

Understand and Find a Mechanism to Enhance the Power of App-based Food Delivery Riders in Thailand

ทำความเข้าใจและค้นหากลไกเพื่อเสริมพลังให้กับผู้ทำงานส่งอาหาร บนแอปพลิเคชันในประเทศไทย

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คำสำคัญ: ผู้ทำงานส่งอาหารบนแอปพลิเคชัน, พื้นที่สาธารณะ, แพลตฟอร์มดิจิทัล, การสื่อสาร

Abstract

Background and Objectives: To explore new possibilities for finding spaces that can support the opportunity for dialogue and exchange among food delivery workers on digital platforms, which will strengthen their collective efforts to demand rights for the group, instead of establishing a union that is not recognized by law. This is because food delivery workers are currently controlled by digital technology rather than working in traditional physical workplaces. In the case of Thailand, food delivery workers are not classified as employees with social protection rights and do not have the legal right to form a union or demand rights under labour laws. As a result, their voices are ignored, and they lack bargaining power to demand better working conditions.

Methods: The study employed a method of reviewing relevant academic documents, gathering data on the environment related to app-based food delivery workers, and synthesizing this information to explore the possibilities based on the actual conditions experienced by individuals in this occupation.

Results: Although digital platforms disrupt the working conditions of food delivery workers, they can also serve as new public spaces for fostering community and advocacy. These online spaces enable workers to share experiences, discuss challenges, and collectively push for better working conditions and labour rights. By facilitating open dialogue and mutual support, these platforms can strengthen their collective voice, empowering workers to advocate for changes in their work environment.

Application of this study: Food delivery workers can increase their bargaining power for labour rights by utilizing online spaces, as these can be free spaces from hierarchical legal structures. This can lead to demands arising from the consensus of the food delivery workers in the online system, empowering their collective voice to negotiate and protect their labour rights with authorities.

Conclusions: Establishing an online platform as a communicative space for food delivery riders is crucial for addressing the challenges they face, particularly their lack of bargaining power. This digital public space will serve as a vital forum for riders to share experiences, discuss common issues, and collectively determine goals, thereby fostering a sense of community and solidarity. By facilitating open dialogue and mutual understanding, such a platform empowers riders to advocate for improved working conditions and more labour rights. Ultimately, this participatory mechanism not only enhances their ability to negotiate with agencies but also strengthens their collective voice, promoting a sustainable and supportive work environment.

บทคัดย่อ

ที่มาและวัตถุประสงค์: เพื่อศึกษาความเป็นไปได้ใหม่ในการค้นหาพื้นที่ที่จะช่วยพยุงรักษาโอกาสในการแลกเปลี่ยนถกเถียงของกลุ่มผู้ทำงานส่งอาหารบนแอปพลิเคชัน อันจะเป็นสร้างความเข้มแข็งให้กับการรวมตัวเพื่อเรียกร้องสิทธิให้กับกลุ่มผู้ทำงานนี้แทนการจัดตั้งสหภาพที่ไม่ได้รับการรองรับ เนื่องจากผู้ทำงานกลุ่มนี้ในปัจจุบันถูกควบคุมด้วยเทคโนโลยีดิจิทัล แทนที่การทำงานบนสถานที่ทางกายภาพแบบดั้งเดิม กรณีของประเทศไทยผู้ทำงานส่งอาหารผ่านแอปพลิเคชันไม่ถูกจัดให้เป็นลูกจ้างที่มีสิทธิในการคุ้มครองทางสังคม และไม่มีสิทธิในการรวมกลุ่มเพื่อเรียกร้องตามกฎหมายแรงงาน ส่งผลให้เสียงของพวกเขาถูกละเลยและไม่มีอำนาจต่อรองเพื่อเรียกร้องสถานการณ์การทำงานที่ดีขึ้น

วิธีการศึกษา: ใช้วิธีการศึกษาจากเอกสารทางวิชาการที่เกี่ยวข้อง โดยรวบรวมข้อมูลสภาพแวดล้อมที่เกี่ยวข้องกับผู้ทำงานส่งอาหารผ่านแอปพลิเคชัน และสังเคราะห์ข้อมูลเพื่อค้นหาความเป็นไปได้จากสภาพความเป็นจริงที่เกิดขึ้นของผู้ที่ประกอบอาชีพในลักษณะนี้

