Digital Work in Times of COVID-19 Pandemic, the Case of Delivery Riders in Bogotá: I'd Rather Work with COVID than Starve*

Trabalho digital em tempos de pandemia de COVID-19, o caso dos entregadores em Bogotá: Prefiro trabalhar com COVID do que morrer de fome

Trabajo digital en tiempos de la pandemia por COVID-19, el caso de los repartidores en Bogotá: Prefiero trabajar con COVID que morir de hambre

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Abstract

Introduction: The gig economy is an expanding economic model characterized by atypical employment relationship particularly in work mediated by digital platforms. In Colombia, a delivery platform business has emerged, facilitating interactions between customers, restaurants and riders through an app. While this model promotes flexibility, autonomy, and income diversification, it often conceals underlying forms of exploitation.

Objective: This research aimed to understand the perceptions and experiences of delivery riders working for digital platforms regarding their working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic in Bogotá, D. C., Colombia.

Methodology: We conducted ethnographic research focused on digital environments, observing and engaging with delivery rider communities on Facebook and WhatsApp.

Results: The study revealed a worsening of already precarious working conditions and their effects on the health and quality of life of delivery riders. These impacts were reflected in riders' perceptions of disease, the (in)visibility of their role as workers, the challenging material living conditions during the pandemic, and the lack of adequate bio-protection measures to which they were subjected.

Conclusions: This paper provides empirical evidence that highlights the human dimension of platform-based delivery work within a syndemic context. It underscores the urgent need for comprehensive policies that articulate economic development with social and labor protection suited to the emerging forms of digital labor.

Keywords: Gig Economy, Digital Delivery Platforms, COVID-19 Pandemic, Precarious Work, Ethnography for the Internet.

Resumo

Introdução: a gig economy é um modelo econômico em expansão, caracterizado por relações de trabalho atípicas, especialmente em atividades mediadas por plataformas digitais. Na Colômbia, surgiu um mercado de aplicativos de entrega que facilita as interações entre clientes, restaurantes e entregadores. Embora esse modelo promova flexibilidade, autonomia e diversificação de renda, muitas vezes oculta formas subjacentes de exploração.

Objetivo: este estudo teve como objetivo compreender as percepções e experiências dos entregadores que trabalham por meio de plataformas digitais em relação às suas condições de trabalho durante a pandemia de COVID-19 em Bogotá, D.C., Colômbia.

Metodologia: foi realizada uma pesquisa etnográfica com foco em ambientes digitais, observando e interagindo com comunidades de entregadores no Facebook e WhatsApp.

Resultados: o estudo revelou o agravamento de condições de trabalho já precárias e seus efeitos sobre a saúde e a qualidade de vida dos entregadores. Esses impactos foram refletidos nas percepções dos trabalhadores sobre a doença, na (in)visibilidade de seu papel como trabalhadores, nas difíceis condições materiais de vida durante a pandemia e na ausência de medidas adequadas de bioproteção.

Conclusões: este artigo oferece evidências empíricas que destacam a dimensão humana do trabalho de entrega mediado por plataformas em um contexto sindêmico. Reforça-se a necessidade urgente de políticas públicas abrangentes que articulem o desenvolvimento econômico com a proteção social e trabalhista adaptada às novas formas de trabalho digital.

Palavras-chave: economia de bicos, plataformas digitais de entrega, pandemia de COVID-19, trabalho precário, etnografia da internet.

Resumen

Introducción: la economía de plataformas (*gig economy*) es un modelo económico en expansión, caracterizado por relaciones laborales atípicas, especialmente en trabajos mediados por plataformas digitales. En Colombia, ha surgido un mercado de aplicaciones de reparto que facilita las interacciones entre clientes, restaurantes y repartidores. Si bien este modelo promueve la flexibilidad, la autonomía y la diversificación de ingresos, frecuentemente oculta formas subyacentes de explotación.

Objetivo: esta investigación tuvo como propósito comprender las percepciones y experiencias de los repartidores que trabajan a través de plataformas digitales en relación con sus condiciones laborales durante la pandemia de la COVID-19 en Bogotá, D. C., Colombia.

Metodología: se llevó a cabo una investigación etnográfica centrada en entornos digitales, observando e interactuando con comunidades de repartidores en Facebook y WhatsApp.

Resultados: el estudio evidenció un agravamiento de condiciones laborales ya precarias y sus efectos sobre la salud y calidad de vida de los repartidores. Estos impactos se reflejaron en las percepciones sobre la enfermedad, la (in)visibilidad de su rol como trabajadores, las condiciones materiales adversas durante la pandemia, y la ausencia de medidas adecuadas de bioprotección.

