

Labor Control in the Platform Economy from an Ideological Perspective

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Abstract: With the rapid development of information technology, the platform economy has fundamentally transformed traditional labor relations, creating paradoxical conditions for workers. While delivery couriers ostensibly enjoy unprecedented flexibility in daily work arrangements, they simultaneously confront increasingly sophisticated labor control mechanisms embedded in digital platforms. This article focuses on labor control regimes within the platform economy, using China's food delivery industry as a critical case study. By incorporating Žižek's theory of the dialectics of desire—particularly his ideological critique of how systems shape subjective aspirations—the research provides a novel lens to examine labor control dynamics in the gig economy. The study bridges critical theory with empirical analysis of food delivery platforms, systematically investigating how algorithmic management systems structurally constrain worker autonomy while ideologically framing such constraints as opportunities for "self-optimization." Through analyzing the interplay between technological governance, performative incentives, and ideological narratives, the article illuminates the transformation of industrial relations under digital capitalism. It ultimately seeks to dissect the power asymmetry between workers and platforms, expose how technological tools enforce labor discipline, and propose frameworks for balancing labor rights protection with sustainable platform development. Additionally, the research extends the application of desire theory to contemporary platform-mediated labor conflicts, enriching both critical philosophy and labor studies discourses.

Keywords: platform economy, labor control, ideology, worker subjectivity

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of the platform economy, an increasing number of workers are choosing to join this emerging field, becoming so-called "platform workers," such as delivery couriers and ride-hailing drivers. Unlike traditional employment relationships, workers in the platform economy are often treated as independent contractors rather than formal employees. This status results in a flexible yet insecure employment relationship without legal labour protection regulations, such as minimum wage guarantees, social insurance, and overtime pay. Platforms use complex algorithms and technological means to manage and control workers' tasks with precision. For example, food delivery platforms optimize delivery routes and times through algorithms to increase efficiency, which places significant time pressure and safety risks on riders. Ride-hailing platforms, on the other hand, monitor drivers' service quality through rating systems and reward-punishment mechanisms.

These technological measures improve platform operational efficiency to some extent but also spark widespread debates about labor rights and labor control.

In comparison to the discussions of labor control theories by Marx, Bounovitch, and others, Lacan, Žižek's theory of the dialectics of desire offers a deeper and more unique perspective. The theory of desire not only focuses on the influence of social structures and power relations on the individual but also delves into how individuals position themselves within these structures, as well as how individuals seek fulfillment within complex power dynamics. In the context of the gig economy, issues such as how workers maintain autonomy amidst platform surveillance and market competition, and how they achieve personal value while pursuing economic interests, are closely tied to core concepts in the theory of desire, such as desire, needs, satisfaction, and frustration. Therefore, examining labor control within the gig economy through the lens of desire theory provides a more comprehensive and profound understanding.

This article aims to reveal the complex relationship between workers and platforms in the gig economy through the lens of the theory of desire, exploring how platforms implement labor control through technological means, and how workers seek self-realization and resistance under structural control. Specifically, it examines how labor control in the platform economy – particularly in the food delivery industry – operates through ideological mechanisms. Adopting Žižek's ideology theory and Marx's and Bourdieu's theories on labor control, it analyzes how digital control technologies shape workers' subjective experiences, and how these experiences, in turn, affect workers' behavior and identity. Specifically, this paper will address the following core issues: (1) What technological tools and management strategies do platforms use to control workers? How do these control mechanisms impact workers' work experience and labor rights? (2) How does ideology assist platforms in realizing labor control? How do workers form identification with and dependence on platforms under the influence of ideology? (3) How is workers' subjectivity expressed under labor control in the platform economy? How do they respond to and resist platform control?

2. Literature Review on Labor Control in the Platform Economy

Labor control theory is key to understanding the evolution of labor relations in the platform economy. The study of labor control originated in the industrial society of the 20th century, primarily focusing on how capital controls workers' labor through organizational structures, work processes, and management methods. In the platform economy, labor control has shifted from traditional direct management and material conditions control to more subtle and widespread methods, such as data monopolies, algorithmic applications, and piece-rate pay systems. Both domestic and international scholars have made significant progress in the theoretical analysis of labor control mechanisms in the platform economy. These studies not only reveal new forms of labor control but also attempt to construct theoretical frameworks to understand the phenomenon of worker alienation in greater depth.

The food delivery industry is a core component of the platform economy. Many scholars, by examining the work of delivery couriers, have found that the organization of delivery couriers' work is almost entirely subject to the monitoring and scheduling of digital platforms. [1] Li Shenglan and other scholars have investigated the labor processes of delivery couriers in the food delivery sector and the control mechanism over work time. The research found that food delivery platforms manage couriers' daily work with precision and efficiency by setting time rules, creating a work environment that balances flexibility with control, and shaping a sense of "punctuality" and "speed" in a temporal framework. [2] However, this alleged flexible work model actually constrains couriers in the name of freedom, subjecting them to enormous time pressures and work intensity. In their pursuit of freedom, couriers gradually lose control over the labor process, leading to a heightened sense of alienation, increased psychological pressure, and heavier workloads.

