



## Article

# Are You Really Your Own Boss? *Flexi-Vulnerability* and False Consciousness of Autonomy in the Digital Labor Culture of Riders

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**Abstract:** In the European Union, over 28 million people work through more than 500 available digital platforms, and it is estimated that by 2025, this number will reach 43 million. However, we lack up-to-date and sufficient data on employed individuals, as platforms practice a policy of non-disclosure of data. This paper focuses on the so-called location-based platforms and specifically the figure of the rider, understood as the individual who, through a commercial or labor relationship with a company, performs tasks such as the delivery of goods to end customers. By conducting 143 surveys and 15 in-depth interviews with riders, we identified a series of characteristics that allow us to analyze this archetype of contemporary work–digital relations and delve deeper into relevant questions related to this figure, which have to do with the modality linked to the performance of their activity (self-employed or salaried), the levels of job satisfaction with respect to their activity, or the strategies for work or personal conciliation. Specifically, we focus on those discourses that refer to the characteristics of flexibility and autonomy inherent to this type of work, analyzing a heterogeneity of discourses that explain, on the one hand, a situation of precariousness and, in other cases, a job opportunity and a self-employment strategy, introducing the idea of *flexi-vulnerability* understood as a concept that captures the dual nature of flexibility and vulnerability experienced by individuals who work as self-employed in the so-called “gig” economy.

**Keywords:** gig economy; rider; flexi-vulnerability; digital labor cultures



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## 1. Introduction

In the context of contemporary labor relations, the incorporation of new technologies in the workplace, as well as the emergence of new jobs in productive sectors based on the use of these technologies, are generating significant social, economic, and cultural impacts. In this scenario of potentialities and risks, it is necessary to analyze the impact of automation and digitization in the context of labor relations. Working with platforms encompasses different realities and is characterized by a high level of heterogeneity in the activities carried out. In this regard, we find different categories of platform work: Remote or on-site, requiring either a high or low level of skills, remunerated per task or per hour, serving as either a primary or supplementary occupation, and with varying profiles of platform workers and types, among others (Malo 2018; Signes et al. 2019; Cañigüeral 2020). Moreover, the blurred distinction between dependent and independent workers (wage earners or self-employed) often observed in platform work leads to insecurity regarding employee or dependent self-employed rights, the benefits they are entitled to, and the applicable regulations (Williams and Lapeyre 2018; Majetic et al. 2023; Ales and Faioli 2012).

We are therefore in the realm of the so-called “gig economy”. A context where the digital reformulates logics in the context of labor relations, which we can concretize in the

following general characteristics: (a) Task-based work, as the gig economy often revolves around specific assignments, projects or tasks, emphasizing a task-oriented or project-based approach rather than long-term employment; (b) digital platforms, which act as intermediaries connecting workers with potential clients or customers; (c) variable income, unlike employees with fixed salaries and benefits, gig workers' income depends on the number of gigs they achieve; (d) diverse skills, workers can leverage their expertise in multiple areas or perform different jobs to maximize their earning potential; (e) qualifications and reviews, they help establish trust and credibility within the gig economy ecosystem; and (f) absence of employment benefits, gig workers typically do not receive employment benefits such as health insurance, retirement plans or paid time off (Muldoon and Raekstad 2022; Meijerink and Keegan 2019; Banik and Padalkar 2021; Kost et al. 2020).

Working on digital platforms goes beyond traditional employee relationships because, mainly, these platforms do not recognize their workers as employees. Instead, workers are categorized as entrepreneurs, freelance contractors, or independent professionals (Meijerink and Keegan 2019; Duggan et al. 2020). Digital platforms position themselves as impartial marketplaces that facilitate transactions between clients and workers. While they distance themselves from conventional employment arrangements, they still exert control over workers by implementing measures to ensure proper work assignments and performance management (Waldkirch et al. 2021). Consequently, workers frequently compare themselves to employees, and in this sense, in the last few years, we have found court rulings in favor of workers seeking employment status. Additionally, workers often find themselves guided and controlled by automated decision-making processes, commonly known as "algorithms". In this sense, this status of being or not being a hybrid between self-employed and salaried generates controversy and an intense social debate on the rights of people working for this type of platform, which also highlights individual discourses that position themselves as self-employed or salaried.

The rider is identified as an individual responsible for delivering various goods, primarily in urban settings. They are subjected to multiple regulations, many of which lack transparency, such as surveillance and control systems inherent in algorithmic-driven digital economies, rankings, and competition. Their work entails providing on-demand home delivery services and facing outdoor conditions, traffic, and other unforeseeable variables that, while beyond their complete control, still afford them some degree of influence over their scheduling and work patterns. Overall, they adopt an equivocal discourse based on their work practices and routines, positioned at opposite ends of a spectrum. On one side, there exists a meticulously monitored and controlled work approach that is occasionally perceived as arbitrary. On the other side, there is a viewpoint that highlights autonomy and flexibility, which they regard positively as an enhancement of their working conditions, according to their own perspective. Moreover, riders are not limited to that sole task. They also engage in vicarious work, promoting the company they work for, facilitating the transfer of customer data to the company, or making their own personal image available to the company. Furthermore, they navigate the territory in which they work, connecting with urban conflicts, struggles, and productions in public spaces (Lefebvre 1991), interacting with other agents, and, in general, becoming an active and participatory subject of citizen knowledge.

The identity of riders in the platform economy is complex and multifaceted, shaped by a range of social, cultural, economic, and political factors. The identity of users must take into account the social and cultural factors that determine their decision to participate in platform work. In some cases, for these riders, working on platforms can provide an opportunity to access income and social integration that they may not be able to achieve through other means. This fact can shape their identity as entrepreneurial, resilient, and adaptable individuals who are capable of navigating and thriving in complex and challenging environments. However, it is important to analyze the meaning of the concepts of flexibility and autonomy, which sometimes articulate the discourse of entrepreneurship and self-management in relation to the task of the rider, and thus try to deepen the complexity

of these meanings in the context of digital work. From this perspective, we deal with the concept of *flexi-vulnerability*, which arises from the fact that, despite the appearance of flexibility, these (mostly) self-employed workers still face significant risks and insecurities. They lack traditional employment benefits and protections, such as a stable income, job security, access to healthcare, and social security. Moreover, they often have limited bargaining power and face challenges in negotiating fair compensation or improved working conditions due to the lack of collective representation.