Conclusiones: este artículo aporta evidencia empírica que destaca la dimensión humana del trabajo de reparto mediado por plataformas en un contexto sindémico. Se subraya la necesidad urgente de políticas integrales que articulen el desarrollo económico con la protección social y laboral adaptada a las nuevas formas de trabajo digital.

Palabras clave: economía de plataformas, aplicaciones digitales de reparto, pandemia de la COVID-19, trabajo precario, etnografía digital.

Introduction

Digital technologies have reshaped the global labor landscape (1-3). In particular, the gig economy has emerged as an expanding phenomenon characterized by the intermediation of digital platform between customer and gig workers (4-8). As a result, an atypical employment relationship has arisen between the workers and the digital platforms (2,9).

Woodcock and Graham (9) propose two organizational models within the gig economy. The first is cloud work, which can be performed from any location with Internet access; for example, freelancers who provide services via websites or various platforms. The second is geographically tethered work, which relies on mobile application interfaces to offer location-based services such as private transportation and food delivery. In this latter model, digital platforms act as intermediaries connecting customers, restaurants, and gig workers known as delivery riders, while shifting much of the operational risk onto the workers themselves. This dynamic significantly reconfigures traditional labor relationship (4).

According to Gandini (6), this model implies that workers receive service requests, location details, and payment information through an application's notification system. The defining features of this model and its novel labor dynamics include: i) a significant increase in working hours accompanied by a reduction in wage income (2-3); ii) online work challenging the collective perception of exploitation at an individual level (2,9); iii) the "general intellect" shifting from a focus on machines as fixed capital to the accumulation of techno-scientific knowledge within the workforce (1); and iv) the immateriality of work, as it is no longer tied to a physical workplace, unlike traditional employment settings (1,10).

As a result of these organizational transformations, some authors have highlighted the emergence of a social class known as the precariat. This group comprises workers engaged in atypical work modality characterized by an individualized, unprotected workforce, absence of social security, and limited future employment prospects (2,11), due to the use of digital technologies, the informalization of work and the proliferation of atypical forms of employment in the gig economy.

In the Global South, the gig economy has permeated various labor market dynamics across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, shaped by distinct demographic, geopolitical, and developmental conditions (12-14). However, labor relations and legal studies have positioned the gig economy as an extreme manifestation of broader trends in insecure employment that are gaining prominence worldwide (2,14). Thus, gig economy works arrangements vary from country to country, exploiting context-specific conditions of informality and unemployment. These variations reveal the underlying tensions that challenge the promises of flexibility, autonomy, and income diversity often associated with this economic model (15-17).

This configuration has given rise to a new proletariat of precarious and flexible workers who lack job stability, means of advocacy, and labor protection in a generalized state of *flexploitation*

(3,11). This concept captures the tensions between the apparent labor flexibility and the hidden conditions of exploitation in the context of platform mediated jobs. Under the guise of independence and autonomy, workers are simultaneously treated as both entrepreneurs and laborers, assuming the costs and risks in the provision of the service, while meeting performance requirements demanded by the platform (2).

As outlined by Gandini (6)and Berg et al. (17), the gig economy embodies material conditions and a capital-labor relationship characterized by low wages, intensive workloads, lack of social protection, and nascent regulation. For example, digital platform workers endure precarious working conditions: they are classified as independent contractors without guaranteed salaries, social benefits, or collective bargaining rights, and they are required to provide their own tools and resources (2-3,14). In this context, platform-based delivery work is identified as non-standard and atypical contributing to the overall precarization of labor (14,16).

In light of these dynamics, the gig economy has become the focus of regulatory debates worldwide, prompting scrutiny of labor relations with the aim of formalizing these occupations. In countries such as Spain, France, and the United Kingdom, riders engaged in digital sharing have been categorized as salaried workers within a novel employment relationship (8,18). However, international organizations have expressed concerns regarding escalating inequalities, the emergence in precarious work, the concentration of corporate power, and the weakening of labor bargaining influenced by new technologies, particularly digital ones. Therefore, advancements in safeguarding workers within global value chains, regulating labor platforms in the digital realm, and addressing corporate taxation concerns are required (19).

In Colombia, a group of established entrepreneurs founded the technology-based delivery startup Rappi® (20), which began operations in Bogotá and later expanded to eight countries, achieving the distinction of becoming the first unicorn in Latin America (21). The company's value proposition centers on the rapid delivery of more than 50,000 products and services. Rappi's growth aligns with the proliferation of platform delivery in the region, catalyzed by the emergence of other platforms.

