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Final Research Output:

The Collective Identity of Food Delivery Couriers in Amsterdam

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Introduction

The following report comprises the findings of month-long research exploring how flash food delivery workers in Amsterdam organise themselves for better working conditions and how institutional actors can support them. The research was conducted on the behalf of the Scientific Bureau for the Dutch Trade Union Movement, De Burcht. Responding to the growing concerns of trade unions about the lack of regulation of this emergent working sector, the study aims to enrich the understanding of all willing parties about the current struggles that food delivery riders face to negotiate better working conditions. Research methodologies relied primarily on qualitative methods in the form of 12 semi-structured interviews, participant observation at distribution centres, often called *hubs* or *darkstores,* and on delivery workers' most frequented streets, as well as informal conversations and monitoring of social media. A survey added quantitative measurement, out of which 20 responses concurred to the results. We categorised our findings along three different shortcomings currently preventing the organic development of collective action, each one substantiated by the voices of workers themselves. On the basis of these, we offer three suggestions for the adaptation of a new narrative, which might be better equipped for labourers in the grocery delivery sector.

Findings

The research process highlighted that flash food delivery riders in Amsterdam are not simply failing, but are not attempting to organically construct a collective action aimed at improving their working conditions. The overarching reason for a lack of collective drive lies in the lack of identification of riders as a working class, which prevents the union's efforts to mobilise a class action from appealing to their imagination. The research shows that this partly results from the nature of mobile application-based work and from food delivery companies' management strategies, with the following three implications for workers:

1.   Difficulties in building active networks of relationships

2.   Lack of emotional involvement in their work

3.   Failure to negotiate collective goals, means, and field of action

(1) Lacking Relationship Networks & (2) Emotional Involvement

"I don't necessarily have too much interest in making friends at the place I work, and I don't get the impression anyone else here does either."

"I just go there to work, not to make friends. This is only a part time job to support my studies so I'm not really trying to get to know people."

Flash food delivery riders confessed their difficulties in cultivating meaningful relationships at work. Qualitative data gathered by the research team confirmed that riders experience none or at best sporadic and superficial interactions during their working shifts. Findings of multiple participant observations reinforced each other: workers hunched over their phones, often with headphones on, not interacting with coworkers. Moreover, while 45% admitted not to being in contact at all with their colleagues outside of work, respondents made it clear that, if achieved, such contacts are so infrequent and shallow that it is difficult to build a comradeship. The lack of relations among riders derives from:

Demography of Riders'	Flash Delivery Concept
App-Based Work	Companies' Workplace
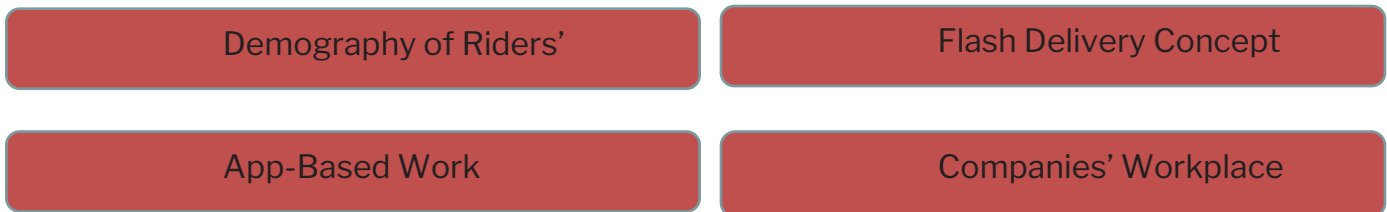
Demography: Riders' population in Amsterdam is varied and hardly generalizable. Yet, it is mostly composed of part-time workers, who constituted 70% of our sample, with the average commitment ranging from 0 to 20 working hours per week. Dedication to work is not only restrained by a limited weekly availability but it is also limited to the short-term, with 90% of respondents having worked in the sector for less than a year and 55% for less than 6 months. The high-turnover and part-time commitment elicit two results on riders' relationship to the job and to their co-workers:

- It promotes a functional relation to the job

- It prevents emotional involvement

"It's just a delivery job, no one really takes it seriously or no one really thinks that it's worth the effort to do more than that."