Understand and Find a Mechanism to Enhance the Power, E3142 (1-13)

ผลการศึกษา: แม้ว่าแพลตฟอร์มดิจิทัลจะสร้างเปลี่ยนแปลงต่อสภาพการทำงานของกลุ่มผู้ทำงานส่งอาหารบนแอปพลิเคชัน แต่ก็ได้กลายเป็นพื้นที่สาธารณะแห่งใหม่ที่ส่งเสริมการสร้างชุมชนและการเรียกร้องสิทธิ พื้นที่ออนไลน์เหล่านี้ช่วยให้กลุ่มผู้ทำงานนี้สามารถแบ่งปันประสบการณ์ พูดคุยถึงปัญหาและร่วมกันผลักดันสภาพการทำงานและสิทธิแรงงานให้ดียิ่งขึ้นด้วยการสนับสนุนการสนทนาอย่างเปิดเผยและการช่วยเหลือซึ่งกันและกัน แพลตฟอร์มเหล่านี้จะช่วยเสริมพลังเสียงให้มากขึ้น ทำให้สามารถเรียกร้องการเปลี่ยนแปลงในสภาพแวดล้อมการทำงานได้

การประยุกต์ใช้: กลุ่มผู้ทำงานส่งอาหารผ่านแอปพลิเคชันสามารถเพิ่มพลังการต่อรองสิทธิแรงงานผ่านการใช้ประโยชน์จากพื้นที่ออนไลน์ เนื่องจากพื้นที่ออนไลน์สามารถเป็นพื้นที่ที่ปราศจากลำดับชั้นจากกฎหมาย เพื่อนำไปสู่ข้อเรียกร้องที่เกิดจากฉันทามติของผู้ทำงานส่งอาหารในระบบออนไลน์ในการเพิ่มพลังให้กับเสียงกลุ่มก่อนตนเองในการต่อรองและปกป้องสิทธิแรงงานกับกลุ่มผู้มีอำนาจ

บทสรุป: การสร้างแพลตฟอร์มออนไลน์ที่เป็นพื้นที่สื่อสารสำหรับผู้ทำงานส่งอาหารผ่านแอปพลิเคชันถือเป็นสิ่งสำคัญในการแก้ไขปัญหาที่คนทำงานเหล่านี้กำลังเผชิญโดยเฉพาะการขาดอำนาจในการต่อรอง พื้นที่สาธารณะบนดิจิทัลนั้นจะทำให้พื้นที่เป็นเวทีสำคัญให้คนทำงานได้แบ่งปันประสบการณ์ พูดคุยประเด็นร่วมกัน และกำหนดเป้าหมายร่วมกัน ซึ่งจะส่งเสริมความเป็นชุมชนและความเป็นหนึ่งเดียวกัน ด้วยการส่งเสริมให้เกิดการสนทนาอย่างเปิดเผยและสร้างความเข้าใจซึ่งกันและกัน แพลตฟอร์มดังกล่าวจะช่วยเสริมสร้างศักยภาพให้ผู้ประกอบอาชีพนี้สามารถเรียกร้องสภาพการทำงานที่ดีขึ้นและสิทธิแรงงานที่มากขึ้น ท้ายที่สุดกลไกการมีส่วนร่วมนี้ไม่เพียงแต่ช่วยเพิ่มความสามารถในการเจรจาต่อรองกับหน่วยงานต่างๆ แต่ยังช่วยเสริมสร้างเสียงรวมของคนทำงานให้เข้มแข็งขึ้น ส่งเสริมสภาพแวดล้อมการทำงานที่ยั่งยืนและสนับสนุนซึ่งกันและกัน

Reality and Challenges of Food Delivery Riders

The digital platform economy is a relatively new phenomenon that is transforming the economic landscape, particularly in terms of social protection for those engaged in these innovative practices. This economy encompasses workers on digital platforms, including food delivery riders, who face unique challenges related to modern working conditions (Theerakosolpong, 2020). Traditionally, informal economies were primarily found in developing countries, closely tied to their socio-cultural conditions. The informal economy is typically linked to subsistence activities, which limits the accumulation of financial capital for future investment (Nirathorn, et al., 2005). Most workers in this sector struggle to integrate into the formal labor system, resulting in issues such as inadequate health and safety protections and employment instability. To address these challenges, governments need to create suitable opportunities for workers in the digital platform sector and develop policies that ensure long-term labor rights and protections (Theerakosolpong, 2020).