The platform delivery business is grounded in the digital mediation of interactions among customers, restaurants, and delivery riders through a mobile app. Platforms manage these interactions using 'transparent' algorithmic methods for users, wherein these methods remain obscured to them (22-24). The original premise was to capitalize on the availability of young people's time to distribute products and generate extra income, a dynamic that swiftly shifted when encountering labor markets characterized by high informality and a surplus of individuals seeking employment opportunities.

Algorithmically managed gig work signals a new era of automation, flexibility, and job creation, promising autonomy under the guise of self-employment (13,25). The study of algorithmic

labor management is crucial for analyzing the platform business model, as delivery riders rely on autonomy, relying on digital platforms fueled by rating and reputation systems derived from customer interactions with the interface. As a result, customers effectively determine the parameters of the job, what task are performed, when, where, and how, directly impacting the riders' performance and income (22,25).

Within this framework, delivery work is regarded as a low-skilled activity, occupying a peripheral and precarious position in the informal economy, providing refuge for those who struggle to find opportunities in the labor market, including young people, migrants, individuals with limited education, and the unemployed (12,26). This situation is particularly pronounced in Latin American countries, characterized by high rates of informality and the recent migration crisis of the Venezuelan population, reshaped the historical migration dynamics of the region towards a South-South logic and, consequently, influencing labor market dynamics (27).

Despite their critical role in the urban supply chain, delivery platforms continue to refuse the recognition of delivery riders as employees. Instead, they categorize, them as independent collaborators, thereby evading any formal employment relationship and associated legal obligations. Platform-based labor is deeply embedded within informal labor market, lacking access to social security and legal protection for riders (28). This situation reflects a widespread regulatory gray area that challenges the capacity of national social protection systems to address the complexities of platform work. As such, platform delivery riders have come to represent one of the fastest-growing forms of precarious labor in a global context increasingly marked by the erosion of formal employment (29).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Colombian government implemented a series of isolation and quarantine protocols, restricting population movement while permitting exceptions for the supply of essential goods such as food and medicine. This led to an emergence in platform delivery in the country, a worldwide phenomenon (30). This growth can be primarily attributed to three circumstances: i) Many companies' digital infrastructure or online sales capabilities turned to platform-based delivery as one of the few options for supplying households. Consequently, digital platforms capitalized on this scenario to act as intermediaries for essential products, resulting in the proliferation of delivery riders navigating cities with their distinct colored backpacks, laden with products and pandemic-related concerns (31-34). ii) The widespread unemployment prompted millions to view working for digital delivery platforms as one of the few alternatives to navigate the crisis, initially requiring only a bicycle and mobile data on their cell phones (33,35). iii) The availability of a large labor force, driven by the Venezuelan migration crisis and newly unemployed individuals amid the pandemic, fostered a workforce willing to accept virtually any working conditions for subsistence, with limited capacity to advocate for labor protections (12,26,32-33,35).

The socioeconomic crisis intensified the precarious working conditions faced by delivery riders, further undermining their access to health services and social protection. In response, riders turned to digital spaces such as Facebook groups, WhatsApp chats, and YouTube channels to

share experiences, express grievances, and foster solidarity in the face of challenges with the platform, restaurants, or customers during periods of full quarantine and heightened societal fear (23-24). Although the utilization of these digital networks is a common practice among this population due to the inherently digital nature of their means of work (9).

The aim of this article is to illuminate the employment and working conditions of delivery riders in Bogotá, Colombia, during the COVID-19 pandemic. It examines the specific dimensions of this work through an examination of the riders' perceptions and experiences, highlighting their shared social reality through their imaginaries in a particular historical context. Castoriadis (36-37) points out that the *social imaginaries* account for the system of world interpretation of a certain group and endow the shared social reality with meaning says. It also considers the tension of being both indispensable and invisible as the riders' juggle between going hungry, overcoming workplace anxiety, and the lack of bio-protection in a massive public health crisis.

Methods

Between March 12 and June 30, 2020, during the initial peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Colombia, an ethnography for the Internet was conducted using WhatsApp and Facebook as primary data sources. A critical reevaluation of research methodologies was undertaken, seeking non-traditional digital techniques (38) to address digital sharing and establish meaningful connections with delivery riders amidst the prevailing health crisis. The qualitative approach employed enable the retrieval of participants' voices and the reconstruction of their imaginaries and everyday experiences, functioning as a kind of a digital logbook or binnacle (39).