Overall, the labor control regimes in the gig economy are complex and multidimensional, involving not only control over worktime and task allocation but also the guidance of workers' values and consumption patterns. Platforms grant workers a certain degree of autonomy through mechanisms such as work independence, pay and incentive systems, and rating systems. However, these mechanisms also guide workers to identify with the platform, thus facilitating the normative control over the labor process.

As the gig economy increasingly becomes an important part of the global labor market, research on labor control is developing at an unprecedented pace. However, despite the substantial research output in this field, the application of the theory of dialectics of desire remains underexplored, especially when it comes to exploring how alienated labor generates false desires to maintain capital control, a key issue. In the context of the platform economy, workers' desires are carefully shaped and manipulated, becoming valuable tools for capital accumulation. This phenomenon provides a unique perspective for understanding new forms of labor control. Jia and Zhong made an important step in this field. They were among the first to approach the issue from the perspective of the cultural industry, using Lacan-Žižek's theory of desire to conduct an in-depth analysis of the new changes in labor control in the creative cultural industries. They pointed out that platform companies, by creating enjoyable user experiences and community atmospheres, successfully stimulated users' participation and consumption desires, thereby strengthening platform control. [3] The entertainmentization of the labor process, while providing workers with brief moments of pleasure, obscures the exploitative nature of labor and the alienated state of workers. Through strategies like relational work, emotional labor, and sentimental work, managers create a false illusion that drives workers to voluntarily engage in high-intensity labor under the influence of a sense of noble mission and value. All of this, in turn, invisibly conceals the true nature of labor and the alienation of workers.

Žižek argues that illusion is at the core of desire. Illusion is not simply falsehood or hallucination, but an unconscious fantasy that constitutes the very social reality itself. Žižek's theory of illusion reveals the core mechanism of how capitalist ideology operates: as an unconscious framework structuring desire, illusion is not a false reflection of reality, but directly participates in the process of constructing social reality, becoming a covert tool that sustains capitalist domination. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, he liberates ideology from the traditional category of "false consciousness" and repositions it as a "social existence"—by stitching together societal fractures and concealing the inconsistencies of symbolic order, illusion not only provides legitimacy for the capitalist mode of production but also deeply shapes the mechanisms of subjectivity's desire. [4][5] In labor control theory, this interplay of desire and the role of illusion manifests as capitalists use ideological control to influence workers' thoughts and emotions, making them identify with or adapt to the capitalist mode of production. Furthermore, workers' subjectivity presents a dual aspect within the structure of illusion. On the one hand, illusionary scenarios such as promises of promotion and consumerist imaginations lead workers to internalize the exploitative relationship as a driving force for personal struggle. On the other hand, a fundamental denial of the existing order lurks beneath the surface of compliance, manifesting in forms such as absenteeism and resistance. This tension confirms Lacan's assertion that desire is essentially "the desire of the Other," with the subject oscillating between the desired object constructed by the symbolic order and the trauma of the real. The paradoxical nature of desire means that workers, when facing capitalist control, exhibit both compliance and a certain degree of resistance. [6]

3. The Role of Ideology in Labor Control

Ideology, as a system of ideas, is an important link between individual behavior and collective action. In today's rapidly growing platform economy, ideology has become a key means of labor control.

Platforms construct and spread specific ideologies to guide workers in forming behavior patterns and values that align with the platform's interests, thereby achieving effective control over workers.

3.1. Freedom and Constraint: The “False Freedom” and “Competitive Game” of Delivery Couriers

Platforms often emphasize the freedom of delivery couriers in their promotions. However, a closer examination of this alleged freedom reveals underlying issues. Firstly, this freedom is not real freedom. Although delivery couriers may choose their working hours and locations, these choices are tightly controlled by the platform's algorithmic system. Secondly, this freedom is accompanied by considerable uncertainty. The earnings of delivery couriers are often directly linked to factors such as delivery volume, customer ratings, and other factors.

