnings call).

Uber Eats has developed capabilities related to rapid market entry, cross-regional scaling, and leveraging an extensive installed user base across multiple services. At the same time, the dispersion of local market density constrains the platform's ability to consistently deliver high-frequency usage and uniform service reliability across markets, with implications for the perceived value of subscription benefits.

Technology and Data Resources

Uber's technology resources are among its most important strategic assets and are shared across its multi-service platform. These resources include a global digital infrastructure, large-scale data assets generated from mobility and delivery services, and proprietary algorithms for routing, pricing, and matching. In 2019, Uber Eats already benefited from these shared resources, which had been developed initially to support ride-hailing operations and were subsequently adapted for food delivery (Uber Technologies, 2019 Form 10-K).

By 2024, Uber continued to emphasise advanced analytics, integrated user accounts, and platform-wide data utilisation as core technological resources (Uber Technologies, 2023 Form 10-K). These resources enable real-time coordination across services and support subscription offers that span food delivery and mobility.

Using these resources, Uber has developed capabilities related to cross-service integration, unified subscription management, and dynamic pricing across verticals. These capabilities allow Uber Eats to bundle delivery benefits with ride discounts under Uber One. However, because Uber's technological resources are shared across multiple business lines, including mobility and delivery, delivery-specific optimisation is embedded within broader platform priorities. Uber's disclosures emphasise platform-wide technology development and cross-segment integration rather than delivery-exclusive optimisation, suggesting an inherent trade-off between breadth and depth of specialisation (Uber Technologies, 2023 Form 10-K; Uber earnings calls, 2023–2024).

Financial Resources

Uber's financial resources are primarily group-level assets, including cash, access to capital markets, and diversified revenue streams across mobility, delivery, and other services. In 2019, Uber operated at significant losses but maintained substantial access to external financing, enabling it to subsidise multiple business lines, including Uber Eats, which showed accelerated growth during COVID-19 (Uber Technologies, 2019 Form 10-K). By 2024, Uber reported improved cash flow generation and stronger financial performance at the group level, reflecting a transition toward operational leverage and profitability (Uber Technologies, 2023 Form 10-K).

In 2024, Uber reported approximately USD 7,137 million in net cash provided by operating activities, a better position than the USD 4,321 million in net cash used by operating activities in 2019. This metric turned positive in 2022 and has grown steadily since (Uber Technologies, 2020 Form 10-K; Uber Technologies, 2022 Form 10-K; Uber Technologies, 2024 Form 10-K).

Building on these resources, Uber has developed the capability to pursue ecosystem-wide subscription strategies that prioritise customer lifetime value across multiple use cases. At the same time, capital allocation decisions must balance competing strategic priorities, which may constrain the intensity of financial commitment to food-delivery subscriptions.

Strategic Focus and Organisational Resources

Uber's strategic and organisational resources are rooted in its multi-service platform model, global brand recognition, and integrated user account system. In 2019, Uber Eats functioned as a complementary service within a broader ecosystem, with organisational attention distributed across mobility and emerging delivery operations.

Between 2019 and 2024, Uber Eats expanded beyond restaurant delivery into groceries, alcohol, and retail, supported by partnerships with major international grocery chains in several markets, including Carrefour, Tesco, and Costco (Uber Technologies, 2023 Form 10-K; Financial Times, 2023). This expansion leveraged Uber's existing platform resources while increasing the scope of delivery offers across markets.

Uber has developed capabilities in ecosystem coordination, cross-selling, and subscription bundling, culminating in the positioning of Uber One as a platform-wide membership that integrates food delivery and mobility services. However, this broad strategic scope introduces organisational complexity and trade-offs, as subscription design must accommodate the objectives of multiple business lines rather than optimising exclusively for food-delivery performance.

5.1.3 Comparative Resource Analysis

DoorDash and Uber Eats possess distinct resource endowments and the capabilities built upon them, which have become more pronounced over time rather than converging. While both platforms operate two-sided delivery marketplaces and expanded beyond restaurant delivery between 2019 and 2024, they have done so through structurally different resource configurations.

From a market position resource perspective, DoorDash and Uber Eats exhibit a clear contrast between depth and breadth. DoorDash's resources are characterised by dense local market penetration within a concentrated geographic footprint, particularly in the United States. Its emphasis on suburban and mid-density markets enabled the accumulation of high restaurant density and short delivery distances, which directly support frequent usage and subscription value creation. Uber Eats, by contrast, accumulated market position resources through rapid

geographic expansion across dozens of countries, resulting in a broad but heterogeneous footprint. Although Uber Eats operates at greater scale, its local density varies substantially across markets, as evidenced by strategic withdrawals from smaller or less competitive geographies (Reuters, 2020). As a result, DoorDash's market position resources are structured around delivering consistent local service quality and supporting frequent repeat usage. In contrast, Uber Eats' resources prioritise geographic reach and flexibility in market participation. These differences in market position and resources explain distinct operational capabilities. DoorDash's dense local networks support capabilities related to delivery reliability, predictable service quality, and high order frequency, which are particularly valuable for subscription users seeking to maximise their benefits. Uber Eats dispersed strategy, while enabling rapid market entry and global scale, constrains the platform's ability to deliver reliably across all regions, limiting the consistency with which subscription benefits can be realised at the local level.