Various terms have been used to describe ethnographic research on the Internet. Caliandro (40) provides an extensive overview, encompassing terms such as virtual ethnography (41-42); internet ethnography (43); cyber-ethnography (44); digital ethnography (45); expanded ethnography (46); ethnography of virtual worlds (47); chatnography (48); and netnography (49), among others. The inherently digital character of platform-mediated labor necessitated the adaptation of methodological frameworks to accommodate inquiries into digitally structured work.

Given the limitations on in-person fieldwork, a flexible, multi-sited approach tailored to the digital landscape proved essential. This methodological flexibility allowed for the exploration of shared meaning-making among delivery riders in virtual spaces, echoing the ethnographic principle of 'being there' (50). In this context, social networks emerged as strategic sites for data collection, enabling delivery riders to share their daily work experiences (3,23,51).

Acknowledging that an ethnography for the Internet of gig work does not aim to exhaustively capture the entirety of the phenomenon, this study instead focused on reflecting the contingencies of the digitally mediated social world surrounding delivery work at a specific

moment in time. The approach was deliberately open, reflexive, and heterodox (52). Moreover, it recognized the co-production of online and offline realities, adopting emphasizing the onlife approach (53).

Given the limitations imposed by the pandemic, ethnography emerged as a 'non-reactive' method, allowing the capture of intricacies of daily life that might be challenging to obtain through interviews or, in certain contexts, observation. This methodological adaptation is especially valuable under exceptional conditions, such as those brought about by COVID-19. Social media platforms, which delivery riders frequently use to communicate, enabled spontaneous expression and uninterrupted digital presence, offering a rich environment to observe the complexities and subtleties of their work.

This study received approval from the Research and Ethics Committee of the Universidad del Rosario, Bogotá, Colombia. It was conducted as part of a collaborative research project on the role of digital platforms in sustainable development, involving Universidad del Rosario, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, and Universidad de los Andes.

To comprehensively approach the phenomenon, especially its digital dimension, it was essential to investigate the daily virtual interaction spaces of delivery riders. Consequently, a profile on the social network Facebook was created to conduct non-participant observation in discussion groups of riders. Using keywords such as *rappitendero, rappi* and *repartidor* various groups of delivery riders in Latin America and different cities in Colombia were identified. Two private groups were selected for scrutinity: *Rappitenderos Colombia* and *Trabajadores de rappi en Bogotá solo rappi tenderos* both created in 2017 with more than 20,000 and 10,000 active members respectively. Virtual informed consent was requested from the group administrators who, upon approval, enable the retrospective manual collection of posts published between March 06 and May 11, 2020.

In addition, two public WhatsApp group invitation links posted on Facebook were identified. Access to these groups, started on March 12, involved contacting administrators, sharing the project details, and obtaining informed consent. While one administrator declined authorization and removed the researchers from the chat, the second group, *Rappitenderos Colombia, consisting* of 257 members, granted access. Data collection within this WhatsApp group concluded on June 30 due to saturation of relevant information.

During the quarantine period, a total of 1,046 Facebook posts, including comments, videos, photos, and screenshots were collected. Most of these entries concerned issues related to app functionality, delivery fees, route calculations, bicycle sales, platform contact numbers, user accounts, and the ongoing epidemiological situation. On WhatsApp, an average of 300 messages per day was observed, with the total message count exceeding 3,000 during the period of data collection. This data allowed the research team to understand the daily interactions of delivery riders concerning digital work within their networks (54).

The collected data was analyzed using NVivo v13, with coding initially structured around deductive categories drawn from the literature on occupational health and safety. This was complemented by an emerging categorization that facilitated the capture of social imaginaries surrounding digital work, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the labor world. The exercise involved collaborative review by the four authors. The analysis yielded four categories guiding this article and offering a substantial interpretation of the imaginaries of working for digital delivery platforms at the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Selected textual and visual excerpts are presented in the following sections to illustrate these categories. These materials were anonymized to protect the identity of delivery riders. Participants are identified using generic labels (e.g., Rider 1, Rider 2, Rider 3, etc.), which do not imply continuity across the article. No demographic details such as gender, age, or nationality are included, to respect participant privacy. All data was considered secondary and contained no personal identifiers. Videos and audios were omitted in this stage due to saturation with the chosen text materials.

The next sections present the four analytical, illustrated with selected excerpts that reflect the riders' imaginaries of the disease; their dual perception as essential yet invisible workers; the impact of the pandemic on their material living conditions—marked by fear and hunger; and, finally, their exposure to inadequate bio-protection measures.