Globally, there has been a rapid emergence and expansion of a new group of workers operating within the informal sector on digital platforms, driven by digital technology rather than traditional work settings. Between 2018 and 2021, the gig economy experienced significant sales growth in the UK, USA, and Australia, increasing approximately fivefold, while Canada saw growth of more than seven times (Ahuja et al., 2021). According to a prediction by Gitnux (2023, cited in Karnchanapoo, Danuvass, & Sagarik, 2024), by 2030, the number of gig workers is expected to surpass that of non-gig workers. In terms of economic value, a study by Kulach (2023) found that the gross volume of the gig economy grew to over 400 billion U.S. dollars in 2023, up from approximately 200 billion U.S. dollars in 2018. This rapid growth has also been observed in Thailand, where the gig economy has continued to expand (SCB Economic Intelligence Center, 2021). In 2024, the food delivery market in Thailand is projected to reach a market value of approximately 86 billion baht. Despite a decline in the number of orders, the value per order has increased (Kasikorn Research, 2024). Additionally, Grab's performance report for the third quarter of 2024 shows a 17% year-over-year revenue growth, underscoring the continued expansion of the gig economy. In general, workers in this sector are commonly referred to as "gig workers."

The figures above highlight the significance of the gig worker group and the fundamental changes in the way work is performed, as well as the evolving relationship between work and worker. These changes present new global challenges (Theerakovitkajon & Tularak, 2020). There are numerous types and definitions of gig workers. This paper specifically

examines the situation and labor experiences of food delivery riders, one group of gig workers in the gig economy, which is referred to as the "Physical Gig Economy: Location-Based Service Delivery" (Heeks, 2017). Among the various definitions of food delivery riders, the difficulty in defining the status of riders arises because the relationship between employer and employee for those operating on digital platforms is not clear (Drahokoupil & Piasna, 2019). The relationship between employer and employee varies; sometimes, those who work in the gig economy are labeled as independent contractors, agency workers, on-demand workers, short-term project-based workers, part-time workers, or freelancers in the service sector. Riders perform temporary jobs on short-term projects with various clients, always through online channels (Heeks, 2017; Merriam-Webster, 2023). A food delivery rider is a person who works outside of a traditional, long-term employer-employee relationship. They earn revenue based on the temporary jobs or projects they complete for multiple clients or tasks (Cook, 2015; Herrity, 2023; Howard, 2017).

1. Difference in Employment

The work of food delivery riders changes the nature of employment, and the inability to officially define and determine the status of labor also affects social protection. In many instances, those working on digital platforms operate within a relationship framework that is not clearly defined, especially when compared to traditional work settings where the roles and expectations between employer and employee are well-established. Sometimes, food delivery riders are considered employees, while at other times, they are viewed as having a partnership or business arrangement with the employer, similar to independent contractors (Drahokoupil & Piasna, 2019). As a result, governments worldwide, including in Thailand, have not recognized food delivery riders as employees (Rocket Media Lab, 2021). This means that riders operate within the informal economy, which provides flexibility in work. However, their nonstandard employment (Roberts, 2005) often leads to increasingly unfair working conditions, as platform service businesses attempt to reduce operational costs by cutting labor expenses.

The non-standard employment of food delivery riders means that their employment status is unclear. The gig economy generates short-term and flexible work without the usual labor practices and regulations, such as social security. As a result, this type of work tends to lean toward self-employment and has sparked various debates about the form of employment. For example, since the duties of food delivery riders are determined by the platform, they are not free to operate as independent workers who can choose and accept jobs based on their skills (Harmon & Silberman, 2018; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2016). Furthermore, the question of who exactly supervises the riders remains unclear. Is the employer the digital platform that allocates work to the food delivery riders, or is it the entity that controls the digital platform?