In this context, we focus on analyzing localized work platforms, specifically the figure of the rider, understood as a paradigmatic case of an individual who, through a mercantile or employment relationship, makes themselves available to a user company for specific periods of time to carry out delivery tasks to end customers. As mentioned before, its task involves the use of algorithms for the assignment, tracking, and evaluation of the rider's work, both by the user company and the end customer. The main objective of this study is to identify, locate, describe, and analyze the role of this type of delivery person in the context of the Region of Murcia (Spain). To achieve this, a quantitative and qualitative research methodology has been implemented, including (1) a documentary review; (2) surveys conducted with a total of 143 riders providing services in the Region of Murcia; and (3) a total of 15 in-depth interviews with a significant sample of these delivery riders. The obtained results provide insights into the representativeness of this profile of individuals registered and providing services on localized work platforms in the Region of Murcia. It allows us to delve into the most relevant issues related to this figure, such as the employment status associated with their work (self-employed or employee), levels of job satisfaction regarding their activities, and strategies for work–life balance.

Specifically, we analyzed the data obtained from the surveys in relation to the different discourses of the interviewees to try to understand how the concepts of flexibility and autonomy are perceived in their work as riders. In order to approach this analysis, we can ask ourselves a series of questions: Is there a difference in work culture between the self-employed rider and the salaried rider? Beyond the material aspects that condition their work situation depending on whether they are self-employed or salaried, can we speak of the self-perception of the self-employed rider? In this case, what do they think of the legal regulations that favor their inclusion as an employee? Do these regulatory changes affect their capacity for autonomy and flexibility? Furthermore, what logic does the self-employed use to explain the flexibility and autonomy of their activity? Finally, to what extent may the concept of *flexi-vulnerability* help us to interpret the relationship between the rider's self-perceived discourse and their material situation (socio-labor and economic)?

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. The Rider as an Archetype of Location-Based Platforms

The figure of the home delivery rider linked to digital platforms, who travels the city by bicycle, motorcycle, or car, is “traditionally” considered self-employed, and in some cases, by virtue of recent regulatory changes, under the consideration of a platform employee (Signes et al. 2019; Revilla and Martín 2021; Fernández-Trujillo Moares 2020), constitutes a paradigm that is incorporated into the contemporary global cultural landscape. We can understand it as a product of deregulation and offshoring, understood as strategies of the globalized context, and to whom are sometimes ascribed considerations linked to the concept of collaborative economy, with the nuances that correspond to an activity where we can identify the rider as an individual link between company and customers rather than as a participant in the benefits of co-creation between peers (Morales Muñoz and Abal Medina 2020; Luisa Pérez Guerrero and Royo 2021).

The origin of this intended linkage between rider and collaborative economy derives from the concepts of flexibility and innovation with which the activity offered by the platforms is linked, so as to allow the establishment of an agile relationship between companies and delivery drivers as partners for the delivery to the end customer. In this sense, the main argument that explains the benefits of this type of economy identifies

technology as a novel incorporation that allows, among other things, riders to work on the days and in the time slots they choose, thus incorporating concepts such as flexibility and autonomy in favor of the delivery drivers. However, the relationship between riders and the collaborative economy has been the subject of controversy, as different voices argue that they do not enjoy the same rights and protections as traditional (salaried) employees, such as minimum wage, benefits, or job security (Fernández-Trujillo Moares 2020). In addition, the nature of the work also means that delivery riders may be exposed to risks, such as traffic accidents, without adequate insurance or protection. For its part, the idea of innovation that the new technologies would incorporate is also questioned, as it is understood that the tasks performed are similar to other “traditional” delivery and messaging tasks and that, in any case, the platform company would act as a “black box” where the information derived from this interaction is hidden as an asset of the company itself (Malo 2018).

The impact of the *platformization of the economy* (Hernández and Zapata 2020) is also linked to the precarization of the labor market. In this sense, it is observed how full-time and open-ended jobs have been reduced, the number of employees with temporary and part-time contracts has increased, as well as zero-hour contracts, considered those in which workers are hired by the company without being subject to a specific working time, and self-employment with the so-called false self-employed. This process of precariousness is also observed in working conditions: Working hours and conciliation, remuneration, intensification of work, or control and management over the performance of the activity. In relation to working hours, as work on digital platforms is linked to contractual forms such as zero hours, the labor or commercial relationship is subject to demand. Thus, in the case of riders, there may be periods of inactivity linked to a lack of demand or other eventualities related to the operation of the application managing the services, which must be assumed and borne by the workers themselves. The risk is not only related to the unpredictability of working time but also to its lengthening, so long working hours and atypical working hours entail the risk of self-exploitation of labor (Brancati et al. 2020; Annarosa et al. 2018).

Regarding the idea of flexibility, we may refer to different works that study the socio-anthropological distinction between self-employment and salaried work, and for this purpose, among other factors, they refer to the aspects of autonomy and flexibility. In this case, self-employment, unlike salaried work, would be an end in itself since its ultimate interest would be to maintain its self-employed status (Højrup 2018; Hansen and Højrup 2001; López-Martínez 2015; Bologna 2018). The person who provides services to various clients and does so as a freelancer or self-employer will organize their activity, prioritize the demands, and, precisely because of this exercise of autonomy and flexibility, have the possibility of even surviving in the face of market fluctuations by readjusting their “own business”. Does this occur in the case of the rider? The literature and the result of our fieldwork explain that the rider’s self-employed status differs from this “classic” status since the rider exercises its task under the coordination, organization, and dependence of the platform company that supplies them with orders. In this sense, its self-employed nature would present a contradiction with respect to these concepts of autonomy and his exercise of self-conscious flexibility and freedom.

## 2.2. Neither Self-Employed Nor Salaried: Economic, Social and Cultural Considerations

Some authors characterize platforms attending to their nature as austere within their typology, as they lack ownership of physical production goods and instead focus on owning the software that facilitates delivery services (Srnicek 2017). This distinction is significant because it enables companies to disassociate themselves from any labor-related obligations by presenting themselves as mere intermediaries utilizing a technology represented and embodied by an algorithm. This is a significant debate that occupies this area of platform work at the international level and is explained by the companies’ intention to justify a commercial and not an employment relationship with the rider, so that it is the delivery

driver themselves who, in this case, assumes the social costs and risks derived from their activity.