Results

Imaginaries of the Disease: A Methodological Exploration of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Lives of Digital Platform Delivery Riders

As part of their daily routine, delivery riders are involved in a series of physical interactions, ranging from collecting items at stores to delivering goods directly to customers. Although many of these interactions are close in proximity, from an epidemiological standpoint, none of these interactions qualifies as a close contact. However, in 2020, this distinction remained unknown to riders. In this context, it became imperative to stay informed about isolation protocols, disinfection practices, and contagion prevention.

Unfortunately, during this period, scientific evidence about COVID-19 was scarce. Consequently, delivery riders resorted to their own social networks as privileged means to resolve uncertainties, express concerns, and provide mutual support. This facilitated the emergence of conflicting imaginaries concerning the *existence* of the virus, its transmission mechanisms, and disease treatment.

With regard to transmission, riders frequently identified airborne contagion as the primary contagion route of infection, highlighting crowded spaces among colleagues as potential sources

of risk. The waiting areas for orders, where riders interact without masks and share personal items like cigarettes or drinks were identified as high-risk zones. For instance, one rider expressed this perspective:

> If someone is smoking a cigarette and has something strange, it is transmitted through the smoke […]. Yeah, that is something that was proven because the virus remains in the air molecules; it is up to them to be informed and read how the virus is transmitted. (Extracted from WhatsApp, April 2020)

Upon experiencing symptoms of the disease, delivery riders identified specific situations at work as sources of contagion. Notable instances included making deliveries to hospitals and the failure to observe social distancing protocols in high-traffic areas where large numbers of riders congregated.

> Guys, I couldn't go to work today. I woke up very bad, couldn't breathe at night, and had severe lung pain. I think I won't be able to go out again for a while, and I'm getting the flu, I think I'm sick. I don't know if it's the flu or COVID, but I didn't go out today. Half my body ached, and I had tremors […]. I have been in hospitals making deliveries.
>
> A few days ago, I was in the hospital (hospital name) […] I have been in areas where a lot of *Rappies* sneeze, share cigarettes, and blow out the smoke, so you can get that virus. (Extracted from WhatsApp, April 2020)

In addition to imaginaries surrounding contagion, other aspects emerged concerning actions to treat COVID-19 symptoms and protect vulnerable relatives. These responses were shaped, in part, by the significant barriers that many delivery riders, predominantly Venezuelan migrants, faced in accessing the Colombian healthcare system. Due to informal healthcare practices, this population often found itself isolated when attempting to protect themselves. Within this context, riders shared various prevention and treatment measures rooted in popular knowledge, such as eucalyptus vapors and baths, disinfection with chlorine or alcohol, and the application of antibacterial gel, although there was skepticism about its efficacy against viruses. For example:

> Rider1: I wear gloves and a mask, and I carry antibacterial gel and alcohol spray with me. That's when delivering and then cleaning everything after. Motorcycle handlebars and everything I touched with my hands.
>
> Rider2: Perfect, thanks! It's the duty, antibacterial gel for hands and alcohol in a small spray bottle for the motorcycle.
>
> Rider1: Yes, if we get ill, how do we pay the rent?
>
> Rider3: And who told you that antibacterial works against viruses? It's called antibacterial for a reason [answer in voice note]. (Extracted from WhatsApp, March 2020)

A noteworthy aspect was the undervaluation of the disease and the very *existence*of the virus by some riders: "That virus thing. It's all fake, man. Nobody dies. That Covid thing is crap" (Extracted from WhatsApp, June 2020). Thus, while some considered the disease comparable to the flu, others were deeply concerned, leading to opposing positions:

> Rider1: Covid is going to kill more than one dr [delivery rider] you'll see. You go to [name of supermarket chain], and there are flocks of up to 10 throwing spit when laughing, they think this is child's play.
>
> Rider2: *Rappis* are immortal; during hailstorms, we're in flip flops and we don't even get the flu. (Extracted from WhatsApp, March 2020)

Delivery Riders in the Pandemic: Essential yet Invisible

Amid government-imposed quarantines, platforms inundated delivery riders with messages emphasizing their commitment to delivery work to meet the escalating demand for orders. These messages, although recognizing work risks and the high probability of contagion, were paradoxically couched in phrases underscoring the riders' indispensability. For instance: "Your city needs you, this weekend you will be able to make deliveries. The Mayor's Office gave special permission in Decree 90" (Extracted from WhatsApp, March 2020). Riders recognized the contradictory nature of these messages and understood that the *essential* nature of their work necessitated a timely response from the platform concerning minimum biosecurity elements and disinfection. Consequently, a distinct imaginary evolved around their role during quarantine:

> Rider1: We *rappies* claim the streets. Now all of Colombia depends on us. All countries have quarantined; the delivery riders are the only ones claiming the streets.
>
> Rider2: The heroes of the country, if we die, we save lives […].
>
> Rider1: What we must do is demand the provision of masks and gloves, for real. (Extracted from WhatsApp, March 2020)

Government authorities adopted a similar logic to the platforms, recognizing the importance of delivery work in supplying goods to quarantined clients. However, they failed to recognize the unique nature of the non-standard employment relationship between delivery riders and platforms. As a result, riders were unable to obtain official mobility permits for their vehicles or fully comply with public health regulations, such as mask usage, handwashing, and disinfection of work elements. It is crucial to note that riders lack sanitary facilities, disinfection or rest spaces, and were not provided with supplies. In this sense, they were essential but invisible.

> We delivery riders have not been given the recognition we deserve since we are also key workers, and due to our work nature, we must go out to meet the needs of many people. (Fragment of WhatsApp from a rider, March 2020)

Awareness of the riders' role during quarantines, along with expressions of solidarity and instances of stigmatization, highlighted the complex and ambivalent experiences faced by riders. On several occasions, riders reported that customers urged them to keep the food they ordered,

interpreting this gesture as an expression of gratitude and recognition for their service during the lockdown period:

> Customer: Good afternoon (rider's name). How are you?
>
> Rider: Good afternoon.
>
> Customer: The order I made is for you! So please, when you receive it, keep it!
>
> Rider: Ok, thank you so much! I'm very grateful.
>
> Customer: Your welcome, God bless you! Enjoy it!
>
> Rider: Thanks again! (Screenshot uploaded by a rider on Facebook, April 2020)

Material Conditions of Platform Delivery Work: Fear for Some, Hunger for Others

Regarding the material conditions of platform delivery work, two predominant imaginaries emerged during quarantine: Fear and hunger. These were identified in daily conversations about the distress due to the possibility of infecting their close relatives, in addition to the impossibility of working in case of being reported with symptoms by app users or the difficulty in receiving payment for the service in cash given the distancing measures and the new digital payment implemented during the pandemic.

> Order inconveniences. To improve. Confirmed COVID-19 case.
>
> To take care of your health, from today and for 14 days, you will have to preventive lockdown.
>
> Get well soon! (Platform notification to delivery rider. Extracted from WhatsApp, April 2020)

The previous message uploaded by a delivery rider included a countdown in days, hours, minutes, and seconds that showed him how long he would be unable to work. The delivery rider had no means to contest or verify their health status because it was the customers who reported the apparent signs of the disease and reported the presume infection. This meant a series of reactions to delivery riders who complained about the unilateral nature of the measure and the platform's lack of knowledge about their health status and the effect on their socioeconomic conditions:

> And what if we are tired? Screw Item, 14 days of minimum rest […] It can't be, I'd rather go to work with COVID than starve. 14 days without working is a hard thing […] Besides, who es not going to have to high temperature after all day on to bicycle, pedaling it. (Extracted from WhatsApp, April 2020)

This situation was very common and revealed the social imaginary of delivery riders as sources of contagion, which significantly affected their daily means of subsistence and translated into economic insecurity, manifesting as hunger and fear of the disease and its consequences on work. These concerns extended beyond health to encompass the complete lack of labor protection for the group. In response to the growing number of sick riders, or rather, those reported as sick by customers and, therefore, blocked, the Rappi platform created a financial assistance fund for those infected, calculating economic recognition based on the average earnings received during the last two months of work on the app. Access to this fund would require compliance with a series of terms and conditions that ignored the reality of the delivery riders' lives.

Another phenomenon that affected delivery riders during the pandemic was the massive linking of unemployed people onto the platforms. This represented an increase in available riders that the platform leverages algorithmically, either by lowering the recognized value per delivery or by creating various competition strategies among delivery riders. These changes negatively impacted the number of services available per deliver rider and their income: "We rappitenderos are going to reach the point where nobody es going to get profits, they have been diminished" (Extracted from Facebook, April 2020).

Additionally, to address customers' fears of contagion, the platform introduced a series of physical distancing measures called No Contact Deliveries in which customers were required to retrieve their packages without interacting with the delivery rider and confirm receipt through the app chat before making an electronic payment. This also affected riders' economic security.