Regarding technology and data resources, both firms control sophisticated digital infrastructures and large-scale data assets, but their capabilities differ. DoorDash's technology resources are primarily oriented toward food and local-commerce delivery, allowing data, algorithms, and logistics systems to be optimised around a single core use case. This supports capabilities in last-mile efficiency, demand forecasting, and service reliability under high-frequency conditions. Uber Eats draws on technology resources shared across a multi-service platform, enabling capabilities such as cross-service integration and subscription bundling, but also imposing trade-offs as delivery-specific optimisation competes with broader platform priorities across mobility and other services.

Both firms possess substantial access to capital but deploy financial resources differently. DoorDash's liquidity position supports a long-term investment approach focused on deepening engagement in its core delivery business, with DashPass explicitly framed as a retention mechanism rather than a short-term profit centre. Uber's financial resources are allocated at the ecosystem level, enabling subscription strategies that seek to maximise customer lifetime value across multiple services, which may dilute the intensity of financial commitment directed specifically toward food-delivery subscriptions.

Finally, contrasts in strategic focus and organisational resources shape how expansion beyond restaurants has unfolded. DoorDash's expansion into grocery, convenience, alcohol, and retail reflects a depth-oriented adjacency strategy, leveraging existing delivery infrastructure to increase order frequency and everyday relevance without fundamentally altering the platform's core focus. Uber Eats' expansion follows a breadth-oriented logic within a multi-service ecosystem, where delivery is one component of a broader mobility and services offer. These

organisational differences translate into distinct capabilities: DoorDash excels at tightly integrating subscriptions with a single service category, while Uber Eats leverages subscriptions to coordinate engagement across multiple use cases.

Taken together, the comparative analysis suggests that subscription performance is not driven solely by scale, but by the alignment between resource configuration and capability development over time. DoorDash's dense, focused resource base supports subscription strategies built around frequent, repeat usage. In contrast, Uber Eats' broader and more dispersed resources support subscription strategies centred on ecosystem bundling and cross-service engagement.

5.2 Subscription Strategy Implementation

5.2.1 DashPass Strategy and Evolution

DashPass represents DoorDash's subscription initiative and is designed to increase order frequency, reduce price weight for frequent users, and deepen engagement with the platform's delivery ecosystem. Launched in 2018 in the United States, DashPass predates many competing delivery subscriptions and was initially positioned as a delivery-fee waiver program for high-frequency users (DoorDash, 2020 Form 10-K). Over time, its scope, eligibility, and integration with DoorDash's expanding merchant base evolved substantially.

At its core, DashPass offers subscribers $0 delivery fees and reduced service fees on eligible orders above a minimum basket size, typically set at USD 12 for restaurants and higher thresholds for grocery and retail orders, depending on the merchant category (DoorDash, 2023 Form 10-K). The subscription is priced at approximately USD 9.99 per month or USD 96 annually, a price point that management has consistently framed as accessible for frequent users (DoorDash Q3 2024 earnings call).

Eligibility for DashPass benefits is determined at the merchant level. Restaurants and non-restaurant merchants must opt into DashPass, and only eligible merchants display DashPass badges in the app. By 2024, DoorDash reported working with over 500,000 merchants globally, with DashPass eligibility extending across a substantial portion of this base in its core markets (DoorDash, 2023 Form 10-K).

DashPass has also been used as a lever for customer acquisition and retention through partnerships and promotions. DoorDash has offered DashPass access through free trials, discounted introductory periods, and bundled offers with credit card partners, lowering adoption barriers and encouraging trial use among new or infrequent users (DoorDash, 2023 Form 10-K). These initiatives indicate that DashPass prioritizes user adoption and habit

formation before full-price monetization. DoorDash consistently frames DashPass as a long-term engagement mechanism rather than an immediate profit centre. Earnings calls emphasise retention, order frequency, and customer lifetime value, with management explicitly acknowledging that subscription economics depend on scale, density, and operational efficiency (DoorDash Q3 2024 earnings call). This positioning aligns DashPass closely with DoorDash's underlying resource configuration, particularly its dense local networks and delivery-focused organisational structure.

In sum, DashPass is implemented as a frequency-driven, delivery-centric subscription, tightly coupled with DoorDash's merchant density, logistics capabilities, and expansion into adjacent everyday categories. Its design deliberately emphasizes repeat usage, local relevance, and operational integration, laying the foundation for evaluating subscription outcomes and comparative performance in subsequent sections.

5.2.2 Uber One Strategy and Evolution

Uber One is Uber's unified subscription product that consolidates several services into a single, cross-service membership. Uber One was formally launched in 2021 in the United States and selected international markets, replacing Eats Pass and explicitly bundling benefits across food delivery (Uber Eats) and mobility services (Uber rides) (Uber Technologies, 2023 Form 10-K). From its inception, Uber One was positioned as an ecosystem-wide subscription rather than a delivery-only product.

Uber One is priced at approximately USD 9.99 per month or USD 99.99 annually (Uber Technologies, 2023 Form 10-K). The subscription provides $0 delivery fees and reduced service fees on eligible Uber Eats orders above minimum basket thresholds, alongside percentage-based discounts on Uber rides, typically around 5%, subject to market-specific conditions.

Eligibility for Uber One benefits is determined at both the merchant and market level. Not all Uber Eats merchants participate in Uber One, and benefit availability differs across regions depending on local partnerships, regulatory constraints, and operational considerations. Uber does not disclose the precise share of merchants eligible for Uber One benefits, but filings indicate that eligibility coverage varies significantly across markets, reflecting the platform's heterogeneous geographic footprint (Uber Technologies, 2023 Form 10-K).