As mentioned, one of the important aspects that has occupied the last few years in relation to the rider has been its consideration as self-employed or salaried. The body of European and Spanish legislation, in the form of directives, recommendations, decree laws, and case law, as well as reports, papers and other advisory documentation prepared by different bodies and institutions, has had economic and social implications for the consideration of one type or the other (Bednarowicz 2019; Martínez Yáñez 2021; Kovačević 2020; Rueda Rodríguez 2020). The European Union has been promoting policies related to the platform economy and, specifically, in relation to the labor rights of riders. In this regard, the aim is to ensure that delivery drivers are entitled to the coverage recognized for “traditional” employees, such as the minimum wage and social protections such as healthcare and pensions. This is particularly important given the often precarious nature of platform work (Barbieri 2021; European Commission 2021). Along these lines, there have been progressive calls for platform companies to operate with transparency and accountability in the management of their users. In the Spanish case, the discourse that explains the role of the rider as an intermediary between the company and customers, and hence a relationship of autonomy with respect to the company, would be dismantled according to case law (Spanish Supreme Court Ruling of 25 September 2020) that understands the notes of dependence and subordination of the rider with respect to the platform companies, from which the employment relationship is derived and not merely mercantile (rider as an employee instead of self-employed).

Furthermore, the determination as self-employed or salaried seems to us to be significant in this study since, beyond the fact that its concretion conditions the material coverage that may or may not correspond to the rider, this identification also concretizes a cultural perspective that would have to do with the identity or with a certain work culture that would correspond to this archetype, where technology and work sharing seem to reformulate these tasks. It seems to us that we could speak of a rider culture depending on whether one is self-employed or salaried, which would connect with those works that approach the field of labor relations from an anthropological point of view, on identity, self-perception, and interpretation of how one is in one category or another.

A brief approach to these trends of analysis from the social sciences on the consideration of self-employed or salaried and its cultural implications would lead us precisely to go back to the study of German sociologists, who attend precisely to the change that occurs in the early twentieth century when a majority of the self-employed population becomes salaried in their incorporation to work in factories. Studies and perspectives have analyzed the relevance of the change in the productive paradigm, with the progressive increase in salaried work to the detriment of autonomous activity (self-employment). These authors are interested in the social and anthropological impact of the incorporation of the logic of the Taylorist system in German factories at the beginning of the 20th century. It is interesting because it places us in another historical moment, where the paradigm shift seemed to be critical precisely because of the anthropological consequences of the “transformation” into wage labor (Bologna 2018).

In this sense, and briefly, we should refer to the work of Emil Lederer, who understands that this change implied not only a material impact but profound transformations in the self-perception of the new salaried workers (Lederer 1979). As reported by Bologna (2018), Lederer identifies that one of the main problems or differences between the mentality of the previous worker (mainly self-employed) and those mass wage earners linked to the paradigm shift had to do with the “periodization” of life (Lopez-Andreu 2019). In this analysis, Lederer returns to the idea of the classical concept of alienation and that of individual atomization, wondering about the configuration of an atomized mass (new employees). He transfers these ideas to a case study in which he tries to verify if this change of mentality, derived from the change of affiliation in the field of labor relations, occurs in

addition to the factories within the so-called white-collar workers and to what extent (van der Linden and Roth 2014).

As mentioned briefly earlier, it would be of interest to attend to the perspective of different works that, precisely following that line from the beginning of the 20th century, advance in the study of socio-economic and cultural differences between self-employed and salaried (Højrup 2018; Andresen and Højrup 2008; Cayuela Sánchez 2015; López-Martínez and Espeso-Molinero 2019; Hansen and Højrup 2001). These are proposals that address the concept of ideology—and its practice—in the case of self-employment, where it is understood that there is a link, or rather a continuity, between the concepts of “free time” and “work time” in contrast to the meaning that they represent for the wage earner, where “free time” will be the opposite of the idea of “work time”. This continuity that is proposed for the case of the self-employed is due to the fact that their activity will be an end in itself, and working time is the means that allows them to reproduce their self-employed condition. From this perspective, the self-employed would understand the concept of “freedom” and “flexibility” as an idea linked to their activity and would organize their working day making use of this freedom, which does not distinguish between work time and non-work time. These authors advance this argument so that they link autonomous work with so-called simple mercantile production, which would contrast with the assumptions of the capitalist production system.

From this perspective, some authors consider that the self-employed would be linked to simple commodity production (DiQuattro 2007; Hansen and Højrup 2001; Friedmann 1978; Chevalier 1983), which, among other strategies, allows them to extend their working day without increasing expenses; in many cases, work is embedded in the family business as a way of life. This implies that, together with the idea of “freedom”, of being the boss themselves, another of the defining characteristics of the self-employed would be the idea of “flexibility”. On his part, the employee will be linked to the capitalist mode of production, where the salary will represent the only reason why the employee will develop their activity. The assumptions of this productive mode establish a series of relationships between subjects around a series of concepts: Work, salary, rate, and labor market. It is a “game” of negotiations between buyers and sellers, associating a fee with the labor hired in the labor market.

In our fieldwork, it is of particular interest to pay attention to the discourses depending on the type of rider (self-employed or salaried). In some cases, we found discourses that defend this idea of flexibility and autonomy, of being one’s own boss, which, however, if we consider the characteristics and risks/opportunities of the activity, it would seem that we find situations of precariousness. It is relevant to observe this labor heterogeneity in the context of the same activity, between self-employed riders and salaried riders.

### *2.3. The Algorithm: Organization, Management and Control of Tasks*

In this “new economy”, algorithms and data have become highly valuable assets. Companies collect and analyze vast amounts of data to better understand consumer behavior, market trends, and operational efficiency. Furthermore, algorithms are used to automate various tasks, from customer service and marketing to manufacturing and logistics. This has increased productivity, cost savings, and efficiency, as algorithms can be used to optimize supply chain management by predicting demand, determining the best route for delivery, and identifying potential bottlenecks, among other activities.