2. Also, Difference in Law

The ambiguity in the relationship between employer and employee, created by the digital platform, presents challenges in the working environment, particularly in relation to the nature of informal employment and the different types of labor laws. In the case of Thailand, this situation is even more complicated for food delivery riders, as most riders work full-time. Approximately 78 percent of riders in Thailand have only one job but are not classified as employees by law and, therefore, do not have the rights typically afforded to standard employees (Wantanasombat & Pitakthanin, 2021). Legislation in Thailand defines food delivery riders as either contract laborers or business partners (Tasanakunphan, et al., 2019). As a result, because food delivery riders are classified as contractors or partners, employers are not required to adhere to the usual labor laws that provide welfare benefits or other work-related entitlements. The work benefits provided to employees versus independent contractors or partners, including food delivery riders in Thailand, are outlined in Table 1.

Understand and Find a Mechanism to Enhance the Power, E3142 (1-13)

Table 1 Difference Work Benefits Provided between Employee and Independent Contractors or Partners

Benefits	Employee	Independent Contractor/Partner
Protection in General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Receiving structural-level protection by law 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not receiving structural-level protection - Receiving protection from Announcement of the Department of Welfare and Work Protection
Security in work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employees will be treated according to the employment contract for both wages and length of service. - The employer cannot terminate employment arbitrarily. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Independent contractors are paid only when the work is completed. - Employers can terminate contractors or can terminate the employment contract without needing to wait for the complete work.
Compensation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Under labour protection law, employers pay compensation to employees in four forms: wages, overtime pay, holiday pay. and overtime pay on holidays. - Even if it's not a working day, employees have right to gain wages and overtime 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The contractor is paid or compensated upon completion of work. - If the contractor is unable to complete the work, contractor must be responsible for any damages incurred.
Welfare at work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employee has right to receive compensation in the term of an accident, illness, loss from work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No right for receiving a welfare
Protection from the law	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employee is protected from Occupational Safety and Health and working environment Act, 2011 that employers must take care of safety for employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contractors are not covered by labour law because their work is centered around the completion and success of the project. - Contractor is protected from Announcement of the Department of Welfare and Work Protection; Workplace Safety Practices for “Informal Workers” whose work in the informal economy
Right to integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employee is protected from Labour Relations Act, 1975, which stipulates that workers have the right to form labour integration to demand benefits they want to employers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There are no laws to protect the rights as formal labour integration
Realization of right	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Direct from the company to inform employee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unaware of the information regarding benefits and the process of until applying to become a policyholder under the law.

Adapted from Tasanakunphan et al., 2019; Yi Nang, 2021; TDRI, 2023; Chaiyaphatdejakhorn, Sirawarisara & Phakdejitt, 2023

Table 1 illustrates the marginal status of food delivery riders, who operate as independent contractors or partners. They are not as protected by labor laws as other groups of workers, such as the right to labor integration (Tasanakunphan, et al., 2019). This aligns with TDRI (2023), where Uairat Chantrasiri discusses the issue of food delivery workers not receiving structural-level protection, including labor protection, changes in compensation determination, the lack of welfare, and the absence of job security guarantees. However, food delivery riders have unofficially united to demand fairness within the gig economy due to the financial challenges they face, as their income does not cover their expenses (Rocket Media Lab, 2021). Protests for better labor practices by food delivery riders include calls for fair wages, labor integration rights, and the need for health insurance and other social securities. In comparison to employee benefits, these benefits are not available to food delivery riders because of their employment status (Tasanakunphan & Others, 2019).

The draft *Labour Promotion and Development for the Informal Sector Act* (B.E.) addresses the issue of registration for informal workers in order to grant them benefits under this Act. It also allows for the formation of

organizations by informal workers, with groups of ten or more having the right to establish a group based on their occupation to promote and improve the quality of life for informal workers. Applications for establishing such organizations must be submitted according to the conditions specified by the Minister. (Phakdee, Pronying, & Tongkachok, 2023). The establishment and rights of informal workers, including food delivery riders who fall under this category, are not treated equally to those of regular workers. Furthermore, the formation of such groups is not entirely free; it requires the Minister's approval to establish the organization.

In addition, the unprotected legal status of food delivery riders puts them at risk and exposes them to employment insecurity. For example, if riders are involved in an accident while working, they lose their income and, without any income security, both they and their families face severe consequences. The working conditions of food delivery riders also impact their quality of life; riders report low satisfaction with their working environment due to high safety risks, limited opportunities for social interaction, and a restricted ability to engage in leisure activities (Yi Nang, 2021). The safety risks are significant, with 33.5 percent of riders having been in an accident, such as falling off their vehicle or being hit by a car. Additionally, slightly more than half of the survey respondents (51.1 percent) reported encountering application malfunctions, such as freezing, glitching, or crashing, which made it impossible to continue working (Wantanasombat & Pitakthanin, 2021).