A distinctive feature of Uber One's implementation is its cross-service bundling. Subscribers access benefits across delivery and mobility through a single membership tied to their Uber account. This design allows users to apply subscription benefits across different use cases, such

as combining discounted rides with reduced-cost food delivery within the same platform ecosystem. Uber's earnings communications emphasise this cross-use functionality as a central design element of Uber One, aimed at increasing engagement across multiple services rather than within a single vertical (Uber Q4 2023 earnings call).

Uber One has been launched through promotional trials and introductory offers, including free trial periods and discounts for first-time subscribers. These promotions have been used to encourage adoption among users already active on either Uber Eats or Uber rides, facilitating cross-service trial and subscription uptake (Uber Technologies, 2023 Form 10-K).

Uber sees Uber One as a tool for engaging users across its platform rather than just a pricing model for delivery. Earnings calls show that Uber One increases overall user activity and engagement across different services. The subscription design focuses on maximizing lifetime value within the entire ecosystem, not just improving margins in the delivery segment (Uber Q4 2023 earnings call; Financial Times, 2024).

In short, Uber One is a bundled subscription that combines food delivery and mobility benefits into one membership. Its design promotes broad use across the Uber platform, allows for flexible benefit application among services, and supports growth in various locations. This approach sets it apart from delivery-focused subscriptions and lays the groundwork for comparison in later sections. -centric subscriptions and forming the basis for comparative analysis in subsequent sections.

5.2.3 Subscription Offer Comparison

Although DashPass and Uber One are priced similarly and both offer delivery fee reductions, their subscription designs differ markedly in scope and structure.

DashPass is implemented as a delivery-centric subscription focused on local commerce. Its benefits apply to food delivery and adjacent categories such as grocery and convenience, with eligibility determined at the merchant level and subject to category-specific minimum order values. As a result, subscription value is concentrated within the delivery experience and accrues through repeated eligible orders.

Uber One, by contrast, is implemented as a bundled, cross-service subscription spanning delivery and mobility services. In addition to delivery fee reductions, it provides ride discounts, with benefit availability determined at both the merchant and market levels and varying by geography. This structure allows users to realise subscription value across multiple services rather than within a single vertical.

A central design distinction lies in the concentration versus dispersion of benefits. DashPass concentrates value within delivery use cases, whereas Uber One distributes benefits across services and usage contexts. These differences shape how subscription benefits are accessed in practice, independent of subscription price.

Finally, the evolution of each subscription reflects divergent implementation paths. DashPass expanded incrementally into adjacent local-commerce categories while retaining a delivery-focused structure, whereas Uber One emerged through consolidation, replacing service-specific subscriptions with a unified platform-wide membership.

5.3 Performance Outcomes Analysis

5.3.1 Subscription Adoption Metrics

Subscription adoption evolved rapidly for both platforms over the period under analysis, though with different timing and growth trajectories. DashPass, launched in 2018, experienced gradual adoption before 2020, followed by a sharp acceleration during the COVID-19 period. DoorDash reported a substantial increase in DashPass subscribers during 2020–2021, coinciding with record order volumes and heightened consumer reliance on delivery services (DoorDash, 2020 Form 10-K; Bloomberg, 2022). By 2023–2024, DashPass had reached tens of million of subscribers, with DoorDash disclosures indicating approximately 22 million DashPass and Wolt+ subscribers combined (DoorDash, 2023 Form 10-K).

Uber One was launched in 2,021 but scaled rapidly after its introduction. Uber reported strong uptake of Uber One after consolidating service-specific subscriptions into a single bundled product, reaching approximately 25 million subscribers globally by 2023–2024 (Uber Technologies, 2023 Form 10-K; Uber Q4 2023 earnings call). The pace of adoption reflects the ability to leverage an existing global user base across both mobility and delivery services.

Beyond subscriber numbers, management disclosures highlight differences in usage intensity between subscribers and non-subscribers. DoorDash consistently reports that DashPass subscribers place significantly more orders per month than non-subscribers, framing subscription adoption as closely linked to higher order frequency rather than one-time usage (DoorDash Q3 2024 earnings call). Uber similarly reports higher engagement among Uber One members across the platform, though engagement is distributed across rides and delivery rather than concentrated in a single service (Uber Q4 2023 earnings call).

Overall, adoption metrics indicate that while subscriber scale converges in absolute terms, the timing, growth path, and usage logic of subscription uptake differ meaningfully between the two platforms.

5.3.2 Financial Performance Impact

Subscription programs coincided with periods of increased revenue growth and improving profitability metrics for both DoorDash and Uber. However, the magnitude and timing of these financial outcomes differed in line with each platform's subscription design and broader business model.

For DoorDash, the financial relevance of DashPass becomes visible once subscriber adoption scaled materially during the 2020–2021 period. Before large-scale subscription uptake, DoorDash reported revenue of USD 885 million in 2019 (DoorDash, 2020 Form 10-K). In 2020, revenue increased sharply to USD 2.89 billion, representing year-over-year growth of 226%, followed by a further increase to USD 4.89 billion in 2021 (+69%) as delivery demand surged and DashPass adoption expanded during the pandemic. Notably, revenue growth remained robust even after pandemic-related demand normalised, reaching USD 6.58 billion in 2022 (+35%), USD 8.64 billion in 2023 (+31%), and approximately USD 10.72 billion in 2024 (+24%) (DoorDash, 2023 Form 10-K; DoorDash, FY2024 earnings releases).

While DoorDash does not disclose subscription revenue separately, subscription scale provides essential context for these financial outcomes. By 2024, the company reported approximately 22 million subscribers globally. (DoorDash, FY2024 earnings releases). At a listed price of USD 9.99 per month, this implies a substantial recurring revenue stream in gross terms. However, management consistently frames DashPass as a retention and engagement mechanism rather than a standalone profit centre. Quarterly disclosures through 2024 indicate continued revenue growth and expanding adjusted EBITDA margins, suggesting improving monetisation and operating leverage as subscription adoption matured.