We identified a tension between governmental imaginaries during the quarantine, summarized in the well-known phrase 'stay at home'—and the social imaginaries of delivery riders, who were perceived as sources of infection and whose livelihoods were deeply affected (Figure 1). In their conversations we find the economic anxiety to get their food, pay public services and rent, this was especially greater for migrant riders (Figure 1).

Screenshot of the Facebook group of delivery drivers, March 2020	Screenshot of the Facebook group of delivery drivers, April 2020
	
#StayAtHome Debts - Rent - Family And die from starvation!	-Are you not afraid of COVID -19? -Afraid!!! -Afraid, when my child says: DADDY, I'm hungry!

Figure 1. Screenshot of the Facebook group of delivery drivers
Source: Facebook, Screenshots, 2020. Author's own elaboration

Lack of Bio-Protection: Elements of Personal Protection and Guarantee of Rights

Recognizing the biological and socioeconomic risks faced by delivery riders during the pandemic, we constructed the imaginary of a lack of bio-protection. This concept highlights, on one hand, the limited implementation of physical interaction management protocols by platforms within the delivery chain and the inadequate of personal protective equipment and disinfection supplies for riders. At the same time, it underscores the weak institutional response from the State in safeguarding the health and social protection rights of riders and their families.

The lack of bio-protection emerged as prevailing imaginary among delivery riders, expressed through their appeals for support and solidarity on social networks, primarily WhatsApp and Facebook. Through their conversations, they articulated the ongoing tension: whether to venture out to sustain their daily lives despite inadequate conditions for implementing biosafety measures, or to remain at home to reduce the risk of contagion, albeit at the cost of losing income.

> Rider1: What about us? This is not a joke… continue risking yourselves. Life is not worth an order. #stayathome

> Rider2: Staying at home is crucial—it's about life, not just mine, but everyone around us. I do stay at home. Of course, since we share this life, we must respect others' opinions. My perspective is to take care of vulnerable people and not panic because this is just the beginning.

> Rider3: Let's respect life, guys. Use your savings and make a good purchase, then lock yourself up. If you want to be part of the change, stay at home.

> Rider4: Well, since I owe a lot of money, I must go out, with great caution. After all, I complied with the protocol, wearing gloves, a mask, and using gel. I maintained distance from customers, who also wore gloves and masks in the orders I delivered today. (Extracted from WhatsApp, March 2020)

Despite the prevalence of the hashtag #stayathome on social networks and in the media, it failed to consider the material possibilities and conditions of specific groups of workers, such as digital platform delivery riders, who depend on daily income earned through their work on the streets. This oversight was especially critical in the case of migrant delivery riders, who not only relied on their income for personal subsistence but also bore the responsibility of financially supporting family members in Venezuela.

Discussion

This study contributes to the growing body of research on app-based delivery work in Latin America and globally, conducted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic offers insights—via Internet-based ethnography—into the experiences and perceptions of this labor group concerning their health, work, and daily lives (55). These dimensions are crucial for understanding the future of work, conceptualized as a field of social imaginaries that shape the meaning-making process of lived experiences. For delivery riders, the pandemic brought about significant changes in production dynamics and in the relationships between labor providers and the platforms that employ them (3,6,8).

The findings reveal that these experiences and perceptions were framed in imaginaries of both illness and work, highlighting the impact on their material living conditions and the lack of bio-protection that this group of workers has experienced. This investigation began by paying attention to the voices of the delivery riders, who showed how the platform and the authorities made decisions that affected their health, work, and life circumstances, aggravating the already precarious working conditions, and how they consolidated solidarity networks.

Imaginaries of the disease were expressed in narratives surrounding the (non)existence of the virus, its transmission mechanisms, and treatments. However, for delivery riders, these imaginaries were not an abstract or distant. Instead, they became manifest in their daily work and in the material means of subsistence that this work provided.

Polkowska (30) points out how this group of workers felt ‘on the front line’, similar to health professionals. Although the experience of street work and the particularities of those who carry it out led to other possible interpretations of the virus, such as denial or underestimation. This is explained because the delivery rider’s population is relatively young, and they thought that this would allow them to easily overcome the virus like a common cold. What emerges is a socially constructed understanding of the disease, where the significant interpretation of COVID-19 was presented combined with the material conditions of this group, making it impossible to separate

the experience of the disease from the circumstances of work, the fear of contagion, and the need for economic survival (32,56).