The challenges in defining employment models have led to a lack of legal rights coverage for workers in the rider sector, resulting in various consequences. The next section will discuss the impacts of these challenges on work, the ongoing initiatives, the gaps in these efforts that can still be addressed, and finally, this paper will propose possible solutions to assist the rider group through available digital tools and mechanisms.

Reactions of the Food Delivery Riders in Challenging Condition

1. Direction and Guidelines from Foreign Countries

A review of the rights of food delivery riders in 15 countries concluded that only three countries—France, the Netherlands, and Spain—provide legal support for food delivery riders. The intention of the laws enacted in these three countries is to recognize the status of riders as employees within the digital workforce. A key aspect of these laws is the transition toward granting protections and improving the quality of work conditions for riders. Because their work status is officially recognized, food delivery riders in France, the Netherlands, and Spain are entitled to work protections, health insurance, accident insurance, and the right to form unions or engage in collective action (Rocket Media Lab, 2021).

In some countries, such as China, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Taiwan, there is no formal legislation supporting the rights of food delivery riders as employees, including the right to establish formal labor unions. However, establishing legal rights as employees is not the only mechanism for protecting the rights of riders. Some countries, including the United Kingdom, Japan, Norway, and the United States, provide legal mechanisms for food delivery riders to form and organize labor collectives to advocate for their labor demands (Rocket Media Lab, 2021). In the context of today's rapidly changing workforce laws, practices, and norms, lessons derived from these countries suggest approaches for improving labor regulations to make them more up-to-date and responsive to the demands of the digital economy and the needs of food delivery riders.

2. Causes of Food Delivery Riders Struggles

According to the Fair Work Principles (2021) and the concepts of fairness outlined by Colquitt, Greenberg, & Zapata-Phelan (2005) and Fieseler, Bucher, & Hoffmann (2019), the legal conditions surrounding food delivery riders often result in ambiguous rights due to unclear employment contracts. This frequently leads to food delivery riders being

unpaid and lacking supervision in a fair working environment, particularly in workflows and management systems that heavily rely on technology. This lack of clarity and support leaves workers vulnerable to unfair treatment. Furthermore, food delivery riders are deprived of the right to appeal against unfair treatment and lack support for collective action, which would allow them to form groups to negotiate with authorities and address work-related issues (Tasanakunphan, et al., 2019). These gaps in labor rights suggest that the working conditions for riders remain far below international labor standards, highlighting a pressing need for revision.

In addition to poor working conditions, food delivery riders continue to face power structures inherent in digital platforms, which differ significantly from traditional employer-employee relationships. This new form of institutional power affects the digital workforce and undermines their ability to collectively bargain. The challenging work conditions faced by riders do not align with basic labor standards, such as fair wages, work safety, and welfare, nor do they provide adequate integration into the broader labor market (Flanagan, 1978; World Health Organization [WHO], 1995). These ongoing issues reflect the need for improvements in the quality standards for workers in the gig economy.

Therefore, the working conditions of food delivery riders are characterized by unclear rights, a lack of collective bargaining, and exploitation through the power structures of digital platforms. These factors contribute to the violation of international labor standards and inadequate worker welfare. There is an urgent need to address these issues to ensure fair treatment, safety, and proper integration of food delivery riders into the workforce, ultimately improving their quality of life and aligning the gig economy with global labor standards.

3. How Food Delivery Riders Respond

In the case of Thailand, there is currently no legislation to support the rights of food delivery riders to labor integration (Tasanakunphan, et al., 2019). Even without formal rights to integration, unofficial integration may still be possible (Prachatai, 2021). Labor integration can be divided into two forms. The first form, physical integration, involves workers expressing their views through various actions such as protests, submission of letters to the authorities, etc. The second form, online integration, allows food delivery riders to use digital channels and social media to engage with one another, exchange ideas, and discuss issues without spatial barriers. However, food delivery riders do not have the right to organize as a formal labor union. As a result, their voices are often silenced, and they lack the bargaining power needed to advocate for better working conditions. Social digital platforms could help bridge this gap and offer a new public space to amplify their ideas and strengthen their demands.