Platforms turn the labor process into a “game” through gamification techniques such as “leaderboards,” “point levels,” and “badge rewards.” [7] For example, leaderboards are updated regularly based on multidimensional metrics such as delivery speed, punctuality, and customer satisfaction. Top-ranked riders can receive bonuses or promotion opportunities, while those at the lowest rank are disadvantaged by the platform's algorithmic system. Research shows that this competitive mechanism not only stimulates couriers' “self-pressure” (such as “taking three or five more orders”) but also leads to hidden labor exploitation through data-driven control. Platforms tier couriers using allocation systems, that is, higher-tier couriers receive more orders, while lower-tier couriers are forced to take on less profitable orders. Under the guise of “gamification,” riders gradually lose their collective identity, resulting in atomized situations. [8]

Competition in capitalist societies is an “illusion” that conceals the truth of inequality and exploitation. Riders, in their pursuit of higher income and better rankings, must work overtime and exhaust themselves. This excessive competition creates tense relationships between couriers and hinders solidarity. This illusion creates an environment where “everyone has a chance to succeed,” masking the inequality and exploitation of the structure. However, in capitalist society, success is often controlled by a minority, and the majority can only remain in positions of exploitation and control. This illusion of competition also exists among delivery couriers. Although they have the right to choose their work hours and locations, they are actually subjected to strict control by the platform's algorithmic system and face huge economic pressure and mental burdens. Their competition, though seemingly fair, is rife with inequality and exploitation.

3.2. The Ideology of the “Boss Dream” and Labor Control

The prosperity of digital platforms has normalized the concept of individual entrepreneurship, making the slogan “everyone can be their own boss” an appealing ideology. The core of this idea is that through individual effort and struggle, workers can achieve upward social mobility in terms of social status and economic conditions, ultimately becoming the masters of their own destiny. However, this phenomenon, which is particularly prominent, is essentially a glorification of individualism and self-fulfillment, attributing economic success or failure entirely to individual factors. Within the discourse of delivery platforms, this idea is cleverly packaged as an incentive mechanism, guiding riders to believe that by improving delivery efficiency and optimizing service quality, they can secure more orders, increase their income, and potentially create their own business on the platform, transitioning from a “courier” to a “smallbusiness owner.” [9] However, this seemingly fair and open competitive environment actually contains profound inequality and exploitation. Through complex algorithmic systems and reward-punishment mechanisms, platforms fine-tune the management and control of couriers' work.

Driven by the ideology of “everyone can be their own boss,” riders often find themselves trapped in a dilemma of “self-exploitation.” In pursuit of higher income and better career opportunities, they are willing to accept the platform’s more stringent work standards, even at the cost of their health and safety. In capitalist societies, individuals are often deprived of the opportunity for genuine growth and development. They are confined to a state of “endless competition,” which does not lead to true growth but rather results in physical and mental exhaustion, as well as alienation. Among delivery couriers, this phenomenon of alienation is particularly evident. Firstly, their work is often repetitive and monotonous, lacking challenges and creativity. Secondly, their work hours are often unstable and unpredictable, as they need to be on standby at any time, ready to accept allocated orders from the platform. Lastly, their career development prospects are limited, making it difficult for them to gain professional opportunities. They are often stuck in an “endless competition,” which not only fails to bring real growth but also leads to physical and mental fatigue and alienation. [10]

Thus, the ideology of “everyone can be their own boss” presents a clear contradiction among delivery couriers. On the one hand, it offers them hope for pursuing economic rewards and improved social status. On the other hand, it pushes them toward stricter work standards and an exploitative labor environment. This phenomenon reflects the increasing control of capital over labor in the platform economy, highlighting the urgent need for better protection of workers’ rights.

4. Conclusion

This paper focuses on labor control in the platform economy, using delivery couriers as a typical case study. It combines Žižek’s theories of ideology and desire to reveal how platforms achieve implicit control over workers through technological means and ideological manipulation. The study finds that beneath the “flexibility” presented by the platform economy lies a tightly controlled mechanism. Workers, in what seems to be an autonomous work environment, are actually subjected to dual discipline—algorithmic and ideological. Platforms use technological tools such as algorithmic systems, rating mechanisms, and piece rate payment to monitor and weaken workers’ autonomy over their labor processes. At the same time, platforms use ideological tools to package exploitative labor control as a narrative of “freedom of choice” and “self-actualization.” Žižek’s theory of desire further explains the operational logic of this ideology—platforms create “illusions of success” and “false desires,” causing workers to internalize the platform’s interests as their personal pursuits, thereby unconsciously complying with capitalist valorization.

This article introduces the dialectic of desire into labor control studies, aiming to go beyond traditional theories that focus solely on material exploitation and to reveal how ideology maintains control by shaping desire and identity. This perspective provides a new dimension for understanding labor-capital relations in the gig economy and presents new challenges for protecting workers’ rights: it is necessary to focus not only on technological regulation but also on the awakening of workers’ subjectivity and the potential for collective action. Future research could further explore the differences in platform ideologies across various cultural contexts or combine empirical data to quantitatively analyze changes in workers’ psychology and behavior. Furthermore, how to construct a platform governance model that balances efficiency and fairness, and how to redefine the “worker identity” on a legal level, remain pressing practical issues. This article not only provides new theoretical tools for academic research but also lays a critical foundation for dialogue between policymakers, platform companies, and workers.

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