For Uber, financial performance improved markedly following the introduction of Uber One in 2021. In 2020, before the launch of Uber One, Uber reported revenue of USD 11.1 billion, reflecting pandemic-related growth (Uber Technologies, 2020 Form 10-K). In 2021, the year Uber One was introduced, revenue increased to USD 17.5 billion (+57%), followed by a sharp rise to USD 31.9 billion in 2022 (+82%) as mobility demand recovered and ecosystem engagement strengthened. For the full fiscal year 2023, Uber reported revenue of USD 37.28 billion and net income of USD 1.89 billion, marking its first full-year profit since becoming a public company (Uber Technologies, 2023 Form 10-K).

Uber One reached approximately 19 million members across 25 countries by early 2024, with Uber One members accounting for roughly 30% of Uber's mobility and delivery gross bookings, an increase of approximately 700 basis points year-over-year (Associated Press, 2024). Subsequent disclosures indicate continued growth in subscription adoption, with Uber

One exceeding 30 million subscribers globally by 2025, growing 60% year on year and reaching 34 countries.

While these revenue increases cannot be attributed solely to subscription programs, the timing and persistence of growth align with management's positioning of DashPass and Uber One as mechanisms that support higher engagement, revenue visibility, and reduced reliance on short-term promotions. Significantly, the financial role of subscriptions differs across platforms: DashPass appears closely associated with deepening monetisation within DoorDash's delivery business, whereas Uber One supports revenue growth and profitability through increased cross-service engagement at the ecosystem level.

5.3.3 Competitive Position Changes

The introduction and scaling of subscription programs coincided with meaningful shifts in the competitive positioning of both DoorDash and Uber Eats.

For DoorDash, the expansion of DashPass aligned with a consolidation of competitive leadership in its core U.S. food-delivery market. During the 2019–2024 period, industry estimates indicate that DoorDash increased its share of U.S. meal delivery gross order volume substantially, overtaking and maintaining a clear lead over competitors, with 33% of the US food delivery market in 2019 and about 67% market share in 2024 (CNBC, 2020; Bloomberg Second Measure, 2024).

DashPass appears to have reinforced this position by increasing user lock-in, raising order frequency, and strengthening local network effects in markets where DoorDash already held dense merchant coverage. DoorDash's SEC filings and earnings communications consistently link subscription adoption to higher engagement and retention, suggesting that subscription-based pricing reduced the effectiveness of short-term promotional competition and increased switching costs for frequent users (DoorDash, 2023 Form 10-K).

In contrast, Uber Eats' competitive position evolved along a different axis. Rather than maximising dominance within a single national market, Uber Eats leveraged Uber One to reinforce its role within a broader, multi-service ecosystem spanning mobility and delivery. Uber's disclosures emphasise ecosystem-level engagement and cross-service usage as core strategic objectives, with Uber One positioned as a mechanism to deepen platform-wide activity rather than to secure local delivery market leadership in every geography (Uber Technologies, 2023 Form 10-K; Financial Times, 2024).

Evidence of this differentiated competitive logic is visible in Uber's selective market withdrawals and reallocations of resources. In 2020, Uber exited Uber Eats operations in eight

smaller or less competitive markets where it could not achieve a top two position, indicating a deliberate focus on markets where sufficient scale and density could be sustained Reuters, 2020). This suggests that subscription bundling did not eliminate local competitive constraints but instead complemented a strategy of selective geographic participation.

Subscription strategies altered competitive dynamics in distinct ways. For DoorDash, DashPass reinforced a delivery-centric competitive advantage rooted in local density, frequency, and reliability, contributing to increased market concentration in its core market. For Uber Eats, Uber One supported competitive positioning through ecosystem breadth, cross-service engagement, and strategic flexibility across geographies.

Overall, the evidence indicates that subscription programs influenced competitive position not by equalising platforms, but by amplifying pre-existing strategic differences. Subscriptions acted as force multipliers, strengthening DoorDash's leadership in dense delivery markets while reinforcing Uber's positioning as a multi-service platform with ecosystem-based competitive advantages.

5.4 Findings by Hypothesis

5.4.1 H1: Differences in platform resource and capability profiles are reflected in distinct subscription strategy designs and strategy-consistent performance outcomes

H1 proposed that differences in platform resource and capability profiles are reflected in distinct subscription strategy designs and strategy-consistent performance outcomes, as platforms implement subscription programs in ways that leverage R&C accumulated through earlier strategic positioning. The comparative analysis of DoorDash and Uber Eats provides strong support for this hypothesis.

DoorDash's resource configuration is characterised by delivery specialisation, dense local market networks, and organisational focus on last-mile logistics. These resources underpin a subscription strategy centred on frequent food-delivery usage, operational reliability, and integration with local commerce. DashPass is implemented as a delivery-centric subscription, with benefits concentrated within food delivery and closely related categories. Subscription value increases with order frequency and is closely aligned with DoorDash's core service capabilities. Performance outcomes are therefore assessed primarily in terms of delivery frequency, customer retention, and local market penetration, all of which are consistent with DoorDash's strategic focus.

In contrast, Uber Eats' resource profile reflects its integration into a diversified, multi-service platform. Shared technology infrastructure, global brand recognition, unified user accounts, and

cross-service data capabilities enable Uber One to bundle benefits across food delivery and mobility services. Uber One is designed as a platform-wide engagement mechanism rather than a delivery-exclusive subscription, with performance outcomes distributed across multiple services. As a result, subscription performance is evaluated based on overall platform engagement and customer lifetime value rather than food-delivery metrics alone.

