
Platform Last-Mile Logistics in the Favela of Cidade de Deus, Rio de Janeiro

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Abstract

Rio de Janeiro is a highly complex and dynamic field of tension, where flows, platforms and logistical operations interact with places, communities, institutional actors and individuals, who must constantly rearticulate operations. Services like Uber and 99, iFood and Rappi in the food-delivery, as well as MercadoLivre, Shopee and Amazon in retail, are largely inaccessible in many favelas across Rio de Janeiro. Indeed, to overcome morphological and territory governance barriers, platforms need to entrench informal work, local networks, criminal organizations, and other authorities.

Between January and April 2025, we conducted fieldwork in four favelas (Maré, Rocinha, Penha and Cidade de Deus) through participant observation and 30 interviews with platform workers: Uber and 99 drivers, informal moto-taxi operators, official and unofficial couriers, e-commerce micro-entrepreneurs, and employees of small logistics firms. Drawing on literature on platform economies, informality, and logistical capitalism, we examine how logistical flows are sustained and reconfigured through a mix of formal and informal arrangements.

Focusing on ride-hailing and e-commerce, we show that platform operations only become viable through the work of local intermediaries. In ride-hailing, platforms often block service to and from favelas or issue warnings about entering "risk zones". In response, local transport alternatives, especially moto-taxis, structure everyday mobility. In e-commerce, last-mile logistics rely on decentralized networks of couriers and informal hubs. In Cidade de Deus, we followed the operations of a small, informal hub delivering for Shopee. In other favelas, companies like Amazon operate under similar conditions.

These informal arrangements structure a baroque labor process, in which formality and informality are mutually dependent and in which digitization plays a role, but a limited one. The further we move from central logistical hubs, toward what we call the logistical periphery, the less automation and standardization we find. In these zones, digital coordination tools exist, but infrastructure is fragmented, timelines are improvised, and labor is organized informally. The model of efficient, scalable platform logistics gives way to something else: slower, messier, and more reliant on local knowledge.

At the edges of favelas, communal moto taxis or local logistic companies are located in the last part of the flow, on the border of favela, where they form a kind of intermodal hubs, creating another logistic node where local and informal embeddedness open barriers. Rather than being exceptions, these arrangements are central to understanding how platform economies operate in logistical peripheries.

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