Another interesting finding was the (in)visibility to which platform distributors are subjected, as well as their working and living conditions. This is paradoxical because they are on the streets, and with their bodies and deliveries, they became the first line of supply during a lockdown, despite their precarious working conditions (35), often operating amid misinformation and limited understanding of the disease (32). This invisibility appears to be a deliberate outcome of actions by digital platforms, government authorities, and even society at large, with significant repercussions for workers health, work, and well-being.

Amid rising unemployment during the study period, the platforms implemented measures aimed at protecting their business and ensuring consumer demand similar to those adopted in other countries (7,33), failed to reflect the real particularities in which platform-based work was carried out and the living conditions of those doing it in Colombia. In particular, the change to the digital payment system for deliveries meant that delivery riders only received compensation for their work once a week, affecting the daily availability of cash and the consequent loss of tips. For a population reliant on daily income to cover essentials such as food, rent, utilities, and transportation, this represented a serious hardship. Riders reported that, at such a critical time, they "could not afford to get sick" (35), due to the emotional and financial strain that taking sick leave and staying home would entail (56).

We found that some platforms responded to the contingency with a kind of economic support for the delivery riders infected during work, making this action evident as an international practice (7,35,57). In the case of Rappi in Colombia, this measure was insufficient in the sense that the full social protection conditions of employment did not apply here and only acted as a 'temporary subsidy.' It was inequitable in scopes, as the eligibility excluded many riders, such as migrants or those with limitations to access health services. For other countries, this new way of working, as it is not framed in traditional labor regulation, lacks the basic benefits for workers and their families, being excluded from labor and social protection systems (32-33,35,56).

As Friedman (58) points out, these riders exist 'like fleeting shadows' appearing and disappearing without any formal legal ties to the platforms that profit from their physical labor. As a result, during the pandemic, platforms did not assume responsibility for delivery riders' health-related risks in the manner expected of an employer (57).

Regarding the lack of bio-protection, although during the pandemic the Colombian government issued specific regulations by economic sector, it became evident that digital platforms failed to support delivery riders. The near-total absence of personal protective equipment and the lack of institutional collaboration to ensure basic biosafety conditions in public spaces—such as access to handwashing facilities and disinfection supplies—were widely reported. Similar shortcomings have been noted in other countries, as highlighted by Paché (7), Polkowska (30),

and Apouey et al. (56). In the face of this situation, delivery riders were left to manage these risks on their own, relying on mutual aid and solidarity through their social networks.

The working conditions of delivery after the pandemic remain the same despite several attempts at regulation to clarify the employment relationship within the new digital landscape. It is necessary to establish regulatory frameworks in relation to the formalization of work mediated by digital platforms that safeguard the rights of this group. This includes ensuring fair compensation, contributions to social security systems, and addressing occupational health issues associated with delivery work. The European Union's Rider Law (59-60) serves as an example of such regulation.

Finally, this study reveals the human dimension of platform delivery and its expression in the employment and working conditions of riders, which have been largely mutated by the algorithms that mediate this profoundly precarious activity (7; 26). In this sense, further regulation of platform work as part of the path to decent digital work is recommended. Moreover, this paper hopes to show that, at least during the pandemic in Bogotá, the precariousness of this form of labor extended well beyond what legal frameworks have addressed. The lived experiences and voices of delivery workers must be central to these discussions (6).

It is necessary to propose policies that regulate the expansion of platforms-based labor, reframe the societal value of these jobs, and promote interdependent policies in health, economic development and social equity. Such policies should aim to modernize labor markets, strengthen social protection systems, and enhance worker welfare in the evolving post-pandemic digital era.

Conclusions

This study shed light on the complex labor conditions faced by platform delivery riders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through Internet-based ethnography, it captured their imaginaries, perceptions, and lived experiences related to their roles in the supply chain during lockdowns, as well as the ongoing invisibilization of their labor, health, and safety rights by authorities, society at large, and platform companies.

The findings revealed that the pandemic intensified the vulnerability of digital delivery riders due to: a) the already precarious conditions of digital work; b) the absence of minimum bio-protection guarantees required to carry out their task; and c) the fragility of their material living conditions in the face of policy or platform decisions, such as the shift from cash payment to deferred electronic systems.

To uphold the fundamental principles of digital delivery work, it is imperative to address all legal elements that define the employment relationship between delivery workers and platform companies [59-60] . On the way to a fairer, more dignified and decent digital work, it is essential

to rethink labor policies in the digital era as well as social protection systems, along with the recognition of the human dimension of this work, with an interdependent approach that protects health, welfare and equitable social development of workers and societies.

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Notes

* Research article