
Negotiating Autonomy in a Dual Space: How Ride-Hailing Drivers' Agency is formatted by Digital Intermediation

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Abstract

This paper explores how ride-hailing drivers' agency is not a given, but a constructed disposition shaped by platform-mediated intermediation. Building on a theoretical framework that intersects platform labor studies, labor geography (Rodgers et al., 2013; Beaudé 2021), and agency theory (Alkire, 2008; Sen, 1985), the article's central hypothesis is that drivers' subordinated agency (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021) results from the *dual nature of platform workspace*: a digital space of informational control and a physical space of service provision. Rather than a direct asymmetrical power relationship between platform and driver, subordination emerges from an asymmetry of position between drivers and clients toward the platform, mediated through digital infrastructures. The platform monopolizes information flows, orchestrating coordination while depriving drivers of visibility and initiative at key stages of the service production process. Drivers' agency is thus produced by their position within a triangulated relationship, wherein action is contingent on platform-issued notifications that precondition the real-world act of service provision.

Using a mixed-method approach based on deep learning and natural language processing (NLP), the study analyzes more than 93,000 messages posted by French-speaking drivers on a dedicated online forum (Uberzone.fr) between 2014 and 2022. An agency score was developed by classifying posts into expressions of autonomy, constraint, or neutrality, and cross analyzing these classifications with topic modeling techniques. It then examines how agency fluctuates across two key dimensions: (1) the relationship to time, and (2) interactions with clients. Topics related to time management reveal a partial autonomy when drivers negotiate macro-decisions about when to work, while being constrained in micro-level temporalities dictated by platform algorithms. Topics related to customer interactions show drivers engaging in forms of digital resistance, such as appropriating rating systems, but always within the structural limits imposed by the platform's design.

These findings illustrate that the dual workspace frames drivers differently depending on the sphere (time vs. relationships) and the spatiality (digital vs. physical) involved. Drivers' strategies of contestation emerge less from direct confrontation than from micro-practices of reinterpretation, tactical compliance, and subtle reappropriations of digital affordances. By centering drivers' lived experiences and communication practices, and by conceptualizing digital labor agency as a product of digital intermediation, this research contributes to

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understanding the tacit modes of subordination operating within platform organization of work and, more broadly, to current debates on the contestation of digital labor regimes.

Keywords: digital intermediation, digital labor, cognitive asymmetry, subordinated agency, NLP, ride, hailing platform, tacit subordination