Although the use of online space can be very beneficial for labor integration among food delivery riders, there is criticism regarding the potential creation of an "echo chamber." An echo chamber, a term used in psychology, refers to a situation where individuals are exposed only to beliefs that reinforce their own views, while opposing or differing opinions are excluded. In such a space, participants may believe that their views represent the majority, and by reinforcing these beliefs, they neglect to question or verify the accuracy of their opinions (Ramasut & Thongnok, 2020). The possibility of creating an echo chamber is a very real concern in online spaces. Additionally, creating groups or forums, such as on Facebook, presents challenges and limitations for finding common ground among workers.

Additionally, according to Yi Nang's (2021) study on labor rights, food delivery riders identify the lack of legal protection in the digital economy as a significant problem. However, some riders who protest for fairness from digital platform companies are reprimanded by other food delivery riders who disagree with the protests. This creates a contradiction among food delivery riders, with counter-protesters stating, "If you're not satisfied, move to another platform" (Yi Nang, 2021 : 102). The lack of a unified demand for labor rights, coupled with counter-protests, discourages workers from advocating for their rights. Furthermore, the internal contradictions among food delivery riders may reflect a lack of collective consciousness.

The discourse surrounding work flexibility in the gig economy contradicts the food delivery riders' sense of connection with their peers. Unlike traditional work settings, there is no physical workplace for riders. Additionally, digital platforms present another challenge, as the nature of the digital platform creates a non-clustered work environment. Opportunities for engagement and consultation among members of the digital workforce are more limited than for workers in physical spaces. The ability to integrate and assert their rights is crucial for food delivery riders to achieve stronger bargaining power (Theerakosolpong, 2020). However, this is hindered by the fragmented nature of the digital workforce, outdated laws, unclear employment classifications, and individual work arrangements, all of which contribute to a lack of consensus among food delivery riders regarding the need for labor reform.

Enhancing the Power of Riders Through Online Space

To support the food delivery riders' environment on the digital platform and empower their bargaining power, a key solution to the problem is to open the space for social dialogue through a process of consultation. Food delivery riders should have the opportunity to exchange ideas and debate until they identify common interests with all stakeholders. Applying the concept of public space, it is essential to create a safe space where all parties can come together and discuss ways to improve the situation in a manner that meets everyone's needs. Public space has the potential to reduce power imbalances, allowing participants the opportunity for mutual exchange (Finkayson, 2005). Returning to the central issue of labor integration, the question remains: Is it possible to transform the collective action that occurs via social media into a more formalized process through the creation of a public online space?

1. Possibility of Online World to Create a Collective Action

Labour integration is critical to improving the quality of life for workers, as it strengthens their bargaining power and transforms fragmented demands into a more unified, cohesive force. However, labour integration, or collective action, is often hindered by digital platforms themselves, which treat riders as independent contractors, preventing them from forming alliances (ILO, 2021). This lack of integration is particularly problematic for food delivery riders because they are excluded from the benefits of collective bargaining, and they do not have the legal right to do so under Thai law. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the rights to collective bargaining, enshrined in Conventions No. 87 and 98, are fundamental for all workers. However, food delivery riders, due to their classification as contractors, are excluded from these protections (ILO, 2021).

Without the right to engage in collective bargaining, riders face significant challenges in meeting, exchanging ideas, and collectively advancing their interests. The decentralized nature of digital platforms means that workers are isolated from one another, making it difficult to organize and advocate for improvements in their working conditions. The absence of collective discussion further diminishes their negotiating power, as riders are left to deal with employers or platforms individually without a strong collective voice (Katsabian, 2021). This highlights the critical need for a space where riders can come together, share their experiences, and build solidarity to enhance their collective bargaining power.

One potential solution lies in the concept of online public spaces, which could serve as a platform for food delivery riders to communicate and organize. The power of information technology enables the creation of such spaces without limitation. However, the question remains whether an online space can function as effectively as physical spaces in fostering collective action. Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere provides a framework for understanding how such online spaces could work.