Taken together, these findings indicate that underlying resource and capability configurations shape subscription strategy design and performance outcomes. Rather than converging on a uniform subscription model, platforms deploy subscriptions in ways that are consistent with their broader strategic orientation and organisational focus.

5.4.2 H2: Inimitable resource advantages support more persistent forms of subscription-based differentiation compared to strategies relying primarily on easily replicable resources

H2 proposed that unique resource advantages support more lasting forms of subscription-based differentiation compared to strategies that mainly depend on easily copied resources. The data backs this idea.

In both cases, noticeable subscription features, like delivery-fee waivers, minimum order thresholds, and headline pricing, converged quickly over time. This convergence indicates that subscription design elements are easy to copy and do not by themselves provide lasting differentiation. More persistent differentiation instead rests on deeper, more difficult-to-imitate resource foundations. In DoorDash's case, DashPass reinforces existing strengths in dense local delivery markets by increasing switching costs, raising order frequency, and strengthening local network effects. These outcomes are supported by accumulated restaurant relationships, operational routines, and market-specific delivery density that are costly for competitors to replicate quickly.

For Uber Eats, persistent differentiation arises from ecosystem-level resources rather than delivery-specific subscription features. Uber One leverages Uber's multi-service platform scale, shared technology infrastructure, integrated user accounts, and cross-service data capabilities to increase customer engagement across services. Replicating this form of differentiation would require competitors not only to match subscription terms, but to build and coordinate a comparable multi-service ecosystem over time, involving substantial organisational complexity and capital investment.

Overall, the findings indicate that subscription programs function as amplifiers of inimitable resource advantages rather than as independent sources of sustained differentiation.

Subscription features can be rapidly matched, but the resource foundations that determine how those features translate into persistent strategic outcomes are significantly harder to replicate

6. Conclusions

6.1 Interpretation of Findings

This dissertation looked at how platform-specific research and commerce help food-delivery companies use differentiation strategies with subscription models. By comparing DoorDash and Uber Eats, the analysis sought to explain why subscription programs, which seem alike in pricing and main features, can result in different strategic roles and performance outcomes on each platform.

With respect to the first research sub-question, which asked how differences in platform R&C are reflected in subscription strategy design, the findings indicate that subscription programs are closely aligned with broader organisational focus and strategic orientation. Delivery-specialist platforms such as DoorDash implement subscriptions as delivery-centric mechanisms that reinforce frequent usage, local market penetration, and operational reliability. In this context, DashPass is designed to increase the frequency and consistency of food delivery, with performance assessed primarily through delivery frequency, customer retention, and local network strength. Interview insights reinforce the importance of restaurant relevance and courier availability in enabling subscription value to be repeatedly realised in everyday use.

In contrast, platforms embedded within broader multi-service ecosystems design subscriptions as platform-wide engagement tools. Uber One illustrates how subscriptions can be structured to bundle benefits across food delivery and mobility services, leveraging cross-service integration to increase overall platform usage. In this case, subscription performance is evaluated not only by food-delivery metrics but also by broader indicators such as ecosystem engagement and customer lifetime value. These findings show that subscription strategy design reflects underlying resource configurations and organisational scope, rather than converging on a single dominant model.

The second research sub-question concerned whether subscription-based differentiation can be sustained over time, and under what conditions. The findings suggest that subscription-based differentiation is more persistent when it's anchored in valuable, difficult-to-imitate resources rather than in observable subscription features alone. Across both cases, elements such as delivery fee waivers, minimum order thresholds, and headline pricing converged rapidly, indicating that competitors can easily match subscription features and that these features, on their own, do not constitute durable sources of advantage.

More persistent differentiation instead depends on deeper resource foundations. In DoorDash's case, dense local delivery networks, accumulated restaurant relationships, and operational routines enable subscriptions to reinforce existing market leadership in ways that are costly for

competitors to replicate quickly. In Uber's case, differentiation arises from ecosystem-level resources, including multi-service scale, shared technology infrastructure, integrated user accounts, and cross-service data capabilities. Replicating this form of subscription-based differentiation would require competitors to build and coordinate a comparable multi-service ecosystem over time, which would involve substantial organisational complexity and investment.

Taken together, the findings provide a clear answer to the main research question. Subscription programs enable food-delivery platforms to pursue differentiation not through subscription design or pricing features alone, but through how subscriptions are embedded within broader resource configurations and strategic orientations. Platforms with different resource and capability profiles implement subscriptions in distinct ways, aligning them with either delivery-centric or ecosystem-wide strategies, and evaluating their performance accordingly. While subscription features are easily imitated, subscriptions can support more persistent differentiation when they reinforce valuable, hard-to-imitate resources, such as dense local delivery networks or integrated multi-service ecosystems. The strategic role and effectiveness of subscription models, therefore, depend less on the subscription mechanism itself and more on the underlying platform resources and organisational capabilities through which it's deployed.

6.2 Main Implications

6.2.1 Theoretical Implications

This dissertation contributes to the literature on platform competition and strategic differentiation by integrating insights from the RBT and Porter's Generic Strategies framework in the context of digital platform markets.

First, the findings extend RBT by showing that subscription models do not constitute independent sources of competitive advantage but instead operate as mechanisms that reinforce pre-existing resource advantages. While subscription programs are often framed as revenue models, the evidence indicates that their effectiveness depends on the platform's ability to deliver value at scale consistently. Subscription features are obvious and rapidly imitated, meaning that sustained advantage arises from platform-specific resources, such as dense local networks or integrated multi-service ecosystems, rather than from subscription design itself.