Riders motivated their temporary dedication to food delivery by expressing the consensus that "being a rider is not a vocation" but rather a functional decision, variously motivated by personal prerogatives such as economic reasons, flexibility and proximity among the most rated. Approaching the job in a functional way leads workers to an individual assessment of their work experience, so as to evaluate the balance between pros and cons according to a personal measurement scale. This is detrimental for collective interests, as it allows the delivery workers to cope with the downsides of the job as long as it remains individually profitable, preventing a collective assessment of the group's interests. Moreover, functionality discourages them to invest emotionally in their job, resulting in a disinterest in interpersonal relationships and in developing collective structures of feelings that could fuel group action. Ultimately, functionality renews the cycle of high turn-over and demographic fragmentation.

App-Based Work: Working by means of mobile applications exerts a major force of fragmentation upon riders. A comparison with traditional delivery services directly provided by restaurants confirmed that working apps reduce to a great extent the interactions among co-workers.
- The digital interface replaces work coordination and supervision with digital management and allot self-fulfilling portions of work to individual riders without any need for contacts between co-workers.
- Working apps rely on a game-like outlook which divides work in individual mini-tasks across solitary city rides, allowing (digital) contacts only between the rider, the company and the customer.

"I have no relationship with my co-workers. At all. I'm not even talking to anyone at work, I'm just picking up the packages and leaving that's it."

"**...** at the hub everybody is just on their phone, blocked off from everyone else."

Flash-Delivery Concept & Workplace Management: Qualitative methods show that while *hubs* provide compulsory meeting points, they encourage little interaction. This is due to strategic space-management choices and to grocery delivery companies' policies of flash delivery. The latter results in a discouragement or even reproach by management towards formal or informal moments of team building, regarded as unfitting in the high-pace of flash deliveries. This policy is integrated in the architecture of hubs, which often lack suitable common spaces entitled to the workers, so that couriers often lament having to spend dead moments under any weather condition. The absence of collective working spaces and moments devoted to socialisation is destructive for group cohesion and fails to remedy couriers' spatial dispersal across the city.

> "At the hub in the West, we used to wait for orders in the middle of the street, there was not even a place to sit, or nowhere to stay inside! When it was raining you were outside in the rain!"

Individualisation versus group cohesion

All in all, an ongoing process of individualization rather than of group cohesion is inaugurated by the app-based organisation of the labour process. Individualization of labour is reinforced through strategic management choices which create fertile ground for an independent and individualistic work ethic. Ultimately, the lack of a structure of working relationships fails to provide couriers with a template for self-organisation.

(3) Failure to Negotiate Collective Goals, Means & Field of Action:

While the implications of platform-based flash delivery are detrimental to successful group cohesion, they also impact riders' identification as labourers. Identification into the labourer's shoes is prevented through

- The vernacular language of "gigs" instead of job, "rides" instead of workload, "rider" instead of worker, "crew" instead of workers, "leader" instead of manager.

- Thinking in terms of narratives of "flexibility" instead of weak employment relationships.
- Overshadowing the organisation of labour with app-based, fun-like, mini-tasks whose individuality and discontinuity downplays the perception of couriers' role in the labour process.

The Food Delivery's Vernacular: Food delivery companies have created an appealing jargon to advertise themselves to customers and to prospective workers. Yet, such a jargon also functions as a management strategy that overshadows traditional working relationships, such as companies' responsibilities as employers and riders' position as labourers. This has disempowering effects on workers' acquisition of consciousness. The quotes below exemplify the tendency of both food delivery workers and public opinion to emphasise the fun-like nature of the job over its work commitment made of rights and obligations.

"Are you sure [of] all these requirements for a bit of cycling around? If you're going to demand this sort of thing, get a real job!" @account

"It seemed like a chill job…. it's almost like having a free gym membership haha!"

Narratives of Flexibility: An application of the misrepresentation of work is riders' appropriation of narratives of freedom and flexibility. Quantitative data showed that flexibility, in the form of self-scheduling, was the most rated reason for job application. Yet cross-analysis revealed that flexibility is often "granted" on the basis of 0 hours contracts and weak employment relations.

'We do get a lot of freedom' 'I also like the fact that I can be free during my shift more or less. I can listen to music and podcasts during work, which is nice to have.

"I'm on a 0-hour contract because I want to have the flexibility of having one week where I work a lot and then another week when I don't work at all".

Falsified Labour Process: App-based work falsifies riders' perception of their role in the labour process. Working apps divide delivery rides in game-like, mini-tasks which annihilate the requirement and development of workers' personal skills. This reduces riders' perception of their contribution to the labour process and masks work as fun-time, thus providing justification for modest working conditions. The down-time between one delivery ride and the next further exacerbates couriers' misrecognition of working time as productive time.

> "There's this vibe of just 'waiting'. So, you're kind of waiting to do your job even though you're still getting paid for the time you're there."