1.1 What is the Public Space?

Habermas (1962), a German philosopher, introduced the concept of the "public sphere" in his seminal work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Habermas defined the public sphere as a space where individuals can engage in rational-critical debate, freely discussing matters of common interest. Originally rooted in 19th-century social settings like parks, coffee shops, and public forums, the public sphere allows people to interact without the constraints of power or authority. It emphasizes that spaces should be open to all, enabling the exchange of ideas that can lead to legitimate criticism and stimulate changes in the economy, politics, and society (Finkayson, 2005).

Public space is a space open to everyone, where participants can freely engage without constraints from any power. It serves as a space for interaction and exchange based on various objectives. The exchange occurs on the principle of equality, without formality, allowing various types of information to be freely shared. Public space is one of the key components of urban communities, supporting the enhancement of quality of life. It also fosters the diversity of people in the city, which is an important driving force in stimulating change (Chaichan & Laiprakobsap, 2016). Ultimately, it can lead to the liberation of society from being dominated by power.

Public space is a social space without mechanisms of repression. It exists outside of political society and civil society. Political society includes laws, prisons, courts, powers, and mechanisms of domination, while civil society encompasses schools, religious institutions, families, and the business sector. Public space, by contrast, is a common area without these mechanisms. It is created for citizens to freely exchange ideas, where individuals can voluntarily enter without coercion, independent of authority. The space for discussion, with the flow of rational information, induces changes according to the objectives of the exchange that takes place (Kaewthep & Hinviman, 2017).

1.2 How It Works and Benefits to Riders

In the digital age, online spaces like social media are increasingly seen as a modern extension of the public sphere. They offer a platform for individuals, such as food delivery riders, to discuss shared challenges, negotiate demands, and collaborate without the interference of external authority. The digital public space is characterized by freedom of participation, where individuals can freely voice their opinions, share information, and build consensus, much like traditional public spaces.

Nowadays, the emergence of digital worker protests can be divided into two spatial categories: one involves expressing physical power (Daily News, 2022), through marches and submitting letters to authorities. Food delivery riders' protests have appeared in press and newspaper articles over the past few years (Khaosod, 2022; Prachachat, 2020). The other category involves using social media power to bring digital riders together by exchanging and discussing common issues without barriers in online spaces (Miller, et al., 2016). These developments indicate that the problems faced by food delivery riders have not been resolved or led to improvements in their quality of life. The online space group serves as a starting point for exchange based on the concept of public space, such as the Freedom Rider Union, Grab Fast Moving, Grab Driver BKK Thailand, etc. This has led to a series of protests (Dailynews, 2022; Khaosod, 2022) both in-person and through social media, which appear to be ongoing without resolution.

Moreover, the demands of food delivery riders are largely focused on financial benefits, such as income, wages, guaranteed minimum revenue, or compensation (Wantanasombat & Pitakthanin, 2021). These statements are problematic in themselves. The economic and financial issues faced by food delivery riders have been communicated publicly, but this type of message mainly serves to create motivation and awareness among citizens, while failing to raise other important issues, particularly regarding the working environment.

Habermas's Model of Social Action (as cited in Bolton, 2014) suggests that the limitations of food delivery riders' communication are rooted in "Instrumental Action." This type of communication focuses on what they want as an outcome but fails to explain the reasons behind these desires. For example, riders often demand financial benefits, but this does not address the underlying causes of the problems they face. As a result, the instrumental actions taken by food delivery riders lack justification, making it difficult for the public to understand their message and intentions. It is possible that the online world could better support the concept of "Communicative Action" — statements with justification — for riders (Bolton, 2014). The online space allows people to interact and come together without the influence of authority. Additionally, unlike physical spaces, online platforms are not bound by time restrictions, providing an opportunity for communicators to reflect on what they want to say and carefully consider the issues they need to discuss. As a networked public space, the online environment is accessible, spreadable, and searchable, offering a platform for open discussion and engagement (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Currently, the communication of food delivery riders is one-sided, meaning that the messages they convey do not generate widespread public awareness. Additionally, the arguments they present lack justification and consensus, as these discussions typically take place within their own group. This situation is similar to grassroots movements fighting against poverty, which often lack sustainability for long-term development and do not align with broader social policies (Van Till & Van Till, 1970). The views of food delivery riders are often shaped by their personal experiences or realities, which may not provide the most effective approach to solving the underlying issues. Furthermore, this form of online communication usually involves short-term participation, whereas a comprehensive, long-term approach is necessary to address complex problems effectively.