Second, the analysis contributes to the application of Porter's differentiation framework in platform markets. The findings show that subscription strategies function as instruments of differentiation rather than cost leadership, but that the nature of differentiation varies across

platforms and resource configurations. For delivery-specialist platforms, differentiation is achieved through superior service reliability, local availability, and frequency of use, reinforced by delivery-centric subscriptions. For multi-service platforms, differentiation is achieved through ecosystem breadth and convenience, with subscriptions enhancing cross-service integration rather than solely improving delivery performance. This illustrates that differentiation in platform markets is multi-dimensional.

Third, by combining RBT and Porter, this study clarifies why similar subscription strategies do not lead to uniform performance outcomes. Differences in subscription strategy design reflect distinct strategic positioning choices rather than temporary competitive tactics. From Porter's perspective, platforms pursue different forms of differentiation aligned with their strategic scope, while RBT explains why these positions are defensible only when supported by difficult-to-imitate resources. The findings therefore show that strategic positioning determines how firms compete, while R&C determines whether such positioning can be sustained.

Finally, the dissertation contributes to the literature on competitive dynamics in digital platforms by highlighting the limits of subscription-based competition as a standalone strategic move. The rapid convergence of subscription features across platforms supports the view that visible competitive actions are quickly matched, not producing any sustainable competitive advantage unless supported by structural advantages. Subscriptions thus can act as amplifiers of chosen differentiation strategies, rather than substitutes for underlying strategic positioning or resource strength.

6.2.2 Managerial Implications

The findings of this dissertation have several implications for managers operating in platform-based and subscription-driven business models, particularly in highly competitive platform markets such as food delivery.

First, the results suggest that subscription models should not be seen as separate solutions for gaining a competitive edge. Managers should understand that subscriptions mainly strengthen existing advantages rather than make up for weak capabilities. In markets where local density, service reliability, or operational execution are lacking, simply introducing a subscription won't lead to the expected increases in revenue and customer loyalty. Subscription design should come after investing in essential platform resources.

Second, the analysis highlights the importance of aligning the subscription strategy with the platform's scope. For delivery-specialist platforms, subscriptions are most effective when used as retention mechanisms that increase order frequency and deepen local market penetration.

Managers in such platforms should focus on operational excellence, merchant quality, and geographic density to ensure that subscription benefits are consistently realised. For multi-service platforms, subscriptions should be designed as ecosystem-wide engagement tools, leveraging cross-service integration to increase overall platform usage and customer lifetime value. Attempting to replicate a delivery-centric subscription without comparable delivery depth may dilute strategic focus.

Third, the findings underscore the limits of competing solely on subscription features. Observable elements such as delivery fee waivers or minimum order thresholds are rapidly imitated and tend to converge across competitors. Managers should therefore avoid escalating subsidy-based competition through subscriptions without a clear understanding of how deeper resource advantages support these costs. Without such foundations, subscription-driven competition risks eroding margins without delivering durable differentiation.

Overall, the managerial implication is that effective subscription strategies are not generic best practices but context-dependent tools, and their success depends on the coherence between platform resources, strategic positioning, and organisational capabilities, rather than on subscription design alone.

7. Limitations and Future Research

7.1 Research Limitations

As with any case-based research, this dissertation is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, the study is based on a comparative case analysis of two leading food-delivery platforms, DoorDash and Uber Eats. While this approach allows for in-depth analysis and theoretical grounding, it limits the generalisability of the findings to other platforms, industries, or geographic contexts. The conclusions drawn are therefore most applicable to large-scale, platform markets characterised by strong network effects and subscription-based competition.

Second, the empirical analysis relies primarily on secondary data, including company disclosures, industry reports, and publicly available performance indicators. Although these sources provide a robust basis for comparative analysis, they constrain the level of detail at which certain aspects, such as user-level behaviour or subscription profitability, can be examined. The reliance on aggregated data also limits the ability to identify causal relationships between subscription strategies and performance outcomes directly.

Third, the study's qualitative component is based on a limited number of expert interviews. While the interviews provide valuable interpretive insights and help contextualise the empirical findings, the small sample size restricts the breadth of perspectives captured.

Fourth, the study is conducted within a research context characterised by a relatively limited body of academic literature on subscription strategies in platform-based food-delivery markets. Although the analysis draws on established theoretical frameworks, such as the RBT and Porter’s Generic Strategies, the limited prior empirical research on this topic constrains opportunities for direct comparison and replication. This limitation reflects the emerging nature of subscription-based competition in digital platform industries.

Finally, the analysis focuses on strategic positioning and competitive dynamics rather than on the long-term financial sustainability of subscription models or the durability of the competitive advantages they confer. While the study examines subscription strategy design, strategic role, and competitive differentiation, it does not explicitly quantify subscription-level profitability or the evolution of margins over time due to data limitations. In addition, the study’s time horizon supports conclusions about relative persistence rather than permanent competitive advantage. Whether ecosystem-level resource configurations continue to sustain subscription-based differentiation over longer horizons remains an open empirical question.

7.2 Future Research Directions

The limitations identified above suggest several avenues for future research.

Future studies could extend the comparative analysis to a broader set of platforms, including regional food-delivery providers or platforms operating in adjacent sectors, to assess whether the relationships observed in this study hold across different competitive environments.

