
The Delivery Worker in Platform Companies' Discourse: Representation Strategies on Digital Platforms

Romina López Concha*¹ and Guillermo Rivera Aguilera*²

¹Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso – Chile

²Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso – Chile

Abstract

Transformations in the world of work have given rise to new forms of employment characterized by the intensive use of digital technologies (Bericat Alastuey, 2019), as exemplified by platform-based labor. This type of employment, linked to the digitalization of the economy, is marked by precarious working conditions that challenge both national and international legal frameworks (Alferi, 2020; Fairwork, 2021). Although digital platform companies do not formally acknowledge an employment relationship, a clear dynamic of subordination has been identified, given that workers are required to follow instructions imposed by the app and are subject to continuous digital surveillance (Kougiannou & Mendonça, 2021; Umer, 2021). These companies portray themselves as mere technological intermediaries, thereby outsourcing responsibilities—a stance that has triggered labor mobilizations (Morales & Abal, 2020). Specifically, delivery workers have organized collectively through unions to advocate for the recognition of their labor rights (Haidar et al., 2020; Stewart et al., 2020). This form of work often emerges in contexts of social vulnerability and economic crisis, where perceived job insecurity compels workers to adopt this new labor model (Fernández-Trujillo, 2020). In this context, the present study aims to analyze the discursive construction of delivery workers by digital delivery platform companies operating in Chile, based on their communicative practices in social media as spaces of symbolic interaction and ideological socialization. To this end, a netnographic approach was employed (Marta-Lazo et al., 2020; Rivera-Aguilera et al., 2023), focusing on the Facebook and Instagram profiles of three delivery platform companies active in Chile. The analysis was conducted on visual corpora consisting of public advertisements and posts published between 2019 and 2023. The study draws on elements of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough & Wodak, 2000). Preliminary findings identify three ideological categories underlying the representation of the delivery worker: (1) "The faster the delivery, the more valuable the worker"; (2) "A geolocated worker is a more efficient one"; and (3) "No matter how, the worker must fulfill the customer's wishes." These categories reflect common strategies among digital platform companies, rooted in a business model that prioritizes cost reduction and profit maximization, instrumentalizing and rendering the worker invisible as a subject, thereby stripping them of their central role—contrary to the narrative promoted by digital platforms.

Keywords: work precariousness, digital labor, employers, delivery platforms, digital platform companies

*Speaker