In conclusion, the use of online spaces as a public forum for food delivery riders is essential for enabling collective action and fostering solidarity among workers. Unlike traditional, physical protests or demonstrations, online spaces provide a platform for continuous dialogue anytime and anywhere, making it easier for riders to reflect on their needs, discuss strategies, and organize actions. It is necessary to create opportunities for food delivery workers to have maximum access to participate in discussions, in order to help build a broader democracy (Nontapatmadul, 2007). The online world is also one of the platforms that can facilitate this opportunity. Digital public spaces, as a formality for their own labor integration through digital space, can empower riders' bargaining power to negotiate for better working conditions, leading to social change that ensures their labor rights are recognized and protected.

2. Network-Based Development to Enhance the Labour Quality of Life

To create a holistic movement among food delivery riders and establish the power to negotiate for achieving their desired goals, consent is the cornerstone of power development within groups. Historically, this concept is rooted in the social contract as outlined by Rousseau (1762). It is human nature to use the social contract to resolve problems, and as a result, violence and physical violations gradually decreased due to the availability of consent and willingness.

A study by Toth, Heinänen & Blomqvist (2020) found that when workers generally trust their work community, it positively impacts work commitment and a person's suitability for the job, which is often the case for freelancers. Confidence and trust are also crucial aspects of online society. The transition from traditional work to digital platforms has created more flexible working structures and increased independent employment among workers with specific skills. Toth, Heinänen & Blomqvist (2020) found that when workers trust digital communities, it positively impacts work relationships

and a person's suitability for their job. Freelancers with specialized skills are ready to adapt to constantly changing structures and remain flexible over time. Independent workers operate without supervision or control from a boss, and often do not seek advice from co-workers. Therefore, they need to possess specific skills and experience to survive in market competition and advocate for the needs of digital workers.

A digital society is constantly evolving. It is necessary to maintain an online exchange environment where respect is mutual. Developing a respectful environment should be a reasonable standard that all food delivery riders accept. If this standard is reasonable, riders will naturally strive to achieve it. Ultimately, it may be necessary to push for a "standard that people widely accept and treat" as Forst (2012 : 6) suggests. Once a standard is agreed upon by everyone involved, they will be more open to listening to each other. Humans have the ability to understand others after debate, in line with the concept of Hegelian Dialectic. When a thesis representing one belief exists, a contradiction appears in the form of an antithesis, eventually leading to a synthesis that incorporates all arguments (Chandravanich, 2019). Thus, a network's consensus and acceptance would emerge, where food delivery riders operate under the same standard of respectful communication.

The existence of standards determines the proper way of behavior among people, but these standards can vary depending on the context and may deviate to the point of not aligning with basic morality. However, an "unchangeable foundation" (Fundamentum Inconcussum) (Forst, 2012 : 237) must exist to provide the basis for rational support. Ultimately, food delivery riders need to establish their own standard as an unchangeable foundation by discussing their situation more thoroughly within the free space, such as online spaces, to advocate for their needs in an appropriate manner.

Conclusion

Food delivery riders currently operate within systems that fail to meet adequate work standards, placing them at significant risk. A primary issue is their lack of bargaining power, which prevents effective negotiations with authorities such as the government or businesses. To address this, it is essential for them to create a communicative space, particularly online, that facilitates discussions and collective decision-making. Such a platform would provide a venue for riders to come together, exchange opinions, and agree on shared goals.

The creation of a participatory mechanism for these discussions is a crucial solution for fostering a sustainable community. This mechanism must be developed and accepted by the riders themselves (Chunhasopak, et al., 2020), ensuring that their voices shape the space. A public online platform, as a public space that freely supports exchanges and discussions based on mutual understanding and interests, would help drive issues forward and meet the needs of all members, ultimately strengthening collective action and solidarity.

An online space for food delivery riders is proposed as a safe environment where both positive and negative experiences can be shared, working conditions can be improved, and bargaining power for labor rights can be increased. Therefore, digital media, as a form of public space, could play a pivotal role in uniting riders, enabling open discussions, and fostering confidence in their work environment. This would create a collective consensus, allowing food delivery riders to raise their voices and bargain for the protection of their labor rights as actual "workers."

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