Further research could also incorporate firm-level or user-level data to examine the causal impact of subscription adoption on usage behaviour, retention, and profitability. Access to cohort-level subscription metrics would allow for more precise testing of the mechanisms proposed in this dissertation.

In addition, future research could expand the qualitative dimension of the analysis by conducting more interviews with platform managers, merchants, and users. This would enable a more comprehensive exploration of organisational decision-making, partner incentives, and behavioural responses to subscription models.

Finally, longitudinal research examining the evolution of subscription strategies over time would be particularly valuable. As competitive dynamics and regulatory environments continue to change, studying how subscription models adapt, converge, or diverge across platforms could provide deeper insights into the long-term role of subscriptions in digital platform competition.

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8.1. Use of AI

I acknowledge that I have listed all AI tools used in this research in the "Use of AI Tools" table below, and that I have exercised critical judgment in selecting and presenting the outputs of the generative AI tools, ensuring their relevance, validity, and coherence with the broader research objectives.

Domain	Generative AI tool(s) used	Purpose / Function	Methodology / Approach	Sections in the document
Text revision and summarization	ChatGPT 5.2	Support text refinement by suggesting synonyms, antonyms, rephrasing, and alternative wording to improve clarity and avoid repetition.	Used interactively to request alternative formulations (e.g., “Give me three synonyms for …”, “Rephrase this sentence without using …”).	Used throughout the document to improve readability, avoid repetition (e.g., overuse of “Moreover”), and refine language.
Text revision and grammar correction	Grammarly	Grammar checking, spelling correction, and stylistic suggestions to improve clarity and conciseness.	Grammarly’s automated suggestions were reviewed by the author and accepted or rejected based on relevance and appropriateness.	Used throughout the document.
Translation	ChatGPT 5.2	Used to create an initial translation of the Abstract in Portuguese.	Used to request a translation of the Abstract into Portuguese, which was thoroughly reviewed and revised as needed.	Used in the Portuguese Abstract.

Table 2: Use of AI Tools

9. Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Guide- Food-Delivery Platforms and Subscription Strategies

Purpose: to explore how platform-specific resources and capabilities enable differentiation through subscription models such as DashPass and Uber One.

Format: Semi-structured, ~30 minutes, five thematic blocks.

Confidentiality: All participants anonymized; findings used solely for academic purposes.

Block	Question
1. Professional Background	1) Could you briefly describe your professional background and how you've interacted with food-delivery businesses? 2) In your current or past roles, have you dealt with subscription or loyalty strategies?
2. Competitive Environment	1) How would you describe the current competitive landscape in food delivery, particularly in mature markets such as the US or Europe? 2) From your perspective, what main challenges do platforms face in differentiating their services when consumers often multi-home across apps? 3) Do you think the market is reaching a saturation or consolidation stage, and how does that affect strategy?
3. Resources and Capabilities	1) In your opinion, which resources or capabilities are most critical, market reach, technology, brand, financing, partnerships, or others? 2) Which of these resources do you believe are hardest to imitate and therefore most decisive for long-term advantage? 3) To what extent do local market density, courier liquidity, and restaurant partnerships determine sustainable performance?
4. Role of Subscription Programs	1) What, in your view, explains the growing importance of subscription models like DashPass or Uber One? 2) What specific goals do these programs pursue: customer loyalty, higher order frequency, data collection, margin stabilization?

	3) How do resource differences (e.g., a single focus vs. multi-service platform) shape how each company designs and manages its subscription? 4) Have you observed any examples of capabilities, technological, operational, or financial, that made one company's subscription more effective?
5. Expected Evolution of Subscription Programs	1) How do you see subscription models evolving over the next 3–5 years within the broader delivery or mobility ecosystem? 2) What potential risks might affect their success? 3) Do you think we'll see convergence toward one dominant platform, or continued coexistence of several?

Appendix 2: Segments by Category Interviewee A (note extracts/paraphrases)

Block	Sub-Topic	Interviewee A (paraphrase of notes)
2. Competitive Environment	Competitive intensity/industry economics	"Very competitive"; competition sustained by exclusivities; market share highly dependent on exclusivities.
2. Competitive Environment	Shift away from broad promotions	Mentions shift from a historically price-focused focus to "big exclusivities" more recently.
2. Competitive Environment	Exclusivity as a competitive lever	"70% of relevant restaurants do delivery; with exclusivity nobody can enter."
2. Competitive Environment	Multi-homing (consumer behaviour)	Multi-homing challenge framed as exclusivity/pricing + communication/top-of-mind; subscriptions help users feel "obliged" to order with the subscribed platform.
2. Competitive Environment	Differentiation levers beyond restaurants	Notes end with a contrast of platform offers: Glovo retail, Bolt mobility, Uber Eats restaurants.
2. Competitive Environment	Consolidation / entry barriers	"Max 2 players winning; 3rd exits"; industry of numbers, needs scale.
3. Resources and Capabilities	Financial capacity (what it enables)	Financial backing enables aggressive pricing and exclusivity at close; must be at least break-even vs. the non-sub model.
3. Resources and Capabilities	Local density & restaurant selection	Operational prerequisites: relevant restaurant selection, recurring user base, couriers.
3. Resources and Capabilities	Courier supply/service quality constraints	Courier/supply chain dependence noted; demand vs courier supply (e.g., rain) and "timing" (users more impatient).
3. Resources and Capabilities	Technology & data as enablers	"One subscription model but two apps"; user-friendly experience; leverage touchpoints (marketing/communication); data for pricing.
4. Role of Subscription Programs	Why subscriptions matter (primary objectives)	"Two big reasons: predictable revenue + retention; otherwise only pricing."