Disempowerment through management

As seen above, advertising and management strategies of food delivery companies are appropriated by couriers with disempowering results, which ultimately remove couriers from the imaginary of traditional work and from fighting the battles of traditional workers.

Food Delivery Riders & Unions: Failing to recognize oneself with traditional working experiences disconnects these workers from the conventional narratives of class struggle mobilised by union locals.

Quantitative methods registered that 65% of our sample doesn't know nor is interested in getting to know any formal or informal organisation taking care of riders' interests. While most of the food delivery riders who are currently involved in informal unionising campaigns are already active in other causes, less politically involved riders are reluctant to join in. Qualitative methods provided explanations for such a trend:

- The respondents fail to recognise themselves in the narratives of precarity and oppression mobilised by unions. When confronted with such a portrait they repeatedly address "hav[ing] worked for much worse exploitative jobs" and counterpose a sufficiently positive assessment of 6.1 out of 10 of their overall work experience.

> "The easiest money I ever made in Amsterdam!"

- Working tools, workplace safety and communication are the categories most often insufficiently rated by the couriers and coherently reflected in unions' programs. Workers also addressed their healthcare benefits as insufficient. This impacts especially zero-hour contracts where basic benefits such as healthcare are often not granted. Yet, these riders still emphasise the pros over the cons of their job such as flexibility and freedom from the traditional boss' stick.

> "A good health care assistance that's all that we need!

- The delivery workers declare that their temporary commitment to food delivery is not a strong enough motivation to join any unionising campaign.

> "If I'm unhappy with anything, I'll just quit and get another job."

> "The basis is missing to carry on a trade union struggle for someone like me!"

> I'm not planning to do this in my whole life, it's more like a temporary job until I get a better one."

Lack of identification with the narrative

Overall, couriers don't recognize their experiences in the narrative of precarity mobilised by unions. The gap between self-understanding of their working conditions and unions' representation lies in:

> Couriers' fulfillment of personal interests over collective ones

> Couriers' insufficient commitment to the job in terms of time and sentiment

> Couriers' misconception of food delivery as a fun-like, de-skilled activity, rather than *real* work

The interplay of these factors promotes the unattractiveness of traditional discursive formats of workers' mobilisation in the couriers' imagination, who ultimately fail to recognize themselves as a group, as workers and, as a result, as a working class.

> "It's so clear to me that [unions] have no idea what they are talking about. Unfortunately, the truth is that the basis is missing to carry on a trade union struggle for someone like me!"

Suggestions

Based on the findings, we suggest three ways in which the narratives surrounding couriers could be changed to better serve the interests of flash delivery couriers.

1. **Changing the narrative of how workers see themselves.**

Before drivers would be willing to unify, they need to recognize themselves as part of a larger group of workers.

- As discussed before, the language used to categorise workers often comes from management strategies; such as *gigs, hubs, riders* and *rides*. We suggest unions avoid making use of such vocabulary, and start to address "riders" as *workers*, so as to reinforce the perception that they do perform actual labour.
- Making clear that flexibility is not just a plus, it's an exchange. In exchange for flexibility you sacrifice other factors of stability.

2. Compensating the couriers' emotional disengagement by engaging the public opinion.

If these workers fail to perceive the need for mobilisation, sensitising the customers of these platforms, the media and the public opinion at large could provide the sentiments and commitment required to normalise this working sector. Having the public be more aware of the challenges of food delivery jobs could be a valuable source of support for the unions.

- o Flyers in mailboxes: the couriers can put them in after they have delivered the order so as to not directly get caught or personally associated with the protest.
- o Broadening of the focus: advertising not only to riders but to any workers. This might help not only riders to feel more like workers, but other workers to feel more closely connected to riders' struggles.
- o Advertisement should be more of a pressing concern. Awareness of the unionising movements is still low.

3. Changing the narrative of what protesting means.

Be innovative in thinking of new ways to protest, to make collective action more accessible for people who do not identify with traditional forms of protest.

- Signing petitions: we found the use of QR-codes to be especially worthwhile, since they are already part of riders' working routines.
- If workers won't protest outside of their job, think of acts of resistance that can be incorporated into the work, such as:
  - o wearing ribbons or armbands to make a statement across companies
  - o filing complaints in mass stating a specific wrongdoing
  - o wearing the uniform combined with colours from another company to emphasise how workers stand united (for example a Gorillas employee wearing purple and yellow, the colours from Getir).

Thank you for your trust in our research team.

We hope to have provided useful insight.

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