Undoubtedly, algorithms have brought a new way of supervising, organizing, and controlling employees. With the advent of data analytics, machine learning, and artificial intelligence, companies now have unprecedented access to vast amounts of data about the behavior, habits, and performance of their employees. These data can be used to design algorithms that optimize productivity, reduce costs, and increase efficiency. Although algorithms can be useful tools for companies to improve their operations, they can also have unintended consequences for employees. For example, algorithms can lead to increased surveillance and micro-management, as managers rely on them to control and track

employee behavior. This can lead to a loss of trust between employees and management and can even lead to burnout and stress. In the specific case of the rider, the rider's work tool will be the mobile application that assigns their orders, controls their times, and makes them interact with the company and the customer, obtaining, in this last case, a valuation from both.

Similarly, data generated by algorithms and digital platforms have become a valuable commodity. Businesses use data to create new products and services, improve existing ones, and personalize the customer experience. They also sell data to third parties, such as advertisers, researchers, and other companies. However, the growing reliance on algorithms and data has also raised privacy and security concerns. Furthermore, the use of algorithms in the platform economy has raised concerns about the exploitation of workers and the lack of control over their work. The algorithms used by the platforms often prioritize efficiency and cost savings over the well-being of workers (Revilla and Martín 2021; Morales Muñoz and Abal Medina 2020). For example, algorithms can direct riders through unsafe areas or require them to complete tasks in unrealistic time frames, putting their safety at risk. For their part, the use of algorithms means that freelancers are subject to constant monitoring and evaluation. This can create a sense of insecurity and uncertainty about their work, as their performance and income are determined by opaque algorithms over which they have no control. Additionally, algorithms can rate and penalize workers for factors beyond their control, such as traffic or technical difficulties, which can negatively impact your revenue and reputation (Ruiner and Klumpp 2022; Acemoglu and Restrepo 2018; Arntz et al. 2017; Parker and Grote 2022).

### 3. Materials and Methods

In order to collect the relevant data for this study, quantitative and qualitative research techniques were used, a mixed approach that allows us to address this phenomenon due to its multidimensional nature.

#### 3.1. Quantitative Approach

On the one hand, a total of 143 riders in the Region of Murcia (Spain) have been surveyed. It is a representative sample that collects information across the breadth of the territory of the Region. The surveys were carried out during the months of September, October and November 2022. First, riders were contacted in person, individually, to request their participation (contacted at waiting points to pick up food and other goods for delivery to end customers). Once their consent and willingness to participate in the study were obtained, they were provided with a link from which to access the questionnaire and complete the questions. Snowball sampling was carried out. This method is commonly used to select samples from a population for which no previous census is available. The questionnaire consisted of 30 questions divided into four thematic blocks: (1) Socio-demographic profile; (2) work organization; (3) economy and income; and (4) rider identity and culture. The first one included questions related to gender, age, level of education attained, place of work, and means of transportation used in their performance as a rider. The second thematic block evolves around the organization of work and includes the following variables: Type of work, work experience, satisfaction with the current job, the company in which the rider works, years worked in the occupation, organization of routines and time, incentives and sanctions, equipment-uniform, and, finally, the perception and relationship with unions and workers' associations. Thirdly, there are related questions that address: The income–expense balance, relationship with clients, savings, and expense forecasts. Finally, the identity and culture dimension includes questions dealing with the relationship with colleagues, self-perception and identity, corporate acculturation, adaptive strategies to the work environment, perception of working time, and relationship with space.

### 3.2. Qualitative Approach

On the other hand, qualitative research techniques allow us to know directly the testimonies, narratives, and experiences of individuals. In this study, the key informants have been riders who develop their activity in the Region of Murcia. It is a proposal for 15 semi-structured interviews in order to expand and develop the information collected in the surveys from their testimonies. The content and thematic blocks of the interviews have been designed based on the previous study of the consultation of primary sources and scientific articles in this field of study, as well as the experience obtained from the exploratory pilot work carried out in the city of Murcia (López-Martínez et al. 2022). In order to establish categories and analyze the different dimensions to organize the structure of the interviews, we used the MaxQda program. The use of this software for processing and analyzing our material led us to design a structural relationship of the interviews attending to the following dimensions and categories: (1) Material dimension (categories: labor modality; working conditions; work–life balance; incentives and penalties; adaptive strategies); and (2) ideological dimension (categories: identity and corporate acculturation; self-perception and meaning of the rider as worker; labor biography; ideology/values; motivations and advantages; insecurities and disadvantages; self-employed/entrepreneurship in riders).

For the planning, development, and subsequent analysis of the narratives derived from the interviews carried out, the (controversial) issue of saturation has been taken into account. In this sense, an attempt has been made to avoid this phenomenon in relation to the saturation of both the information obtained (quantitative) and its meaning/interpretation (qualitative) (Fusch and Ness 2015). Therefore, in the course of the investigation itself, once it was detected that the speeches repeated patterns, experiences, and expressions already collected, it was understood that the information could become saturated, so it was interpreted as sufficient to try to analyze it. More specifically, in order to refer to some of the criteria considered to avoid saturation, we can mention the following: (a) repetition of responses, we closely examined the responses from our interviewees, looking for patterns of repetition or redundancy; (b) conceptual redundancy, we also assessed whether the collected data contributed to the development of new concepts, categories, or themes; (c) information richness, when the responses started to converge and additional interviews yielded limited new information, we inferred that saturation had been reached; and (d) theoretical saturation, we compared the collected data with the existing theoretical frameworks and concepts within our research area.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Results

The sample consists of 143 personal surveys from riders. Regarding the distribution by gender, it can be observed that 78.3% (112 riders) are men and 21.7% (31 riders) are women (Figure 1).

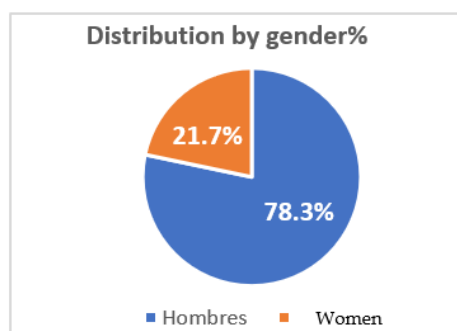


Figure 1. Sample distribution by gender.



The first conclusion we can draw from the data extracted from Figure 1 is that, based on the results, it represents a significantly male-dominated occupation.