4. Role of Subscription Programs	Mechanism: frequency / softer lock-in	“Order frequency much higher (almost double) and more retention; even after a bad experience they return.”
4. Role of Subscription Programs	Scope: single-service vs multi-service / one-stop-shop logic	“Goal is to be a one-stop shop; more services makes retention easier; mobility leader can leverage into food.”
5. Expected Evolution of Subscription Programs	Evolution of subscription offers	Expect adding other verticals; cross-selling; rapid imitation (“if one offers delivery fee, we must offer it too”).
5. Expected Evolution of Subscription Programs	Key risks	Risks: brands breaking exclusivities; courier labor structure/quality control; timing expectations; imitation.

Appendix 3: Segments by Category Interviewee B (note extracts/paraphrases)

Block	Sub-Topic	Interviewee B (paraphrase of notes)
2. Competitive Environment	Competitive intensity/industry economics	"Quite competitive" in Europe; low margins; scale business; grew a lot since COVID; Europe has fewer orders and room to grow.
2. Competitive Environment	Exclusivity as a competitive lever	Mentions exclusivity of large establishments (diversity and quality).
2. Competitive Environment	Multi-homing (consumer behaviour)	"Multi-homing still happens a lot"; cultural in Southern Europe; decreasing with subscriptions; users keep two apps for different benefits.
2. Competitive Environment	Differentiation levers beyond restaurants	Differentiation via breadth of offers: ride-sharing, pharmacies, groceries, restaurants.
2. Competitive Environment	Consolidation/entry barriers	"Market tends to consolidate"; but a large player could still enter. Portugal is hard to enter without global scale; Poland has many active players; mature markets hard entry + continued consolidation.
3. Resources and Capabilities	Financial capacity (what it enables)	"Funding always needed"; scale business needs money; money is required for normal operations and to increase capacity across couriers/clients/merchants; also for partnerships and marketing.
3. Resources and Capabilities	Local density & restaurant selection	"Couriers/clients/merchants as three pillars" (capacity building), plus exclusivity of large establishments.
3. Resources and Capabilities	Courier supply/service quality constraints	Fewer couriers will increase costs.
3. Resources and Capabilities	Technology & data as enablers	Tech capability to "facilitate the flow"; operational systems to customize merchant views.

4. Role of Subscription Programs	Why subscriptions matter (primary objectives)	Subscriptions explained as: secure customer exclusivity + retention/loyalty; cost strategy alone is expensive and does not create loyalty.
4. Role of Subscription Programs	Mechanism: frequency / softer lock-in	“Subscriptions have had adherence”; people see the benefit across multiple orders; higher frequency supports scale and profitability.
4. Role of Subscription Programs	Scope: single-service vs multi-service / one-stop-shop logic	Differentiation via breadth of offer (ride-sharing + pharmacies/groceries/restaurants).
5. Expected Evolution of Subscription Programs	Evolution of subscription offers	“Keep within current patterns”; constant growth of benefits (more restaurants/partners).
5. Expected Evolution of Subscription Programs	Key risks	Inflation//cost competitiveness; hard to raise subscription prices; fewer couriers increases cost.

Appendix 4: Segments by Category Interviewee C (note extracts/paraphrases)

Block	Sub-Topic	Interviewee A (paraphrase of notes)
2. Competitive Environment	Competitive intensity/industry economics	Market described as "dynamic" and increasingly competitive; customers have many choices and strong deal sensitivity; food-delivery apps perceived as becoming more like "deal apps".
2. Competitive Environment	Shift toward price competition	Strong prevalence of price-led competition (e.g., "30% buy one get one"); sustained pressure to continuously match competitor offers.
2. Competitive Environment	Multi-homing (consumer behaviour)	Multi-homing remains common due to price sensitivity; users switch platforms depending on promotions and perceived value.
2. Competitive Environment	Differentiation challenges	Differentiation framed as dependent on restaurant partnerships and platform quality; success described as "more of a sales game" with restaurants.
2. Competitive Environment	Consolidation/entry barriers	Consolidation described as ongoing in Germany; competition framed as "who is going to stay till the end and assume the losses"; cross-subsidization across geographies noted.
3. Resources and Capabilities	Financial capacity (what it enables)	Financing is critical in an "investment-heavy" business; required to sustain losses, support operations, and remain competitive.
3. Resources and Capabilities	Operational capabilities	Operational execution emphasized as central, particularly in terms of delivery speed and alignment with city-level demand dynamics.
3. Resources and Capabilities	Local density & service quality	Performance described as highly dependent on selection, delivery speed, and pricing; service quality closely tied to operational efficiency.

3. Resources and Capabilities	Technology & data as enablers	Platform quality and operational systems described as necessary enablers rather than standalone sources of advantage.
4. Role of Subscription Programs	Why subscriptions matter (primary objectives)	Subscriptions framed as a response to price competition and as a source of "predicted revenue" for the company.
4. Role of Subscription Programs	Why subscriptions matter (primary objectives)	Subscriptions mainly increase retention and order frequency among already active users; "doesn't get you new customers, but increases loyalty".
4. Role of Subscription Programs	Competitive imitation	Subscription design described as largely reactive; platforms "take what the competition is offering".
5. Expected Evolution of Subscription Programs	Evolution of subscription offers	Subscriptions expected to become "more dynamic" and easier for customers and platforms; increased data availability expected to shape design.
5. Expected Evolution of Subscription Programs	Key risks	Rising costs and inflation identified as risks; subscriptions may become more expensive and require careful cost–benefit balancing.