*“[...] If you don't have to balance family and your life, well, you can do it. I think that's something men can do. Young men without children who don't need a fixed schedule”.* (E12, 29 years old)

Among the riders participating in the survey, the average age is 32.9 years (with a standard deviation of 9.5 years). As we can see from Figure 2, the youngest worker is 19 years old, while the oldest worker is 64. Figure 2 also shows that the majority of these workers fall within the age range of 21 to 38 years old.

*“Well, it's not just about being young or old. It depends on how far you want to go and the deliveries you can make. Although, yes, it's better to be young than old if you want to earn some extra money with the bike”.* (E2, 28 years old)

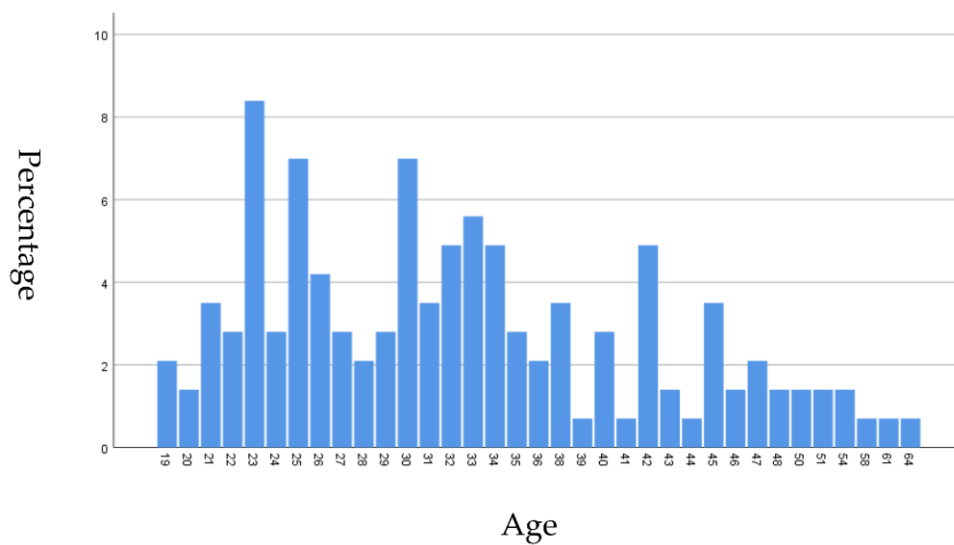


Figure 2. Sample distribution by age (years).

Regarding the highest level of education achieved, Figure 3 shows that among these workers, the highest proportion is in the category of higher education, at 36.3%. On the contrary, those with primary education represent the smallest percentage at 4.2%. Based on these data, an initial conclusion that can be drawn is that the sector's precariousness is not a refuge, as initially thought, for individuals with low levels of education. On the contrary, more than half of the surveyed individuals have completed post-compulsory studies.

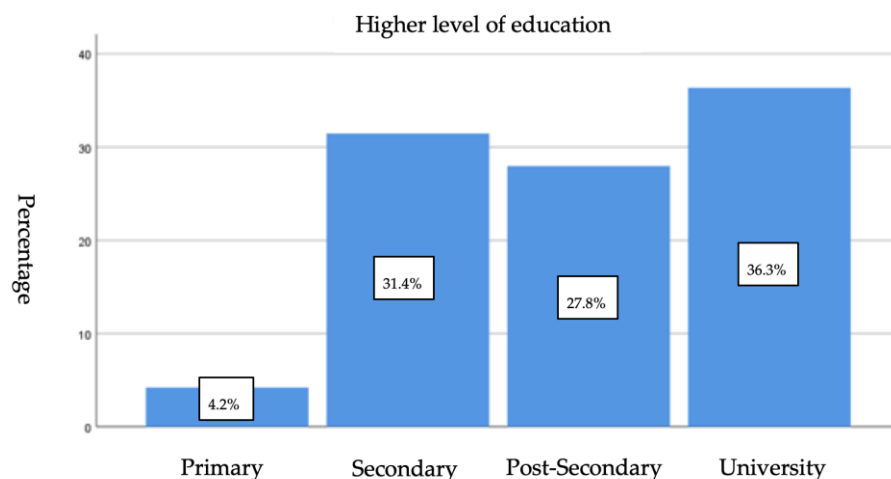


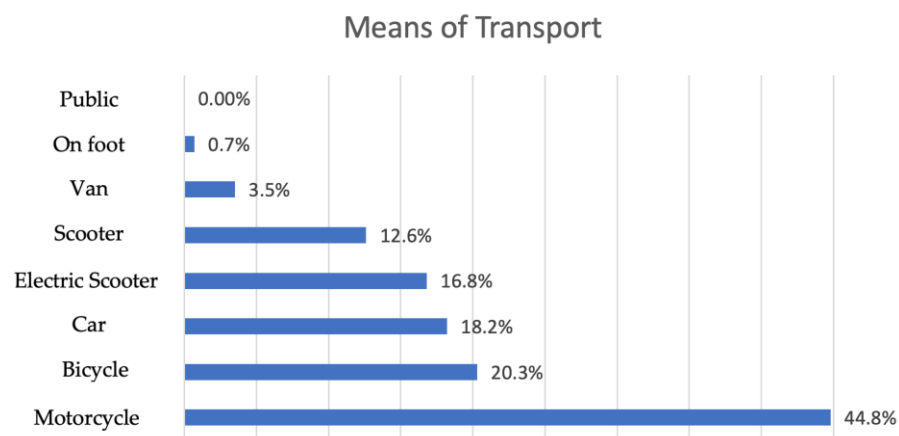
Figure 3. Distribution of the sample according to highest level of education attained.

*“I have trained myself in personal development matters. Actually, I would like to have a center where I can teach yoga”. (E8, 41 years old)*

*“I studied a module in administration and management, but I couldn’t find a job in that field. It’s faster to earn something to get started like this”. (E9, 26 years old)*

*“I have a colleague who studies computer science. While studying, he does deliveries with his motorcycle”. (E14, 34 years old)*

Figure 4 shows the distribution of the means of transport used by the riders. This question had a multiple-choice option, so the results shown are relative to frequencies, not being incompatible with the combination of several modes of transport.



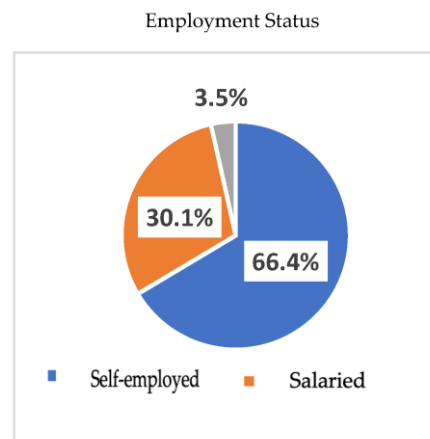
**Figure 4.** Distribution of the sample according to means of transport.

As we can see, in the first place, we find the 125 cc motorcycle (44.8%; 64 riders), which together with the bicycle (20.3%; 29 riders), car (18.2%; 26 riders), and electric scooter (16.8%; 24 riders) are the most used transports. On the other hand, these workers opt to a lesser extent for the van (3.5%; 5 riders) or walking (0.7%; 1 rider). It is also noteworthy that the use of public transport is not a suitable mobility option for any of those interviewed.

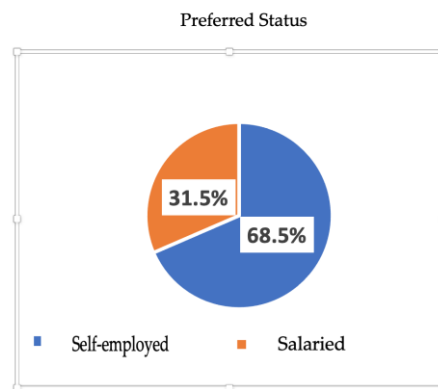
#### 4.2. Work Mode

If we distinguish within the type of worker, establishing two categories (Figures 5 and 6): Self-employed and employed, we see that the prevailing type is self-employed, with 66.4% (95 riders), two-thirds of those interviewed. However, those who are salaried represent 30.1% (43 riders). Further away and with a significantly lower percentage are those who exercise other work options: 3.5% (5 riders). Within this last group are riders who combine both modalities, with 60% (3 riders) of those in this category being both self-employed and salaried. And, finally, those who work on a subrogated basis through the rental of a license or account that allows them to perform this occupation, with a rented account: 40% (2 riders).

If we compare the modalities of current work and the preference for these modalities, we observe that there are hardly any differences between what is desired and the position in which this worker is framed, although there is a slight advantage for those who prefer to be self-employed (self-employed: 68.5%; 98 riders) as opposed to those who declare themselves as self-employed (66.4%). In the case of those who prefer to be salaried employees, the percentage is 31.5% (45 riders), a figure very similar to those who work in this type of employment (30.1%).



**Figure 5.** Interviewee's employment status and preferred employment status.



**Figure 6.** Interviewee's employment status and preferred employment status.

Among the reasons given by the interviewees for choosing self-employment are freedom, flexible schedules, the ability to organize their work time independently, and the salary. It is relevant to note the reasons given by the interviewees to justify their preference for the self-employment modality:

*"We delivery drivers as self-employed are like plumbers, electricians, we provide a service. I don't understand why they want to harm us [refers to the application of the rider law]"*. (E7, 31 years old)

*"As there is flat rate [refers to the incentive for the promotion of self-employment], I pay 67 euros per month. For the moment, I'm doing well. It suits me fine"*. (E1, 32 years old)

*"I work the hours I can and want to. I don't care about the schedule, I adapt to the days when I have to work and the rest I organize myself"*. (E14, 34 years old)

For their part, the reasons given by these workers for choosing to work as wage earners relate to aspects related to job security, stability, social security coverage, fixed income, or the indefinite nature of the contract, among others:

*"You are putting your safety at risk. You go with the bike, or the motorcycle whoever has a bike, and if something happens to you besides your health is that you can't work and you are left with nothing"*. (E6, 22 years old)

*"What is asked with the law is to have a contract because you work for a company, then you have to have your salary, your social security and your vacations"*. (E12, 29 years old)

For their part, most riders consider that the performance of this activity prevents them from combining it with other work (75.5%; 108 riders). Only 24.5% (35 riders) said that this was possible (Figure 7). As we see in Figure 8, most of the workers surveyed state that their

main income comes from their work as riders (86.7%; 124). However, those who have a rider’s salary as a supplementary income only amount to 13.3% (19).

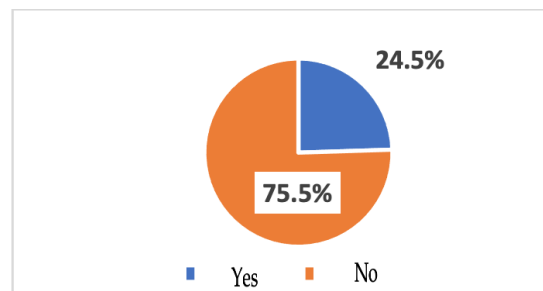


Figure 7. Compatibility with other employment.

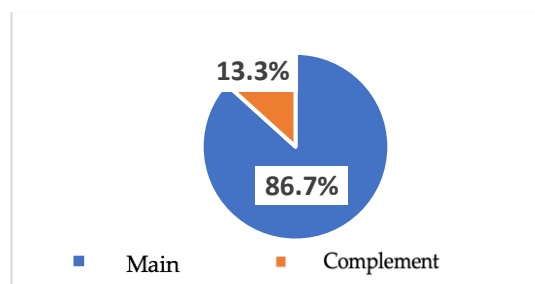


Figure 8. Type of income.

*“I am a sound and image technician in television, but on weekends I cast. It is money that I think of for my whims. A bonus”. (E1, 32 years old)*

*“It’s the only thing I do. I’m on all day, almost every day. A lot of hours if you want to make a salary”. (E10, 24 years old)*

It is very significant to note that among the reasons for choosing to be a rider (Table 1), there is little difference between “It allows me to organize my time” (72 riders) and “There are not many job options” (63 riders). Likewise, it is interesting to note from Table 2 that the “Only alternative” option appears with 41.3% (59 riders), which indicates that a large part of the people surveyed are engaged in this activity because they cannot find other jobs, which, presumably, would prevent them from continuing to work as a rider.

Table 1. Reasons for working as a rider.

Reason for Working as a Rider	Level of Acceptance
It allows me to organize my time	50.3% (72)
There are not many job options	44.1% (63)
I like it	34.3% (49)
It is an easy job	34.3% (49)
I like to work outdoors	27.3% (29)
I earn extra money	25.9% (37)
It allows me to have a fixed income	20.3% (29)
It is an easy way to earn money	16.1% (23)
It is the only job I can legally do	9.8% (14)

**Table 2.** Meaning of working as a rider.

Variable	Level of Agreement
Work freely	60.1% (86)
No fixed schedule	51% (73)
To be my own boss	48.3% (69)
Only alternative	41.3% (59)
Work only as long as I want	28% (40)
To combine it with another job	23.1% (33)
Pay for my studies	21% (30)
Earn easy money	17.5% (25)
Work without a contract	9.8% (14)

#### 4.3. Discussion

Precariousness refers to a state of insecurity or instability, particularly in the context of employment. It encompasses various factors such as limited job security, low wages, a lack of benefits, unpredictable working hours, and the absence of social protections. This concept has become increasingly prevalent due to globalization, technological advancements, and shifts in labor markets. We understand that the multidimensional concept of precariousness, in addition to the material part that evidences being or not in this situation, contains an individual dimension: How the rider perceives their situation in relation to a cost–benefit analysis. Aspects such as their personal family situation, work strategy at a specific moment in their lives, and availability to respond to the needs of this task will determine their perception of whether their work as a rider is precarious or not. In this sense, it seems relevant to us to analyze these discourses that use the concepts of flexibility, autonomy, or “being your own boss” as preferences when “defending” their activity and not necessarily situating it on the plane of precarious work.

From our fieldwork, we have observed discourses of riders working in the self-employed mode who understand that this activity allows them to obtain immediate income. In these discourses, a logic of rationality is identified, which aims at maximizing profits and would leave in the background the issues of lack of social or material coverage as well as the situation of dependence with respect to the company. The concept of flexibility is often referred to, but if we go further into its meaning, we find the notes of dependence, subordination, and “waiting” with respect to the company for which one works.

*“Flexi-vulnerability”. Are you really your own boss?*

In our study, the process of *precarization* is observed in working conditions, including schedules and work–life balance, remuneration, intensified work, and control and management of job performance. Regarding working hours, as digital platform work is often tied to contractual forms such as zero-hour contracts, the employment or commercial relationship becomes subject to demand. Consequently, there may be periods of inactivity linked to a lack of demand or other contingencies related to the operation of the service management application, which must be assumed and endured by the workers themselves. The risk is not only limited to the unpredictability of working time but also to its extension, resulting in long working hours and atypical working hours (Annarosa et al. 2018), which in turn carries the risk of self-exploitation.

*“In the end, you spend all day on the street. Rain, heat, whatever. Your job is the street, with the bike, or the motorcycle”. (E11, 38 years old)*

*“[. . .] This is good and bad. If you are active, if you are not sitting in an office, then here you have activity, yes. But of course, you know that you are on the street”. (E1, 32 years old)*

*“Here the main thing is that if something happens to you with the motorcycle, an accident or anything, everything comes out of your pocket. And it’s dangerous sometimes, that*

*you have to be on the road for many hours and running to get there on time". (E13, 32 years old)*

Regarding the tasks of control exerted over work performance, various studies point to a loss of autonomy on the part of the worker, who becomes subordinate to the guidelines set by the digital platform as it controls the internal market generated by the platform. In fact, on most digital platforms, control is exercised by algorithms that facilitate the assignment of tasks or services to be provided (Hernández and Zapata 2020; Jesnes and Oppegaard 2020). Regarding this technological control deployed by algorithms, some studies refer to the concept of algorithmic insecurity (Ginès i Fabrellas 2021), arising from these tasks of control and being on standby for specific task assignments (microtasks) primarily found in location-based work platforms (such as home delivery tasks). In these types of digital infrastructures, the worker engages in self-marketing activities (Hernández and Zapata 2020), as well as strategies to improve their position to be chosen in the future as a task performer or service provider (Ginès i Fabrellas 2021).

Riders are subject to the demands and requirements set by the platform companies. While they have the perception of flexibility, they are expected to be available during peak demand periods or face potential penalties or loss of access to future job opportunities. This expectation places them in a position where they have to be constantly ready to work, even if they are not guaranteed a steady flow of income.

*"And here we spend hours waiting for orders. Sometimes there are many, sometimes you are at the door until one arrives. That's what it's like to be a rider". (E4)*

*"Flexibility? Well, you can choose hours, you can work more or less when you want, but there are schedules that you know you have to be working". (E2)*

It was sought to determine if, in addition to the benefits, the interviewees faced any type of penalty from the company for not reaching the set objectives. The majority of the respondents, 81.8% (117 riders), answered negatively, compared to those who stated that their company does impose penalties, 18.2% (26 riders). Nevertheless, it should not be ruled out that these mechanisms do not actually exist, as this is a perception of the employees themselves. However, from the interviews conducted, it is known that penalties do exist through the application that manages the orders, where the rider must attend during certain time slots and days of the week.

*"We have parameters of excellence. The platform rates you based on the orders you complete. For 28 days, you have to be available on high-demand days, which are Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, for three hours each day. Maybe you have to complete 60 orders in total during those high-demand days in Murcia throughout the month. It can be done. But of course, now there are so many gloves [referring to other riders], so it's more difficult to do it". (E14)*

*"Additionally, the customer rating also affects you. If the customer rates you poorly, it lowers your score. By lowering your score, you get fewer hours and lose money". (E10)*

Therefore, it is relevant to observe how there are penalty or sanction mechanisms so that riders must attend certain time slots in a way that shows a subordination and dependence in the organization of their work, something that is far from the idea of "being your own boss". In fact, the rider is evaluated twice: By the company and through the ratings sent by the final customers to indicate how the service was received. In addition, this last customer evaluation is sometimes conditioned by certain contingencies (traffic, accidents, weather, delay in the preparation of the order) that are beyond the responsibility of the rider as a self-employed individual.

These new forms of labor relationships and their incorporation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for management purposes have been associated with the concept of the collaborative economy. However, in the case of localized work platforms, specifically the tasks performed by riders, the label "collaborative" can be disputed. In this regard, there are studies that perceive platform companies as black boxes (Conaty,

P.; Bird, A.) through which all communications, relationships, and ultimately orders and assignments must pass, thus distorting the intended collaborative nature of the economy. Furthermore, this intermediation by platform companies is driven by the need to establish rating and ranking formulas, i.e., evaluation and positioning mechanisms, with the intention of improving their services. However, as this specific study and other research suggest, these mechanisms are sometimes explained as tools for exerting control, imposing sanctions on workers, and promoting individualization by fostering competitiveness among the riders themselves.

#### 4.4. Lack of Collective or Union Action (*Homo Homini Lupus*)

*Flexi-vulnerability* underscores the precarious nature of gig work for riders. They often face long working hours, demanding schedules, and physical strain while navigating traffic and weather conditions. Additionally, riders may lack employment protections such as workplace safety measures or recourse for work-related injuries. These characteristics of the rider's task constitute and promote an individualistic nature of the activity. As this is a young profile who sometimes has few job alternatives and has the possibility of being available to the platform because they do not have family responsibilities, we also find a sector with difficulties in forming collective or union action experiences.

If we analyze these characteristics from the perspective of organization and association among riders, that is, if we try to detect experiences of collective action among delivery workers, we can identify some platforms and associations. However, as said before, when we consider the possibilities of union action, we encounter difficulties derived from the nature of their work. Firstly, the situation of self-employment (false self-employment or subcontracting) makes representation and organization in "traditional" labor relations institutions complicated. The workers do not share a common physical space, so there are no opportunities for communication or collective organization. On the contrary, beyond some notes of camaraderie derived from sharing waiting spaces for deliveries or occasional information exchange among riders, we find discourses that point to the existence of a competitive environment:

*"Here, you are on your own. Even if you see us gathering and talking at the door while waiting with our phones, we are not friends. Well, if someone asks me for a favor and I can do it, I will. But we are here to take as many orders as we can. To earn money". (E13, 32 years old)*

The profile of workers in this collective would also be a characteristic to take into account when interpreting the difficulty of unionization. As evidenced by this study (Figure 3) and noted by other authors (Köhler 2020), the profile of riders as young individuals with high levels of education would imply a certain distance from traditional models of union representation. In other words, this profile would not tend to resort to unionization as a collective strategy for resolving labor conflicts and improving worker conditions. In short, due to the nature of this activity, where replacement is easy and the company can cancel orders without the possibility of a response, this sector lacks effective bargaining power, which leads us to think about the difficulty of unionization (Diana Menendez et al. 2023).

Therefore, we can conclude that the majority of labor conflicts identified in the work context of riders are related to their contractual situation. In response to this situation, we find precedents of strikes (short and punctual) that have had limited impact, precisely due to the riders' limited structural "power" resulting from their easy replaceability (they are expendable and replaceable pieces) and their disorganized position and individualized identity (established in the logic of maximizing their relationship with the company; the more you can work, the more you can earn). These strikes have been organized and communicated through the use of WhatsApp and Facebook as tools for communication, mobilization, and dissemination.

## 5. Conclusions

In the “gig” economy, workers are typically engaged on a task-by-task or project basis, often through digital platforms. While this arrangement provides some autonomy in terms of scheduling and workload, it also creates a power imbalance between the worker and the platform or company they are affiliated with. Riders may have to constantly be available and ready to work to ensure they can secure enough income, leading to a sense of being constantly on call. In our case study, self-employed riders tend to emphasize that this job “allows you to be your own boss, have no fixed schedule, organize your time independently, and spend time with your family”. For their part, the reasons given by salaried riders for choosing to be employees include aspects related to job security, stability, social security coverage, fixed income, and the indefinite nature of the contract. In addition, alongside these discourses that refer to flexibility and autonomy, we find numerous references to a situation of dependence on the company, as well as precariousness in terms of a lack of social security coverage and unpaid hours on standby (waiting for orders) that describe a socio-labor situation of the rider far from the assumptions of independence and “being your own boss”.

As derived from the surveys conducted and the interviews carried out, riders may have to work long hours, often during peak demand, but without the guarantee of stable income or benefits such as sick leave, vacation time, or health insurance. As mentioned in this work, we find those who justify their delivery work as the only alternative they have to earn income, and a large majority of the interviewees work for a single company. Riders work independently, often in isolation, without a centralized workplace or shared physical spaces where they can interact and organize. The absence of regular face-to-face interactions can hinder the development of social bonds and collective identity among riders, making it more difficult to establish union networks. This situation would explain an individualistic logic (*homo economicus*) that is reflected in those discourses that understand the task of economic growth to be a task that is not only a matter of the individual but also a matter of the individual.

*Flexi-vulnerability* arises from the fact that, despite the appearance of flexibility, these self-employed workers still face significant risks and insecurities. As we found in our fieldwork, they lack traditional employment benefits and protections, such as a stable income, job security, access to healthcare, and social security. Moreover, they often have limited bargaining power and face challenges in negotiating fair compensation or improved working conditions due to the lack of collective representation. Thus, we find that the concept of *flexi-vulnerability* that we have proposed here helps us take a more subtle approach (qualitative, if you will) when analyzing what the concept of flexibility means in the specific case of the rider. The differences identified between certain discourses of freelancers who position and identify themselves as independent (“their own bosses”) and those who speak of precariousness, dependence on the company, and alienation in relation to their activity have allowed us to investigate these nuances and differences (material and identity-related). Moreover, *flexi-vulnerability*, in the context of riders in the gig economy, underscores the need for policies and regulations that address these challenges. It emphasizes the importance of fair compensation, adequate social protections, and improved working conditions for gig workers. Initiatives such as establishing minimum wage standards, ensuring access to benefits, and fostering collective representation can help mitigate the vulnerabilities faced by riders and promote a more equitable and sustainable gig economy.

Finally, we find it necessary to mention some proposals for the future with the intention of delving into the characteristics of this phenomenon: (1) making a comparison among different territories and thus investigating similarities and differences in relation to other variables; (2) incorporating the question of gender in the field of “gig” economy; (3) analyzing the figure of the self-employed from the regulatory progress that finally interprets the rider as a wage earner; and (4) advancing and delving into the subjective aspect of occupational/labor identity and thus analyzing the fractures that occur between “desired



work” and “performed work”, and, in the case of the latter, the role played by the digital aspect in its significance.

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